

Teaching Children to Beware of Strangers is not Enough

Media stories about abducted, abused or molested children are terrifying to every parent. We all want our children to be safe, but many of us also want our children to have a sense of trust in adults. It's difficult to teach children to be wary and trusting at the same time.

The recent increase in programs and books that teach children to be assertive and to say 'no' to frightening or hurtful adult actions indicates the great concern about helping children protect themselves. But parents and teachers must remain fully aware that teaching assertive skills to children, and encouraging them to tell parents about 'bad behavior' from other adults, is a small part of keeping young children safe.

We must not forget that children are small, weak, and vulnerable when compared to adults. The protection of children is the most central and important task of parents and primary caregivers. Children must not be overburdened with feelings that they alone are responsible for their own safety.

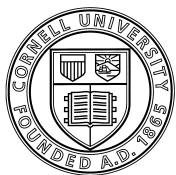
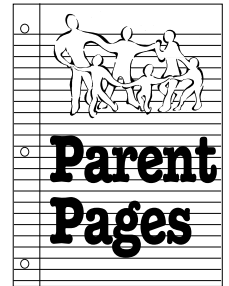
Here are some strategies for keeping children safe:

- ◆ Give children clear, simple clear rules such as, "You must never talk to, go with, or take gifts of any kind from strangers unless we are with you and say it's alright." At the same time, it's probably appropriate for a parent to teach a child the difference between a person in a supermarket who makes a casual, friendly comment and a person who poses a threat.
- ◆ Talk with children about feelings, both positive and negative. Parents can say to preschoolers, "Everyone feels sad sometimes -- people may feel mixed up about something that doesn't feel quite right. When you have sad or mixed-up feelings, I hope you'll tell me about them so we can figure them out together."

- ◆ Pay attention to non-verbal signals that something is bothering your child. Young children often lack words to express their concerns. Parents must be sensitive to behavioral messages. Sustained changes in mood or actions may be important clues that children do not know how to talk about something that's worrying them.
- ◆ Supervise young children in public. Be alert and attentive at all times. If either you or your child is getting tired or irritable, end shopping or visiting and go home.
- ◆ Share information and teach skills that are age-appropriate. Even school-age children are not always ready to care for themselves or handle emergencies.
- ◆ Reassure your children that you love them and will do everything you can to keep them safe.

Parents have always had to establish rules for children's safety and protection. When such rules are presented in a clear, matter-of-fact fashion most children accept them without becoming unduly fearful, particularly when parents indicate that safety is a shared adult-child responsibility. Overemphasis on teaching children assertive skills, or to distinguish between 'bad' and 'good' touch should not lead parents to a false sense of security. Adults must always provide continuous, loving supervision if children are to be safe. We must all continue to stress the importance of neighborliness, support networks, quality child care, after-school programs, and other family-strengthening approaches if our communities are to be truly safe for children.

Source: Jennifer Birkmayer, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, New York State College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.



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Printed 5/2008