

## **Kidpower Response to the Tracy Kidnapping Tragedy ~** *Tools For Empowering Children to Explore Their World With Safety and Confidence*

*Kidpower is a nonprofit organization founded in 1989 that has brought People Safety education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, close to home and around the world. We use the term "People Safety" to mean social-emotional tools that prepare people to take charge of the emotional and physical safety and well being of themselves and others. Our programs are highly recommended by educators, law enforcement experts, mental health professionals, and parents for being positive, practical, hands-on, safe, and tailored to the ages and life situations of our students. Please visit our website at [www.kidpower.org](http://www.kidpower.org) for our free library of articles, e-newsletter, and audio podcasts as well as our publications for sale. For information about services or educational materials, please e-mail [safety@kidpower.org](mailto:safety@kidpower.org) or call 1-800-467-6997 Ext. 1#.*

Like caring adults everywhere, we at Kidpower are saddened and shocked by tragic events with children such as the heart-breaking story of Sandra Cantu, an eight-year old girl who was kidnapped from a quiet mobile home park in Tracy, California. Children deserve to be safe in our neighborhoods, homes, and schools – and too often they are not.

As adults, we grieve for the tragic loss of a young life cut short and want desperately to protect other children from harm. At the same time, we do not want to deal with this tragedy in a way that traumatizes children or prevents them from enjoying their lives.

Here are seven ideas from Kidpower on how to help children who have heard about this sad story – and how to empower them to explore their world with safety and confidence.

**1. Don't blame the victims.** When tragedies like this occur, it's tempting to look for some fault on the part of the children or caregivers in order to feel more safe. It's tempting to lecture children to "be more careful so that something bad like this won't happen" to them.

Our experience with abductions is that in most situations the children and their adults did the best they knew how. A mobile home park or quiet neighborhood can feel almost like an extension of one's home. It is normal for parents and caregivers to believe that a child might safely go down the street to visit a friend's house without adult supervision. We don't know yet whether Sandra was kidnapped by a stranger or by someone she knew, but either way, it is normal for children to be trusting and caught up in their own worlds rather than using the awareness they might use more commonly outside their neighborhoods.

**2. Take charge of what children are hearing and seeing.** Reviewing upsetting details about what happened over and over does not make children safer – it makes them scared and runs the risk of causing avoidable, additional trauma. Years later, our students have told us about how traumatized they were about seeing adults acting terrified and helpless. Make sure that children are not overhearing adult conversations, and turn off the news. Be aware of radio or television that might be in the background at some public place like a restaurant, a friend's house, or even an elevator.

As adults, we need to remember how important it is to shelter children and make sure we don't overwhelm them with too much information and our own feelings of shock, fear, and anger. Many children are like sponges and they hear everything even when they don't seem to be paying attention. Be prepared to interrupt an adult who is sharing his or her reaction to this story in the presence of children, especially small children. You can warmly, but decisively, stop the conversation by saying something like, "Let's talk about this later."

Act calm in front of children so that they know that you believe that they are safe, even though something very sad happened.

**3. Explain what happened in a calm, reassuring way.** If children are likely to hear about any upsetting event, it is better that they be able to talk with you rather than just overhearing conversations or getting stories from other children. Avoid graphic details. Focus on what adults are doing to keep everyone safe. If possible, try to create a supportive space for this discussion. At school, this might be gathered together in a circle. At home, this might be on a parent's lap or holding hands. Do something comforting afterwards rather than trying to go on with business as usual.

A simple explanation might be, "A very sad thing happened to a girl at our school (in our town), and she died. The police are figuring out what happened, and we are all working hard to make sure that everyone stays safe."

If a child asks if she was kidnapped or stolen, you can say, "Someone took Sandra, and we don't know why. The police are figuring out what happened."

It can be traumatic for children to dwell on horrifying details. If a child brings up graphic details in front of other children, interrupt the child and say, "Lots of people are talking about what happened, and the police are working hard to figure things out. What I want you to know is that this is a very safe place most of the time and that you are very strong and can keep yourself safe most of the time." If you are talking one-on-one with a child, and she needs to tell you what she heard to help her cope with what she has heard, listen to her supportively, and say, "yes, those of very scary things you heard. It is very sad. I am very sad too." Then bring the focus of the conversation back to the things you can do to stay safe most of the time. Do not add new information yourself as this just gives children more upsetting images.

**4. Give children positive ways to deal with feeling sad and scared.** As much as we adults want to protect children from being upset, learning how to deal with fear and grief in positive ways is a skill that can serve them throughout their lives. Children need to have outlets for their own feelings without being burdened by the intense feelings of their adults and without discussing upsetting details.

You can acknowledge children's upset feelings by saying in a very warm, matter-of-fact voice, "This is a very sad and scary thing to happen. It is okay that you feel sad and scared. It is okay to cry and to wish that this had not happened."

