

Stranger Danger: What Your Children Need to Know

Do you feel you've spoken to your child about not talking to strangers until you're blue in the face? Well, children do need to hear the safety message again and again, as they sometimes forget or get comfortable with the fact that nothing has ever happened to them. The key is keeping them safe – not scared – by being smart and prepared. Young children often think they can identify a “bad” person by the way he looks. We, of course, know that's not true. A bad person can be well-dressed, pretty, nice and friendly. It's the bad behavior children need to recognize. Whenever you speak to your child about being safe, always do so in a calm, non-threatening manner. He shouldn't feel frightened, as fear can be paralyzing to a child and prevent him from using strategies that you've taught him.

Tips for talking to your child about strangers

Here are some things to keep in mind as you talk to your son or daughter:

- Explain that although strangers could be “bad,” most are not. Conversely, most children are victimized by familiar people; that's why it's important for kids to determine if the behavior, rather than the person, is bad.
- Use “what-if” scenarios and take advantage of “teachable moments” – such as when a kidnapping makes the evening news.
- Give your children permission to be impolite. They may need to be to get out of a threatening situation.
- Explain to them that responsible adults should never ask a child for assistance. That way they won't fall for excuses such as “I need help finding my puppy.”
- Don't assume older children (adolescents and teenagers) are in less danger by virtue of their age and maturity. They are often at increased risk because they have more freedom and independence. Don't hesitate to go over the rules with them anytime they're going to be out or alone in the house.
- Always make sure you have “safety nets” in place. Make sure your children know who can help them in a threatening situation – and give them specific instructions (emergency numbers, phone numbers, addresses) for reaching those people.

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