

The “Illusion of Safety”

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Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought “People Safety” education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

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Putting Safety First

Even very caring, responsible adults can be lulled into complacency by the “Illusion Of Safety.” The Illusion of Safety happens in settings or situations where people feel so relaxed, sheltered, or distracted that they stop focusing on ensuring that their children have adequate supervision, understanding, and skills to avoid potential dangers. Sadly, the Illusion of Safety can lead to children being traumatized, injured, or even killed from problems that could have been prevented.

At the same time, children are likely to be less safe if their adults are constantly anxious. As adults, our challenge is to find a good balance between accepting that life is not risk free, deciding that we want children to enjoy life despite the risks, making a realistic assessment of what these risks are, and having a plan for how to avoid most of them.

Here are seven ideas from Kidpower for replacing the Illusion of Safety with calm awareness and effective action:

1) Don't use either the Wishing Technique or the Worrywart Technique to make decisions. We use the Wishing Technique when we trust that our wishes will make things happen or not happen the way we want. Don't give in to thoughts and statements like, “I'll just be gone for just a minute.” Or, “This is a safe place. Of course, things like *that* don't happen *here*.” Remember that children can come to harm within a few seconds and that “here” might mean many square miles filled with thousands of people, if it happens to be a place or a community that the adult feels attached to, such as a special annual festival. A place is only as safe as the people (or creatures) in that space are acting at any given time.

We use the Worrywart Technique when we invest time, thought, and energy worrying about all the bad things that might happen without taking any action to build skills to address our worries. The Worrywart Technique can make everyone miserable and not make children safer.

When you notice yourself or others wishing or worrying, stop and think. What is most likely to cause danger here? What kind of supervision and/or skills does my child need to be safe here?

2) Remember that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Recently, I was driving up a steep, winding road behind a school bus. I stopped when its red lights flashed, and I watched as the driver got out and, with a hand-held stop sign, carefully escorted a couple of children to the side of the street. The bus drove off, and the children started walking down the middle of this busy road, completely unaware that I was in my car right behind them. The bus driver's procedures and the lack of crime in the neighborhood helped the children be safer, but the children's own lack of skills for walking safely along a street made the situation more dangerous.

Instead of making assumptions, such as assuming that a bus driver and a peaceful neighborhood will be enough to ensure children are safe, think about all the places where a child might be and take a new look at your safety plan for each situation. Are there additional steps you can take or skills you can teach to make the situation safer?

3) Know who is in charge at all times. The Illusion of Safety can cause adults to trust that youth group leaders, other parents on field trips, and life guards at pools will be able to keep track of all the children they are supposed to be watching, even in crowded, chaotic places.

Adults need to be extremely direct about handing off supervision so that everyone is clear about who is in charge of each child's safety at each moment. Even children with fairly good swimming skills have drowned in hot tubs or swimming pools in the middle of a group of people because no one knew which adult was making sure that they were above water.

Also, if we are delegating the safety of our child to someone else, it is our responsibility to make sure that this person has the experience, character, skills, and enough support to do an excellent job.

4) Keep younger children within arm's reach unless you are sure that this place is safe for them. The younger that children are, the more they are likely to lack experience, size, strength, and skill compared to most adults. They need their adults very close by to teach them how to act in the world – and to protect them from harm until they are able to protect themselves.

Even a few inches can mean the difference between having fun and having a tragedy. One very sad story happened when a four-year-old girl was hit by a car because she was just out of her mother's reach and started running to her father, who had waved to his family from the other side of the road.

For a toddler or preschooler, safety means keeping that child within arm's reach in most public places or places where there are attractive nuisances, such as animals, fountains, fans, open windows or doors, fires, friendly people, or machines. Within arm's reach means close enough to grab that child if she or he were to start moving quickly towards potential danger, such as a hot stove. Exceptions should be made on careful step-by-step basis depending on the level of risk and the capability of the child.

5) Watch out for distractions. Children can get into trouble quickly when their adults are busy or distracted. As one mother said, "The scariest five minutes of my life happened while I was shopping for

shirts with my husband. Suddenly, our four-year-old son disappeared. One moment he was right next to us, and the next moment, he was gone. I was about to panic when I saw his little feet sticking out from under the clothing rack, where he'd wriggled in to hide."

At Kidpower, we ensure that our instructors focus on keeping everyone safe not just during the workshop but also that they give special attention to safety during the breaks, when adults are likely to be talking to each other and not paying attention to what their children are doing. This is why our instructors take responsibility for supervising our students at all times, even when their parents are present.

Be prepared to stop in the middle of what you are doing, abruptly interrupt a conversation, or look away from someone you are talking with in order to keep track of your child. Insist that anyone caring for your child makes staying aware of the child a higher priority than any other activity.

6) Prepare children for growth and change. As a child becomes more experienced, reliable, and capable, this child can start to take more responsibility for her or his own safety. The distance that it is okay to be away from the adult in charge can and should get further.

At the same time, it is important for adults to stay aware of potential hazards in new places or with new people and to provide both adequate supervision and the opportunity to practice appropriate skills for developing independence.

7) Remember to put safety first. Kidpower's Underlying Principle is that *"The safety and well-being of a child are more important than anyone's embarrassment, inconvenience, or offense."* At times, resisting the Illusion of Safety is likely to be embarrassing, inconvenient, and annoying or offensive to ourselves, our children, and others. As adults, our job is to be realistic and to stay in charge of the safety and well-being of the young people in our lives until they are able to do this for themselves.

Not sure **how** to protect and prepare children? In addition to our workshops, we have a number of free articles on our website and our \$8 Safety Comics for [Younger](#) and [Older Children](#) also show how to introduce key safety ideas and practice basic skills.