

## **“Stranger Danger” In The News ~ Building Awareness And Confidence Instead Of Fear**

*Scary news stories can create fear, but turning fear into awareness can improve safety.*

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“Stranger danger” wording and other scary or negative images are often used by the media when they present stories about violence, particularly violence against children. Headlines are far more likely to say “GIRL ATTACKED!” than “GIRL PROTECTS HERSELF FROM ATTACKER!” We are more likely to read, “ATTEMPTED ABDUCTION!” instead of “CHILD STOPS ABDUCTION!” This emphasis on the negative – on the danger or risk rather than on the success of the person attacked – can increase anxiety and fear.

When we, as parents and caregivers, follow stories like this, we are wise to reflect on what happens for ourselves and the children in our care in the process. In general, just talking and hearing about dangers increases anxiety and fears. Unfortunately, the rhyming phrase “stranger danger” plays into that anxiety and fear. We encourage people to give up the phrase “stranger danger” and focus instead on stranger safety, along with focusing on safety with peers and other people children know.

Practicing ways to deal with a problem can build confidence and reduce anxiety. When violence of any kind happens close to home, especially if it is violence against a young person, we often find ourselves poring over the newspaper for information or listening to radio or TV reports in hopes of good news.

This is an excellent time to ask ourselves the following questions:

- Is my child aware of this situation (kidnapping, etc) because of the TV or radio?
- What is the nature of the pictures in the newspaper, particularly on the cover?
- Is my child a precocious reader or early language learner who might be processing this information with a level of detail that would not be acceptable to me?

- Are there "missing child" fliers placed where my young reader can read them?
- Is my child in the company of adults who might discuss or listen to details about this incident without realizing my child's ability to perceive pieces of the story or the fear surrounding it?
- Is my child in groups of children (school, camp) who might be sharing details of this situation, both accurate and inaccurate, with one another?
- Is my own awareness of child safety risks running high? Is that awareness causing an increase in my own anxiety? Am I distracted by "stranger danger" worries that are making it hard to focus on stranger safety behaviors I want my children to learn?
- Is my behavior different or emotionally charged enough for my child to perceive that something is causing me anxiety?
- Has my own "talking about dangers" behavior increased (i.e. have I been saying more frequently, "Remember to walk with friends... If someone tries to grab you, just run!".....etc.)
- Have I used this as an opportunity to review skills through positive, upbeat practice in order to reduce fear and build confidence?

As adults, we can often make choices about the information we want children to hear. Some parents regulate the flow of information tightly; others less so. No matter where we are on this scale, our children are safest when we help them manage the information they **do** have; they are far less safe when they discuss scary information or situations they hear about only with their peers or not at all.

Our research and experience show us that the best way to manage scary information is through practice of skills to deal with it, though talking certainly has its place when that talking increases the **adult** awareness about the **existing** thoughts and concerns of the child and when it enables adults to correct misinformation or to express a difficult concept in a way that makes sense without adding more scary information.

We are all relieved when a child who has been kidnapped or attacked escapes and is safe. However, this event is not over for these children, their community, or, to a smaller degree, for the rest of us. Violence has a ripple effect through time and through people. Fear from scary events is normal. At the same time, fear can be the fuel for action and for positive, skill-building practice.

"Stranger danger" wording and other ways of emphasizing scary images can affect how any of us perceive our own power to be safe. When something frightening is being covered in the media, take a moment to reflect on how you are doing and how the young people in your life are doing. Give yourself the time and space to calm any fear and anxiety about safety that might be reducing the quality of life for your family. Taking charge in this way can reduce fear, increase confidence and competence, and bring young people and the adults in their lives closer together.