

Teaching Kids to Be Safe Without Making Them Scared

Tips for Safety With Strangers and People Children Know

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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Children's personal safety skills, when supported, can help them stay safe with most people most of the time. *You can teach children to be safe without scaring them – You just need to know how.*

Young people are at risk of assault, abduction, and abuse even in caring families, schools, and communities. Prevention is the key to protecting children's personal safety. The good news is that there are simple and effective ways of teaching children how to protect themselves that will work most of the time.

Parents, teachers, and other caregivers need to know that their children are more likely to be harmed by someone they know than by a stranger. Children need to have clear safety rules both for strangers when they are out on their own and for setting boundaries with people they know.

Anyone can be a child molester—a neighbor, a relative, a family friend, a youth group leader, a teacher, even another child. The best way to protect your children's personal safety is to make the time to ask them often, "Is there anything you've been wondering or worrying about that you haven't told me?" and to listen to their answers with patience and respect.

Children need to understand that there are different safety rules when they are not in the care of an adult and they are on their own. Children who are only a short distance away from an adult in charge even for a few minutes are on their own. They don't need to worry. They just need to know what to do.

Just telling children about safety or just showing children what to do is not enough. When we just talk to children about danger, their raised awareness can actually raise their level of anxiety. Young people learn best by actively participating. Practicing children's personal safety skills increases their confidence and competence. It is important to do this in a way that is not scary, but is fun. Your child can learn with you, and in programs such as Kidpower.

Talking to Your Kids About Strangers

“Stranger danger” is an idea that can increase anxiety and make it harder for us to figure out ways of helping our children stay safe.

Instead, at Kidpower we talk about stranger safety. Rather than focusing on the bad things that sometimes happen, we encourage parents and caregivers to focus on teaching and practicing the skills and behaviors they want their children to use to stay safe with strangers.

Be sure that you are calm yourself when you talk to kids about strangers. If you sound anxious, they will pick up on that. Talking about “stranger danger” or focusing on scary stories can increase fear and anxiety for everyone. Instead, tell kids in a matter-of-fact way that you believe that most people are GOOD, and that this means that most strangers are good, but that a few people have problems that might cause them to hurt kids.

Tell children that they do NOT have to worry about strangers if they follow the safety rules. If children are by themselves, the safety rule is to come and check with an adult first before getting close to or talking to anyone they don't know well. Help kids come up with specific examples of people they know well and people they don't.

Safety Rules for Children when They Are on their Own

- Most people are good. This means most strangers are good.
- A stranger is just someone I don't know and can look like anybody.
- The rules are different when I am with an adult who is taking care of me and when I am on my own. When I am on my own, my job is to check first with the adult in charge before I let a stranger get close to me, talk to me, or give me anything.
- If I am old enough to be out on my own without an adult to ask, it is safer to be where there are other people close by to get help if I need it.
- I do not give personal information to a stranger or to someone who makes me feel uncomfortable.
- It is OK to get help from strangers if an emergency is happening to me, and there is no one close by that I know.
- My job is to check first with the adult in charge before I go anywhere with anyone (a stranger or someone I know). I will tell the adult in charge where I am going, who will be with me, and what I will be doing.
- I will have a safety plan for how to get help anywhere I go.
- I will know what my family's safety rules are for children answering the door, being on the phone, and being on the internet.

To be able to follow these rules, children need to practice the following skills:

- How to stand and walk with awareness and confidence.
- How to keep a safe distance from someone approaching them.
- How to walk away from a stranger without waiting even if that person is being very nice.

- How to check first even when someone says not to.
- How to get help from a busy or insensitive adult if they are lost or scared.
- How to make noise, run, and get to safety in case of an emergency.
- What to say and do if a stranger approaches them at home.

Safety Rules With People Kids Know

- I belong to myself--my body, my time, my spirit--ALL of me. Touch for play, teasing, or affection has to be both people's choice and it has to be safe.
- Except for health, no one should touch me in my private areas (the parts of the body covered by a bathing suit).
- No one should ask me to touch them in their private areas.
- Touch or other behavior for health or safety is not always a choice, but also should never, EVER, have to be a secret.
- I do not have to let what other people say control how I feel.
- Anything that bothers me should not have to be a secret.
- If I have a problem, I need to tell an adult I trust and keep on telling until I get help.
- It is **never** too late to get help.

To be able to follow these rules, children need to practice:

- Saying "No" to unwanted or inappropriate behavior using polite clear words, eye contact, and assertive body language.
- Persisting even when someone uses bribes, hurt feelings, or power to try to pressure them into doing something that makes them feel uncomfortable.
- Protecting themselves from hurtful words.
- Verbal choices for getting out of potentially dangerous situations.
- Getting the attention of busy adults and telling the details about situations that make them confused or uncomfortable.

These are just a few of the children's personal safety skills that Kidpower has to offer.

Children's personal safety skills can grow quickly and help them stay safe most of the time with strangers and with people they know, especially if the adults in their lives help them learn and practice those skills. For more information, call us at 1-800-467-6997. You can subscribe to our free e-newsletter.