

Teaching Stranger Safety ~ The Kidpower Way

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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'Stranger danger' is, unfortunately, a commonly used phrase. The phrase brings to mind worries we have about what strangers might do, and those worries can make it hard to remember what even very small children know, that a stranger is simply a person we don't know.

Most adults and many children have strong, often unpleasant feelings and pictures in their minds when they think of the word "stranger." The phrase 'stranger danger' can make those unpleasant feelings even stronger. Those pictures can actually interfere with our efforts to stay safe, and to keep our children safe, by distracting us from the fact that strangers are simply people we don't know, including men, women, people using wheelchairs or holding puppies, seniors, and children.

This cognitive interference can lead us to give confusing messages to our children. We may find ourselves telling them not to talk to strangers and then expecting them to talk to strangers such as other children at the park, fellow guests at weddings and parties, or the grocery clerk at the corner store.

In reality, almost everyone is a stranger to everyone else - and that's wonderful! The world is full of exciting people most of us haven't met yet. Because we want our children to live rich and full lives, most of us understand that our children will need opportunities to meet new people, but we want them to meet new people safely. We recommend that parents and caregivers consider helping children learn how to do this by focusing on 'stranger safety' rather than 'stranger danger.'

At Kidpower, we tell children that we believe most people in the world are good. That means most strangers are good, and that if they ever need help, most people, including most strangers, would want to help them. However, since we can't tell just by looking at someone whether they would be one of the very few people out there who might feel like causing a problem, we have basic safety habits so we don't have to worry about it.

Children appreciate hearing from calm, upbeat parents and caregivers that all of us, not just children, behave differently when we're together with others who could help us out and when we're on our own. When young children know their rule is "Check first with the grown-up in charge before you talk to strangers when you're on your own," and when they have the chance to practice actually performing that skill in a positive, success-based way, they are more likely to use that skill in real life.

With very young children, parents can lay the groundwork for this family rule and make sure the child's experience is consistent with it by saying something like, "We're going to meet lots of strangers of all ages at this show - I think it will be a lot of fun. When we're inside this room, you can talk to anyone you want because you are with me!"

Children often have surprising ideas about who they know and who they don't know -- they may feel like the mail carrier is someone they definitely know! A powerful way to start building a matter-of-fact, clear understanding of the word "stranger" in the mind of your child is to start using the word itself as frequently and as accurately as possible. This can include cheerfully asking your young child to point out all the strangers they see in a magazine (most likely 100% of the people in it!) and making matter-of-fact comments such as, "Grandma's bringing a friend to dinner with us tonight. She's a stranger to us, but not to Grandma! I'm excited to meet her."

Stranger danger is a worry; stranger safety is a goal you can work toward while building skill and competence and reducing worry. With a solid understanding of what a stranger REALLY is, children are more prepared to make safe choices, to follow family safety rules about talking with strangers, and to enrich their lives with the companionship of people who make them happy.