

What if a Sex Offender Is Living in Our Neighborhood?

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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Most parents and other caregivers are frightened when they discover that registered sex offenders are living in their community or neighborhood. They want to know how they can keep their children safe. Of course, it is upsetting to learn that someone who is known to have abused children has a home near yours or is the parent of a child who is going to your child's school. As an adult, your job is to protect and empower your children without terrifying them.

Fear for the well-being of their children can lead adults to try irrational solutions that serve the sole purpose of helping them feel safer, but these attempts are usually counterproductive. It is a mistake to give children illogical rules like "Never walk on that side of the street!" Or, "Never sit on any man's lap." General statements like these can cause children to become confused and anxious without making them safer.

Instead, your first job as an adult when you hear about a person who has a history of violence and abuse living near you is to *act calm*. It can be traumatic for children if their adults seem very upset. Next, *be aware* of the potential impact of what you say to children, how you say it, and what they overhear you discussing with others.

Be calm and specific with children about what you want them to do in any situation in your neighborhood and give them the chance to *practice*. This approach is more effective and empowering for children than worrying.

In addition, *make sure* that people who are supervising your children have a clear understanding of your safety rules and that they stay with younger children at all times.

Suppose that you have just learned that a sex offender has moved into the house next door. In a calm matter-of-fact way, you could explain to children who are old enough to understand, "The police have told us that Mr. (or Mrs.) Green who moved into the house next door has problems. Our safety rule is that you stay away from the house and away from Mr. Green. Come and tell me if he tries to talk to you or get close to you."

If children ask for details about what Mr. Green did, you can tell them, "That is not what is important. What is important is that you follow your safety rules with Mr. Green as if he is a stranger."

The Kidpower Stranger Safety rules are that children should *move to safety* and *check first* with their adults as soon as they notice that a stranger is starting to get near them, talk with them, give them anything (even their own things) or go anywhere with them. Children who are old enough to go out without an adult should *move to safety* and *think first* if a stranger tries to approach them. Make sure that children know what their safety plan is about how to get help anywhere they might find themselves.

The rules *Check First* (for younger children) and *Think First* (for older children) can prevent many problems. Remind children who are old enough to go out on their own, "Our safety rule is that you will check with me first before you change your plan about *who* you are with, *where* you are going, and *what* you are doing. Do not go into someone's house, yard, or car unless I have agreed that it is okay. I also want you to check with me first about when it is okay to open our door to someone."

Role-play so children can practice walking away and checking first in a variety of situations. Include the opportunity to practice walking away from a nice person trying to talk them into coming close to look at something interesting "for just a minute."

Although feeling upset about what someone has done is normal, demonizing this individual will serve no purpose and will not help your children be safer. It is important to be realistic. Legally, a registered sex offender has served his time and can live anywhere he wants. The truth is that most of the people who harm children are not registered on lists. A locally registered sex offender is likely to be the first person suspected by authorities if a crime is committed.

At the same time, people who have harmed others sometimes repeat their behavior. This means that you want to make sure that your children are never alone with this person, do not go to his house, or into his yard, and do not let him into your home.

If children living in the house where this man is staying are friends with yours, having them come over can be fine, but you want to be aware of the possibility that they might have been abused. Children who have been abused and who have not had help are most likely to harm themselves, but they might do something abusive to others.

The best way for your children to protect themselves from abuse is to be able to set boundaries and to get help if they need it. Supervise your children's play with all children, including these, until you are sure that they have these skills. Make sure that your children are adequately supervised at all times in all places – at home, at other people's homes, at school, going to and from school, at child care or after school programs, and in all recreational activities

Suppose that you and the registered sex offender have friends in common, but you don't feel comfortable letting your children be at functions where this person is present. Both you and your children need to be able to say "No" to invitations that would break your safety rules without letting embarrassment or guilt stop you from setting clear boundaries.

Be a safe person for your children to come to with their problems. Let them know that you really want to hear from them, no matter how busy you are. Take the time to ask them once in a while, "Is there anything you have been wondering or worrying about that you have not told me?" Listen patiently to their answers without lecturing, joking, overreacting, or judging. Let them know that it is *never* too late to tell. Children who have been molested or bullied often feel that what happened was their fault. The sooner they can get help from caring adults, the safer they are going to be.

Sex offenders may live in your community, but you and your children still have the power to learn skills that can help keep them safe most of the time. Positive, practical People Safety training for adults and children, through organizations such as Kidpower, can be very helpful in reducing worry and increasing competence in skills that promote safety.