

STRANGER DANGER

This month, with school approaching, many mothers' minds turn to the safety of their children. My older twins are starting kindergarten in September and I am excited and nervous! I would also of course like to keep them as safe as possible, and since this will be the first time they are really away from me, I'm going to go over stranger danger rules with them once again.

The first thing you have to realize when you are teaching your children about strangers is that, if your children are young, they may not fully understand the term. Who exactly is a stranger? Are the parents of their preschool friends strangers? Are people you chat with in the grocery line strangers? Basically they need to be taught that a stranger is anyone they don't know. And while it is okay to talk to a stranger with your mom or dad around, it's not okay if you are by yourself.

When your kids are young and still close to you all the time, simply demonstrate an appropriate level of friendliness to people you don't know, and explain your protocol for talking with various people. Don't expect them to understand all the subtleties until they're much older, however.

You can actively teach your child to recognize strangers by mixing in some photos you have cut out of magazines with photos of family members familiar to your child. Then go through the photos and ask your child to pick out the people they would and wouldn't talk to. You will need to change the magazine cut outs each time so they do not become familiar to your child.

Once your children start playing freely in your neighborhood, and walking to school or to the bus stop, you'll need to give them more information about people who might hurt children, and what to do. No matter how well you coach your children, however, keep in mind that they're still vulnerable, and could be lured by a crafty adult who would do them harm.

Teach your kids that if approached by someone they don't know, they should run away or yell loudly, describing exactly what is happening to them, such as: "Help, this is not my Dad," or "Help, I'm being kidnaped." If children only scream, people may ignore them, believing they are simply having a temper tantrum.

Make sure your children know that **YOU WILL NEVER SEND SOMEONE THEY DO NOT KNOW** to pick them up. Be sure they have absolutely no doubt in their minds on this. Tell them to scream, holler and run like crazy if anyone they do not know ever tries to make them get in a car. Be sure they know that it is 100% okay to do this. Give your child a secret code word and explain that if anyone else comes to pick them up that this person **MUST KNOW THE SECRET CODE WORD!** Tell your child to ask them what the secret code word is and if the person doesn't know it, to go to their teacher or person in charge and let them know there is a problem with whoever is trying to pick them up. Make sure they know this secret word applies to everyone, the babysitter, a neighbor, etc. Even someone they know must know this secret code. Don't forget to change the code word periodically.

Make sure your child always plays or walks home from school in groups. Practice safety in numbers! Also, explain to your child that if someone in a vehicle stops near them and wants them to come over to the car for any reason ...don't do it! Keep a safe distance away from the vehicle. **NEVER GET WITHIN ARMS REACH** and it is up to you to show them what "arms reach" is. Get in your car and have your child stand outside the door in the place where they think they are out of arms reach. Do your best to try to "grab" them. If you can reach your child, even enough to touch their clothing, they are too close. They don't understand and you need to show them how far away to be.

One of the most common ways that strangers seek to gain a child's confidence is by asking for help. Pretend you're a stranger and play "what if" games, using some of these examples:

- Ask the child for help finding a lost pet or for directions.
- Offer reward money or candy.
- Tell the child Mom or Dad has been hurt and needs help.
- Act like an undercover police officer (tell kids they should only approach uniformed police officers and marked cars).

Make sure they know to always tell you if someone has approached them. Sometimes children believe they will get in trouble. Assure them that this will not happen. Also make sure your kids know their address and phone number and how to call 911.

Above all else, teaching your children about stranger danger is not a one time lesson. It is a lesson that you and each child need to regularly revisit. The aim is not to frighten our children or to make them scared of every new person they meet, rather it is to keep them safe from that tiny minority of adults who pose a risk to them.

Web sites used for research:

www.family.disney.go.com

www.cdc.gov

www.ci.mesa.az.us

www.advocatehealth.com

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

www.uslink.net

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