

People Safety Issues and Skills for Seniors

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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During a Seniorpower workshop led by our Montreal Center Director Marylaine Leger, a man came abruptly into the room and sat down. The elderly women and men in her workshop clearly knew this man from their Senior Center and became very quiet. The man started disrupting her class by making inappropriate and rude comments.

Marylaine calmly told the man that he needed to participate supportively or leave. When he kept being disruptive, Marylaine started to walk towards the man. Very politely but with complete conviction, she said that it was time for him to leave the room.

The man left, grumbling about how unfair it was, and Marylaine turned back to her awestruck students. They kept saying what an amazing demonstration it was of how personal safety skills could really work, even if you are not physically as big or emotionally as loud as someone. They were especially impressed with how Marylaine was able to be very strong and forceful without being rude or aggressive.

Marylaine's Seniorpower students had been putting up with this man's aggressive behavior for years, as had the staff at the Senior Center. Learning how to set effective boundaries has made a big difference in the quality of their daily lives.

At Kidpower, we use the term "People Safety" to mean people of any age being emotionally and physically safe with people, including themselves. We have found that People Safety issues and skills the same from the time you are born until the time you die. What changes are the situations you are living in and some of your abilities. Our Seniorpower programs give older students the chance to practice the same self-protection, confidence, advocacy and self defense skills as our programs for younger people within a context that is relevant to their specific situations.

It is important not to make assumptions about elderly people, because each is a unique individual. The following People Safety issues apply to many, but by no means all, elderly people.

1. Negative Social Perceptions. As their bodies age, many older people start to face new risks of being victimized by strangers and by people they know and trust. Even if they are very strong, aware and healthy, older people are often seen as being helpless and easy targets for theft, manipulation, abuse and violence.

Although respect for the elderly is a strong value in many cultures, older people are also often seen as being less worthwhile than younger people. The same prejudices about people being disabled are also used against people being old -- that old people are not important, do not have as much power, are about to die anyway, are stupid or crazy, etc.

These negative social perceptions increase the danger elderly people have of being attacked even if they are able to defend themselves. For example, my father is almost 83 and still going strong. A couple of years ago, he and my mother were in a safe public place with lots of people. Suddenly, three young men grabbed my father and tried to pull his wallet out of his pants. My dad fought. My mom yelled. The attackers ran away. The odds are that in this public setting, these men would not have tried to attack a younger couple. This means that my parents were probably targeted because of their age.

One big problem is that some older people internalize negative social messages and come to believe that they are helpless, worthless and powerless because they are old. These negative beliefs can limit their ability to protect themselves and diminish their joy in life.

2. Politeness. Because they grew up in a different time, many older people see being polite as a very high value. They do not want to be a bother to anyone. Many have been taught that it is rude to refuse requests from others, to tell other people that they are wrong, to question authority or to speak up for their needs.

Many older women have been socialized to put the needs of others ahead of their own needs, even at the expense of their own well-being. They might open the door to someone who looks nice, be conned into giving money to people who will misuse their trust, or be vulnerable to emotional coercion from family members who want their money or property.

Older men sometimes also suffer from their need to be polite, especially to people in positions of authority. An elderly friend of mine was so respectful of doctors that he did not speak up when the medical system sent him the wrong medication, thinking that they knew better than he did.

3. Loss. Elderly people also often are dealing with losses - of health, strength, income, independence, and loved ones. These life changes can increase their vulnerability to unscrupulous people.

For example, older men who have become frail because of medical problems are often shocked to be treated as weak and targets for bullying. One man said, "After I came out of the hospital, I was walking at night in a place I have always gone. Some drunk men from a bar started yelling that I was a useless old fart and needed to be put out of my misery. This kind of thing has never happened to me before."

Losses can also lead to great loneliness. With families spread out, many older people end up being alone, especially after the death of a partner. Some people like living alone. Others find social groups to enrich their lives. But some will answer the door or the telephone just to have someone to talk to. A friendly person with bad intentions can take advantage of someone's loneliness.

4. Change. Elderly people also often have less awareness of potential risks, especially if the situation they are living in has changed.

The neighborhood might not be as safe. The people who they know might have moved or died. Their store might have panhandlers in the parking lot, who approach them aggressively because they look older.

They might be riding the bus instead of driving their car and be targeted while waiting at the bus stop or walking home.

Elderly people also might have to change their living situation from a home to a supported living situation with a nursing home, residential care home or family member. After many years of independence, they might be stuck living with housemates who they did not choose. Many are fine people, but a few can be very intrusive and disruptive.

Elderly people needing supported living are in the care of workers or family members who are usually wonderful but occasionally disrespectful or even abusive.

5. Balance. Elderly people often have issues with balance. They are more vulnerable to falling, more likely to be injured seriously if they do fall, and slower to recover.

For example, in a purse-snatching, elderly women are often injured because they hang onto their purses and end up being thrown to the ground.

6. Fear. Fear can stop people of any age from making wise choices for themselves. Fear can also increase a sense of isolation and of being helpless.

One teacher for the Red Cross who is in her eighties told me that many of her friends are afraid to go to the hospital when they have medical problems. Their fear is that the hospital or well-meaning family members might force them to stay in the hospital or go to a nursing home against their wishes.

Sometimes these fears are real, especially when people do not know what their rights are or how to advocate for themselves.

7. Misplaced Anger. It is normal for people of any age to become frustrated and upset about losses, especially if they are having health problems that cannot be cured or if they feel trapped.

