

Safety Tips

How to help protect your children

- Know where your children are at all times. If your child is going to play at the home of a friend, contact the friend's parents and confirm plans beforehand. Call again to make sure your child has arrived safely. If possible, personally accompany your child to play-dates and instruct other parents to notify you when your child leaves their home.
- Have a routine for picking your children up and dropping them off at school, meetings, and lessons. Be on time! Tragedies have happened when parents were late and children tried to walk home alone.
- Give your child's school a list of the people who are permitted to pick her/him up. Inform the school clearly, in writing, if there is an ongoing custody dispute. Make sure your letter is not just filed away-talk to school staff and warn teachers, administrators, counselors, and other staff about security problems you have.
- Most schools today have standard health-and-safety forms that parents must fill out. Be sure to list on this form several trusted relatives or friends who can pick your child up from school if you are not able to do so.
- Teach your children how to call for help. Even very little children can dial 9-1-1. Caller ID systems often tell police the location from which a call was placed, but it's helpful to teach your young child his/her address anyway.
- Consider buying an inexpensive, prepaid cell phone so your children can stay in touch with you or call the police, if necessary. An old cell phone can be used to call 9-1-1 even if it is not activated.
- Encourage your children to tell you any time a strange adult approaches them.
- Encourage your children to go places in groups. Sexual predators are less likely to target a group of children than one isolated child.
- Using simple language, tell your children about the possibility of abduction. Give them clear, police-approved direction on how to handle possible approaches. Urge them to stay alert. After you have reviewed this site, discuss with them some of the ways predators try to gain the trust of children.
- Do not put a large, visible name tag on your child's possessions, or embroider a name on clothing, in a place where a predator might see it. Predators often note such things and win a child's trust by using their name.
- Agree on a family code word, a word that only family members and the most intimate family friends will know. Tell your children that in the absence of a parent, they must never accompany anyone who does not know this secret word.

Special advice for the parents of older children

Teenagers and pre-teens present a unique set of challenges to parents who want to keep their children safe.

- Learn the names of your child's friends, and introduce yourself to their friends' parents. If a teenager is missing, it is useful to contact their friends to learn whether they ran away, and if so where they might have gone. If your son or daughter has a computer-based address book or "buddy list," this is the first place to look for names and addresses of possible contacts.
- Be aware of your child's computer use, since there have been numerous cases in which predators have entrapped teenage children through online conversations. You may wish to think about using parental control software to make certain that your child's online activities are consistent with your family's values.
- Some girls are abducted when they have car trouble, so if your child drives, make sure her car is in good repair. Keep a prepaid cell phone in every vehicle so that your child can call for help immediately in case of car trouble. Plan her routes in advance so you will know where she is going and can ensure that she will avoid troubled areas.
- If your child has an after-school job that keeps her out after dark, consider picking her up after work instead of letting her walk through the darkness to a bus stop or car.
- If a teenager runs away from home, do not assume that the matter is less serious than abduction. Runaways frequently are the subjects of violence or other forms of abuse.

It is wise to have a frank conversation with your children about their safety. Do not frighten them, but talk to them in a clear, honest, age-appropriate manner about the risks children face today.

Of course you will give your children the usual advice about avoiding strangers. But here are some additional tips you can tell your kids.

- Never leave with anyone unless he/she knows your family's secret code word.
- Do not IM with people on the Internet if you have not met them in real life first. Some people on the Internet pretend to be kids when they are really grown-ups.
- If someone tries to pick you up, scream! Scream "NINE ONE ONE!" as loudly as you can, over and over. This is much better than yelling "Help!" If you see other adults nearby, shout to them, "This is not my daddy! Call the police!"

- Fight back! You can bite very hard if you have to. Kick an adult who tries to take you. Scratch his eyes and dig your fingers into them. Do not worry that you will get in trouble for hurting an adult; everyone will think you are brave and strong for saving yourself.

Those who attack children use a variety of tricks to lure their young victims. Here are some points to discuss with your children.

Some predators pretend to be authority figures, people children are taught to obey or admire--policemen, firemen, religious leaders, teachers, or doctors. Children should be taught that they must not accompany any adult unless that adult knows the family's secret word.

Sadly, we must instruct our children not to accompany even a neighbor without that password. Online registries of sexual predators show that in many communities, a distressing number of nearby residents have convictions for sexual offenses. Teach your children that there are some situations in which they must be particularly wary:

1. When a stranger begins paying him/her excessive or unusual compliments
2. When a stranger suggests playing games
3. When a stranger asks a child not to tell anyone about a conversation or activity
4. When a stranger asks for help, particularly if asking for help in finding a lost pet

Unfortunately, a brief parental warning may not be enough.

The staff of a major network television news program recently conducted an experiment with young children. Parents clearly warned their children not to accompany any stranger. Yet only a few minutes later an employee of the news program was easily able to approach those children at a playground and persuade each of them to accompany him by asking for help in finding a lost pet. Children who would have refused an offer of candy from a stranger instantly believed the tale of a lost puppy.

So talk to your children, and keep talking to them. Supervise them carefully when they are at play, and make sure that you check on them if they ever have to walk to school or play-dates unaccompanied.