

Follow-Up To Tracy Kidnapping Tragedy ~ Staying in Charge of Who is Caring for Our Children

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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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In California, the last few weeks have been very emotional for many people, especially parents, with the kidnapping of eight-year-old Sandra Cantu, which ended in tragedy. Shockingly, the suspect arrested in the Tracy kidnapping was the mother of a five-year-old child, a teacher, and the granddaughter of a minister. Sandra had spent time at her house often over the last few months.

The lesson for parents is to be sure we really know who is caring for our children, that we are very clear about what our expectations are with supervision, and that we keep paying attention to whether or not this is a stable person.

Your own mobile home park, cul-de-sac, or neighborhood can seem so contained and safe, and neighbors you meet and see coming and going can seem like people you know. But you don't really know someone unless you have spent some time getting to know each other well. Even then, sometimes people who have been trustworthy and safe can make unsafe choices. Often, if we and our children know how to use our awareness, we can notice possible signs of problems. Being honest with ourselves about seemingly small doubts or uncertainties or discomfort we are feeling, and encouraging children to talk to trusted adults, can help prevent problems.

As adults, safety for our children means that we know at all times who they are with, what they are doing, and where they are going. The younger the child, the more exact this information needs to be. We need to remember that children can be vulnerable in all sorts of ways -- because of cars, cliffs, construction, water, and/or potentially dangerous animals or people.

We need to remember that most of the people who harm children are people they know. I used to be appalled at how sometimes the parents of friends of my kids would let me take their children without spending any time with me at all. They were surprised when I insisted that we meet. It is normal to feel awkward about checking out safety for our kids with adults we know. For example, parents often feel a

little self-conscious asking about guns in the house, hanging around with their kids in a new place, and watching others to make sure they are safe. We encourage parents to remember that safety comes first and to check each situation out, regardless of what others might think of them.

Here are some recommendations from Kidpower about staying in charge of the people caring for your children:

1. Take the time to get to know anyone with whom you are going to trust the care of your child. Go to where your child will be - someone's home, a day care center, or a school. Be very direct about what our expectations are in terms of supervision and safety. Pay attention not just to what the person says, but to how this person interacts with any children around and to what the environment is like.

If a neighbor or classmate's parent is going to be caring for your child at home, invite this person to your home for a visit. If this person has children, see how secure and well behaved the children seem to you. Ask yourself how stable this person seems and if there are any signs of inconsistencies in temper or character.

2. Keep paying attention. Have conversations with anyone caring for your child before and after each visit. Ask how things are going. Insist on knowing each time your child goes to visit and ask what the plans are for the activities to make sure that you approve. Drop by unexpectedly while your child is there by coming back early or returning right after leaving to ask one more thing. If your child is going to walk over to a neighbor, call to make sure that the family is there and that this is a good time.

3. Listen to your child. Ask your child periodically, "Is there anything you've been wondering or worrying about that you haven't told me?"

4. Be prepared to change your plan if things don't seem right to you. If you feel even a little uncomfortable about someone, then don't leave your child. Trust your intuition if things don't feel right, for whatever reason. It may be embarrassing, inconvenient, and offensive to someone if you go to drop your child off at a friend's house and then have a feeling that something just isn't right, and end up taking your child home with you again. You may have a lot of people, including your child, upset with you. But safety is more important.

5. Make sure your child knows how to get help. Even very well intentioned and kind people can have moments where they are not safe for children to be with especially if they have something stressful happening. As soon as they are old enough to understand, practice with your children how to notice when a situation is changing (i.e. the adults in the house are having an argument, there are lots of people over and the house is very crowded, etc.) and make a safety plan on how they can contact you if needed.

6. Teach your child boundary-setting and self-defense skills. Teach children how to tell someone to stop in a clear firm voice if someone is bothering them and to get away and yell loudly if they need help. Teach children to hit, kick, and run to safety in an emergency.