These feelings of frustration sometimes lead to anger that becomes directed at whoever is present. Sometimes elderly people will express their anger in ways that are highly disrespectful to the individuals who are trying to help them.

Some elderly people who are struggling with health issues or other life changes will make unreasonable, unrealistic demands or highly prejudiced remarks that drive away those who could help them.

People providing services to the elderly are often overwhelmed, overworked and underpaid. Most are incredibly compassionate. But it can be tempting for some to avoid or discount people who are being mean to them.

8. Increased Vulnerability. Many elderly people fear losing their independence – and unfortunately, for some, this fear is realistic. Many health problems that rob people of their independence increase with age. When people of any age cannot take care of themselves, they need help from others. Especially if their ability to remember or to speak is impaired, they face increased vulnerability of all kinds of abuse if someone takes advantage of their inability to communicate clearly about what is happening to them.

People Safety concepts and skills do not solve all of the problems that come with age, but they do help people to protect themselves from harm and to get help when they need it. In Seniorpower, we teach our students how to:

1. Build positive beliefs. We teach students that their belief in themselves as being powerful, important and competent is the most important self-protection tool that they have. Their safety and self-esteem are more important than *anyone's* embarrassment, inconvenience or offense, including their own. We have students practice taking charge of the negative beliefs that stop them from getting the most out of their lives.

2. Protect yourself emotionally. We teach students that they have the right to be emotionally safe as well as physically safe. They practice throwing away hurtful words and taking in compliments.

Students learn to identify and take the power out of their emotional triggers. Triggers are thoughts, gestures, ideas or behavior that cause people to explode with feelings and go on automatic pilot instead of staying calm and centered. Students practice staying centered and thinking first, instead of getting triggered positively or negatively and reacting immediately.

3. Stay calm, aware, and confident. We show students how being and acting calm, aware and confident will make them less likely to be chosen as a victim by a potential attacker. Also, people will be more likely to listen to them.

We have students practice sitting and or walking with awareness, calm and confidence.

We also have students practice feeling one way and acting another, by **not** making attacking comments or aggressive gestures, even when they are unhappy or anxious.

4. Set clear appropriate boundaries. We have students identify boundaries that are important to them, such as insisting on certain behavior in their homes or refusing unreasonable demands. We also help students identify areas of life where they have to negotiate boundaries or to accept realities, because their wishes involve unrealistic expectations.

In setting boundaries, students practice sounding and looking like they mean what they are saying in a way that is both firm and respectful. We work with the difference between being passive, aggressive and assertive.

Students also practice how to persist when people react negatively by using emotional coercion, ignoring their boundaries, etc. They practice setting boundaries with people they know well, people they are acquainted with, strangers and faceless systems.

5. Assess safety and practice target denial. We have students think about **who** is around, **what** these people are doing, and **how close** are people who can help them if they have a problem. We point out that most problems can be avoided through target denial, which means denying yourself as a target, or "don't be there!"

We sometimes have students practice not opening their doors to someone who they do not know well, even when this person is very sad and pleading or very well dressed and carrying a briefcase.

If they can, we have students practice moving out of reach and setting boundaries instead of letting someone who has aggressive or intrusive behavior come close to them. We discuss how students can reduce risks when visiting less safe areas by leaving valuables at home or keeping them out of sight and by noticing the behavior of people who try to come close to them.

If this is an issue, we discuss financial safety and how to decide when someone is trustworthy and when not. Niceness is not a reason to trust someone. We recommend that students do not to give anyone money or access to their bank accounts without checking first with people who they know well who have been trustworthy for a long time.

We also show students how they can respond differently when someone's behavior changes, even if this is someone they know very well. We sometimes have them practice adjusting their emotional distance when someone who they care about starts behaving abusively.

6. Be polite and persistent in asking for help. We explain that problems should not be secrets. This means that students should tell their problems to people they trust and keep on telling people until they get help.

We also discuss making a safety plan for how to get help everywhere you go. We then pick situations that are relevant for the students for when they might need to keep asking until they get help.

For example, we might have a student imagine that someone's behavior is making her nervous outside a store. She can then practice approaching a busy, distracted, rude storekeeper and insisting on having someone escort her to her car or the bus stop.

Another common example is that we might have a student imagine that he needs to get medical information from a busy doctor's office where he has been waiting so long that the office is about to close. He practices being very persistent and polite in the face of someone who keeps ignoring and forgetting him.

7. Use their voices and bodies to protect themselves. As with any group of students, we adapt how we teach to the specific needs of the individuals we are working with. If balance is a physical issue, we have people practice while sitting down. If being loud is a cultural issue, we find ways to overcome inhibitions.

Students practice yelling, pulling away, and leaving. They practice giving up their wallets and purses rather than fighting over them or hanging onto them. With adaptations as needed to do this safely, they practice using some physical self-defense skills as a last resort.

8. Make a safety plan for the future. Most people of any age don't want to think about needing to depend on others. Many are fiercely independent. We point out that isolation is dangerous both emotionally and physically no matter how old or young you are. We encourage our students to make a safety plan so that they can decide who is going to help them if they are ever in a situation where they cannot take care of themselves.

As mentioned above, we teach the same People Safety skills to individuals of any age. However, in Seniorpower, we adapt the way we present these skills to address the specific issues that elderly people are more likely to face. We also train caregivers and guardians of vulnerable people of any age who cannot protect themselves to become powerful respectful advocates for their safety and well-being.