

Safe From Strangers

There are few thoughts as terrifying as the abduction of your young child by a stranger. The fear causes parents to think long and hard about their children's safety. They tell them in a very clear voice, "Do not talk to strangers."

The problem is though, that a child's view of a stranger is very different from a parent's view. From the child's perspective, because a stranger is someone they are supposed to be afraid of, they expect a stranger to look ugly or scary. In fact, few, if any strangers actually look like the child's notion. Then to make matters more confusing for children, we teach them to respect and listen to their elders and be polite. Then as role models, children see us talk to people we have never met before, day in and day out. We even have them hug relatives whom they may never have met before!

So young children get it and will not talk to strangers. They will very willingly avoid scary looking people. However, when confronted by a friendly, kind looking older person, they will likely respond politely, which in most cases means "speaking when spoken to" and as they are taught in school, they will follow their directions.

Helping young children not to talk to strangers or not go with them, takes much more than the simple admonishment, "Don't talk to strangers."

Parents who want to increase the likelihood that their child will avoid or leave from persons unknown must spend a good amount of time talking about the issue and teaching their children on an ongoing basis. These tips may help:

1. When out in the community, in a matter of fact voice, point out the various people and ask your child if s/he knows them. Use this as an opportunity to explain that a stranger is any person we do not know, regardless of what they look like.
2. Next it becomes very important to differentiate the rules for grown-ups and the rules for children. Sometimes simply phrasing it as, "Are you old enough to talk to people you don't know by yourself?" and then explain that they must have your permission to do so.
3. In the event a stranger approaches a child, they then must be equipped with strategies to manage the situation. Some parents provide a "code word." Explain to the child if someone doesn't know the code word, they do not have permission to go or talk with the person. In such situations, the child must be instructed to leave the person and immediately go to another adult they know, or older child if an adult is not available. It important to also teach the child that this is not rude. The child must understand that they have your full permission to leave the situation and to do so immediately.

Managing your child's safety, in your absence is truly a scary thought for most parents. We do not want to put undue fear in our children, but we do want to keep them from harm. It is important to understand how our own behaviour may contradict what we want children to do when approached by people they do not know. We have to talk about the difference between what parents may do and what children may do. Only parents may touch the stove... only parents talk to strangers.

Finally, in addition to teaching who NOT to talk to, we must also teach, who they CAN talk to. If for instance, your child is lost in the store, who can they talk to? Develop a list of safe persons your child can talk to – even if they do not know them. The list may include police, fireman, teachers and even cashiers in stores. Remember keeping children safe is an ongoing discussion and not a simple one-time set of rules.

Keep talking with them to keep them safe.

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Buy the book:

To order Direnfeld's book, Raising Kids Without Raising Cane, send a cheque or money order in the amount of \$12.00 to:
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