

Just in Case ~ What Children Need to Know if They Cannot Get Away at First

Irene van der Zande, Executive Director/Co-Founder

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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In California, the news is full of a horrifying story about Jaycee Dugard, a girl who was kidnapped at age 11 and held captive for 18 years. The man who kidnapped her was a registered sex offender. She was finally found thanks to the awareness of a couple of police officers in Berkeley.

Because this is such a shocking story, it is likely that many children will learn about it from the news, by overhearing adults, or from their friends. Sometimes bad things happen no matter what one does, and we have no way to know if being prepared with skills and information would have helped Jaycee escape to begin with or get away later. However, we do know that Kidpower has helped many, many thousands of children to be safer, less fearful, and more confident. Here are seven ideas from Kidpower about how to give children tools that can help them "just in case":

1) Teach children not to blame themselves if things go wrong or they make mistakes. Most of us have had situations when we couldn't do what we thought we should, when something went wrong, or when we made a mistake. Sometimes these situations might result in problems that make us feel upset, stupid, or scared every time we think about what happened. Feeling bad about yourself can get in the way of figuring out what you need to do to get help to solve these problems.

When things go wrong, children are often likely to blame themselves. This is why, as soon as children are able to understand, it is important to teach them, *"It's NOT your fault when you couldn't do something, made a mistake, or forgot something. If you have a safety problem, we want you to keep looking for what you CAN do to get the help you need."*

2) Address issues that might worry children in ways that empower them. In our workshops for children ages 6 or older, after our students have had the chance to practice a number of skills, we answer the question that most children start to ask as they get older, which is, "What if I can't get away at first?" Most children seem relieved to have an answer, because not talking about this issue at all means that it is too terrible to mention, and anything that is too awful to talk about must be truly terrifying.

Even without a workshop, age-appropriate language can put boundaries around this concern for children and give them the bottom line of what they need to know.

3) Practice skills to reduce fear and build confidence. Give children the opportunity to be successful in practicing skills to show them how they can keep themselves safe most of the time.

Because raising awareness without practicing skills can raise anxiety, we strongly recommend that children be given the chance to practice using their awareness, moving out of reach, checking and thinking first, setting boundaries, yelling for help, running to safety, pulling away, changing their plan if a situation is not safe, and, if someone is trying to harm them or take them away, hitting and kicking to escape. Our free articles, inexpensive *Safety Comics*, and other publications give more information about what these skills are and how to practice them.

4) Tell children only what they need to know. We want to be truthful, but we don't want to put upsetting details into children's minds that are unnecessary. Don't focus only on strangers, because most of the people who harm children are NOT strangers, but people they know. In Kidpower, we teach children that, *"Most people are GOOD, and that this means that most strangers are good. However, a few people might try to do dangerous things, which is why it is important to learn how to keep ourselves safe."*

5) Focus on what children need to do rather than on details of what could go wrong. In a calm, matter-of-fact voice, an adult can explain, *"If you cannot get away at first from someone who is trying to harm you, it does NOT mean that you did anything bad – just that you had some bad luck. If someone does something that makes you feel bad, this does NOT mean that you are bad."*

"Remember that you might need to lie and break promises in order to get away and that's okay because you are doing this to be SAFE. A lie to give you a chance to get away might be, 'I will do what you say and I will stay right here.' If you cannot get away at first, your safety plan is to KEEP looking for a NEW chance to get away, because your grownups will love you and want you, no matter what. This is such a big emergency that you can run to ANY stranger to get help. And remember that it is never too late to get help and that this problem is never your fault."

In our workshops, we immediately have children practice after an explanation. For example, they might all yell, "I NEED HELP!" while running to Safety and then review some physical self-defense skills. We use the term "Safety" to mean an adult who can help the child.

Because children often feel helpless if there is a weapon, they also need to know, *"If someone has a knife or a gun, it would be really scary and you might get hurt. But you can keep yourself safe most of the time if you remember a few things. If you have any room at all, run away and get to Safety. Even police officers, who practice every month, miss a target moving away from them most of the time. If the person has a knife, you can also throw ANYTHING – your backpack, sand, a book – and then run. Remember to keep looking for a new chance to get away. As soon as you can, get away and get help."*

6) Tell a Success Story. Keep the story simple, focusing on what the child did to be safe, not on the attack. Leave out scary details. For example, instead of saying that the person was making threats or being sexual, you could say that the person was "acting scary" or "being weird." Act out or practice what the child did to be successful.

For example, in Kidpower we might tell children ages 6 or older this story. *"When someone is being dangerous, it is okay to tell lies and break promises, because you are doing so to keep yourself safe and you will*

get help from an adult you trust as soon as possible. One young boy who got taken away promised the guy who took him that he would stay quietly in the motel room while that guy went to the bathroom. Instead, this boy used the telephone in the motel to call 9-1-1. Even though the boy didn't know where he was, the computer could find out from the phone line. The police got there and arrested the man before he got done going to the bathroom! Now, let's practice using different kinds of phones to call 9-1-1!"

7) Avoid the too much talking pitfall. When adults are worried, a major pitfall is to talk too much and to get caught up in answering lots of questions, instead of practicing what to do. Suppose that you were to talk to children about a fire drill and to start answering their questions about what happens during a fire. Even if you are being very kind and positive, after a very short time of just talking, most children are likely to start to get very worried about there being a fire. In this case, most questions can be put to rest simply by practicing going outside of the building and walking to the designated place where children are supposed to gather.

The same principle is true with other safety problems. It works best if you give a simple explanation and then redirect children into what they CAN do rather than answering their questions. Just say, "First, let's practice!"

Not sure HOW to practice? In addition to our workshops, we have a number of free articles on our website about how to practice and our \$8 *Safety Comics* also show how to introduce and practice basic concepts and skills.