You can reassure children by saying, "Lots of people are here to keep you very safe, and we are going to practice safety plans so you will know how to keep yourself safe."

Help children find positive outlets for grief by doing something to honor Sandra – drawing pictures to send to her family, planting a tree in her honor, or, if you know her, writing down memories of good times you've had. Help children find positive outlets for fear by practicing skills such as the ones mentioned below that will keep them safe most of the time.

Different children are likely to deal with upsetting events differently. Wanting just to play or do something else rather than keep talking is not necessarily a sign of denial or a lack of emotional health. Give children permission to show and talk about whatever feelings they have without having an expectation of what those feelings should be.

Depending on the wishes of the child and your relationship to that child, this is a good time for hugs, cuddling, and holding hands. If a child tries to act like a younger child for a while, this is normal. For example, a child who has enjoyed having her or his own room might not want to sleep alone.

If a child continues to stay very upset, this is a good time to seek professional help from a counselor.

**5. Assess realistically what the safety risks are everywhere your child goes – and your child’s ability to avoid those risks.** Safety risks include cars, animals, and potentially dangerous places such as ponds as well as people. Until they have the skills to take care of themselves in different situations, children need adults to provide ongoing supervision, guidance, and support. Powerful respectful adult leadership is essential in teaching children to manage peer interactions and other social situations in emotionally safe ways – and in preparing them to negotiate their world in physically safe ways.

Our challenge as adults is to find the right balance between protecting a child from harm and depriving that child of the opportunity for important life experiences. We cannot protect children from all risks in life, no matter how hard we try and no matter how much we wish we could. Children learn and grow from being able to do new things and from meeting new people. It’s the adults’ job to provide a structure for doing this as safely as possible.

We need to be realistic about what situations are more safe and less safe and to plan accordingly. For example, a neighborhood is likely to be safer from crime with lots of people around in the morning than with very few people around in the early afternoon. However, people backing their cars out of driveways in a hurry to get to work might make riding a bike in some places too dangerous until a child is older.

We also need to be realistic about what level of independence is appropriate for each specific child. Children are unique individuals and are constantly changing. What is right for one child will not necessarily be right for another. For example, a child who easily gets lost in thought might take longer to be safe crossing the road alone than a child who is very aware.

It only takes a moment for something to go wrong, which is why it is so important to take the time to make and practice safety plans with children for “what if” situations (i.e. what if you fell off your bike, what if you got separated from me at the store, etc.). Don’t expect that your child will know what to do or make the same choices you might make. If you are unsure or concerned that your child might not make the safest choice or if you feel that your child isn’t ready to do something independently, it is safer to take the time to review skills with him or her or make different plans that provide more supervision and support.

**6. Practice skills with children to increase their power and prepare them for more independence.** Just talking about problems can cause children to become more worried without making them safer. Successful practice of how to take charge of their emotional and physical safety can increase children’s competence and reduce their anxiety.

Instead of dwelling on the bad things that sometimes happen, empower children by giving them opportunities for successful practice of the following “People Safety” skills in contexts that are relevant to their lives:

- Walking and acting with awareness, calm, and confidence;
- Checking first with their adults before they change their plan about *what* they are doing, *where* they are going, and *who* they are with, including people they know;
- Moving away and checking first with their adults if they are on their own before they let a person or an animal they don't know well get close to them (or thinking first if they don't have an adult to check with);
- Moving out of reach if something or someone might be unsafe;
- Setting strong, respectful boundaries with people they know;
- Protecting their feelings from hurtful words;
- Making a safety plan for how to get help everywhere they go;
- Being persistent in getting help from busy adults;
- Understanding that the safety rules are different in emergencies where they cannot Check First;
- Yelling and running to safety if they are scared; and
- Using self-defense skills to escape and get to safety in an emergency.

Lead the practice of these skills in the same spirit you might help a young child learn how to fasten his or her seatbelt independently, with your upbeat focus on supporting their success without turning your attention to the bad things that might happen to a person who is not wearing a seatbelt. If you feel yourself becoming anxious or upset when you are working with your child, take a break and practice again later. Children learn much better when their adults are calm. This is sometimes easier said than done when you are worried about your child's safety, but being able to practice together in a calm way is essential for your child to build his or her People Safety Skills.

**7. Get support for yourself.** The murder of a child is absolutely horrifying and we would not be caring people if we did not have feelings such as rage, terror, and grief. Find other caring adults to talk with away from your children. Support police departments by sharing any information that can help them figure out what happened. Take effective action by ensuring that children have the supervision they need, reducing hazards where you can, and teaching children how to explore their world with safety and confidence.

Please note: A related article on this subject is *Helping Children to Regain Their Emotional Safety After a Tragedy*. <http://www.kidpower.org/ARTICLES/Regain-Emotional-Safety.html>

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