

Strangers at School ~ Tools to Build Understanding

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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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"Don't you think this is going too far?" asked a parent during a Kidpower Parent/Caregiver Education Workshop at an elementary school. "Following the Kidpower safety rules would mean that a child eight years old or younger on his own passing a parent he didn't know in the hallway **at school** wouldn't talk to the adult, because the adult would be a stranger! But we want our children to feel like school is a safe place. We certainly want them to feel safe with parents. Would you really expect a child to check first before talking in that situation?"

Adults and most children know that a stranger is "someone I don't know." However, we have a tendency to make assumptions about strangers, often unconsciously. A common assumption is that a stranger is likely to be 'dangerous' because of that person's gender, size, style and color of clothing and hair, or skin color. On the other hand, equally common is the assumption that someone is 'safe' because of that person's gender, size, style and color of clothing and hair, or skin color.

Making assumptions about strangers does not help anyone stay safe. The parent's question above highlights three extremely common assumptions; looking at these will help us explore the question.

Assumption #1: A child passing an adult stranger in the hall at school knows, or should assume, that the adult is the parent of another child at the school.

In schools with hundreds of students, the school community can easily include over a thousand parents and step-parents. Even very small school communities can include more than one hundred. Some of them -- parents of close friends, for example -- will be people children know. Almost all of the parents, however, will be strangers to almost all of the children. Children have no way to assess accurately whether the adult passing in the hall is a parent or not, and attempting to do so could easily distract children from following the safety rules.

Assumption #2: Even if he or she is a stranger, the parent of a child at the school is a 'safe person.'

At Kidpower, we believe most people in the world are good. That means most strangers are good people. It means that most adults walking on school campuses are also good. However, we can't tell just by looking at a stranger whether or not that person will make wise or safe choices. The fact is, many people who do hurtful things to children have children of their own, and most victims of child sexual assault are molested by people they know, including by parents in their community. Being a parent says nothing about whether or not a person will make safe choices with children.

These are **not** details we share with children. Instead, we can help them stay safe by teaching them very simple safety habits that keep people safe most of the time. One of those habits for children ages eight and younger is, "When you're on your own, check first before you talk to people you don't know." The habit is easiest to learn if they are encouraged to follow it consistently.

Assumption #3: Adults on elementary school campuses are conducting legitimate business that helps children and are therefore safe people for children to interact with independently.

Many of us like to think of our schools as being like extensions of our families; this can distract us from remembering that they are actually full of people we don't know who are entering and leaving the campus for numerous reasons. They can include vendors, community volunteers, job seekers, and representatives from social service agencies. They can also include people who simply walk onto the campus, even when the school has an official "check-in" policy. This is not a problem as long as the students have good safety habits that they have practiced with their families and with their teachers.

One of the best ways to help children **feel** safe at school is to help them **be** safe by supporting the development of strong, lifelong safety habits. School communities are well equipped to do this effectively when parents and teachers communicate together about the skills they want children to learn. When passing children on their own in the essentially empty hallways, adults who are strangers to the children can model the skill of walking with awareness and confidence, and they can refrain from engaging them in conversation. Both of these steps can help children feel, and be, safe.

When considering the safety habits you want the children in your life to follow, do remember that you can help them "check first" in **advance**. For example, at a cooperative preschool with **lots** of parents -- strangers to the children -- coming and going in a relatively small, confined space, the safety rule might be, "Inside the classroom and the fence, you can talk with **anyone** you want. But before you talk with anyone outside the fence, or before you leave the fenced area, Check First." Then, **practice** so that you know the children have been successful trying the skill.