

Violence Against Children in the News ~ What Adults Need to Do and Say

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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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"Stranger danger" is a phrase we do **not** find useful in helping people learn to stay safe, but it characterizes the fear-based approach that the media uses when reporting about violence against children. This can increase anxiety and fear. When we hear about violence against children, committed by strangers or by people they know, we can help young people by being aware of this bias in the media, managing our own feelings, and helping our children learn positive safety skills, focusing on safety instead of danger.

Acts of violence against children have the power to unleash a torrent of feelings in us all. When children are brutally victimized, grief, fear, despair, and rage can boil up even in the hearts of those who considered themselves hardened or numbed by the violence of the world around them.

Such intense emotional overwhelm can make us vulnerable: in our desire to understand, to regain a sense of control, to protect fiercely the children whom we love, many of us seek out information that we hope will help us feel better. Much of that information comes from newspapers, radio, the Internet, and television. Again, the "stranger danger" emphasis in news stories can increase our upset or anxiety if we are not aware of it.

Assessing the value and accuracy of information when we are overwhelmed with feelings is a challenge. To complicate matters, our emotional upset has a market value: by speaking to it, the news media as well as businesses that teach self defense or sell safety devices can increase ratings and sales. No matter how accurate their reporting or how excellent their products might be, this cycle can escalate fear which in turn impacts our approach to keeping ourselves and our children safe.

Increased awareness and strong feelings can be very valuable. Making safety a priority IS important. Just as having an earthquake can cause us to implement important earthquake safety changes in our buildings and roads, a tragedy can help us make room for ourselves and our loved ones to learn self-protection skills that

can serve us for the rest of our lives.

At the same time, we can be more effective in gathering information and noticing what bias it has – “stranger danger” or otherwise, evaluating safety-related resources, and making the wisest choices for ourselves and our children during upsetting times if we can stay conscious of our feelings. We need to resist the urge to make significant changes in our parenting, caregiving, or safety-related behaviors based solely upon intense emotional responses to a specific event.

Instead, we can:

Make Appropriate Spaces for Our Feelings: Our fear, grief, rage, and despair are normal responses to tragedy. By acknowledging these feelings and sharing them with other adults, we are taking good care of ourselves and reducing the power of upset feelings to rule our behavior. At the same time, we do not want to burden our children with our upset. We want to be aware of when children might be able to hear what we are saying.

Our goal is to get support to reduce our emotional overwhelm so that we can think clearly about the best choices for our families. Many adults have told us that the things they most regret saying to their children about strangers, unwanted touch, or safety in general were said in very emotional times immediately after a widely reported, violent event.

How we talk to children is as important as **what** we say to them. Sounding very frightened when following “expert advice” about what to say to our kids can increase their anxiety without increasing their skills.

Instead of our overwhelm and despair about the bad things that happen, we want to share with our children our belief in their strength, their value, their right to be treated well, and their power to keep themselves safe most of the time. If we focus on “stranger danger,” this can be very hard to do. We recommend that people give up the phrase “stranger danger” and instead focus on SAFETY with strangers and with people we know.

Remember That the World Has Not Changed Overnight: A tragic event can make it seem as if everything is different. The truth is that what has changed is our awareness of the possibility of danger. Safety decisions made in the heat of the moment solely out of an intense emotional response are usually less reliable than those grown out of a consistent parenting or caregiving philosophy combined with credible information. For example, in the days and weeks after an abduction, some parents who previously allowed their children to walk to school on their own often begin escorting them or insisting that they walk in groups. If this decision is merely a response to momentarily heightened awareness and fear of “stranger danger”, adult follow-through is likely to wane as the emotion fades, and the children will soon be walking to school on their own again.

As a result, the children experience inconsistency, increased awareness of fear and danger, and no link between their own level of skill and their freedom. They may wonder why their parents were so scared last month – and if anything is really safer this month? This confusion can increase anxiety and reduce confidence.

However, if the decision about walking to school is made based upon a matter-of-fact assessment of the children's skills, the decision is likely to change over time only in response to a child's demonstrated practice and development of skills. Following through is easier because the choice is consistent with the caregivers' knowledge and beliefs, regardless of their feelings in the moment. As a result, the child can experience the relationship between skill development, maturity, and freedom.

Take the Time We Need to Be Confident About Our Choices: During times like these, "expert advice" is everywhere. We need to think first before applying that advice to our own families. Does the advice make sense? Will it reduce fear and build confidence? Will it increase anxiety? Does it have a fear-based, "stranger danger" bias? Will it build skills? Is it consistent with what we know about our children and their needs? What we show kids is more powerful than what we tell them. Are we thinking about personal safety for ourselves as well as for our children?

At Kidpower, our goal is to increase awareness and skills without creating fear. We have services we believe in, and our dream is to reach everyone.

While we believe that safety with people should become as normal a habit as brushing our teeth or looking both ways before crossing the street, our philosophy is to encourage people to **Think First** before participating in any program, including ours. We hope that you will ask us about any questions or concerns you have before enrolling your child in one of our classes. Please explore our website or talk to someone you trust who has experienced our work.

"Stranger danger" wording and thinking can make it harder to learn and practice positive, effective safety skills. Practice being "safe in your imagination" so that your thinking shifts away from worries about what other people might do onto the power you and your loved ones have to keep yourselves safe. Whatever you do, we hope that each of you will use the emotion of the moment when you hear a tragic story to fuel a lasting commitment to learn how to live joyfully and safely in a world full of wonder as well as risk and to share these lessons with the young people in your life.