

Child safety is more than a slogan

“Stranger-Danger” warnings not effective at keeping kids safer

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“Stranger danger” - the phrase is so pervasive in our culture that it has become part of the lexicon. Well-intentioned adults perpetuate this misguided message, and the media often uses it as a slogan. A recent case illustrates how literal children may be when given a specific message. The child in this case may have evaded his rescuers, because he had been taught “not to talk to strangers.”

This case and many others clearly illustrate how literal children may be when given a specific message. That’s why the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) has never supported the “stranger-danger” message, especially because experience has shown us that most children are actually taken by someone they know or are familiar with. So what does “stranger danger” really mean, and do children benefit from an outdated and incomplete message? Here’s what we have learned about the “stranger-danger” concept

- ★ Children don’t get it.
- ★ Adults don’t practice it.
- ★ It doesn’t go far enough in protecting children from potential danger.

When questioned, children will often describe a “stranger” as someone who is “ugly or mean.” They don’t perceive nice-looking or friendly people as “strangers.” And if someone talks to a child or is even around a child more than once, that person loses his or her “stranger” status. The child then thinks he or she “knows” the person. Children also want to be helpful, thrive on adult approval, and respond to adult authority. So, if someone with ill intent asks them to perform a task or tells them something has happened to a loved one, chances are good the child can be tricked.

The “stranger-danger” message becomes even more confusing for children since they can’t tell by looking at someone whether or not the person is “good” or “bad.” Wouldn’t it be great if we could point out the “bad” people to our children and be done with it? Whether it’s in a grocery store or at a baseball game, adults break the rule of “don’t talk to strangers” all the time. But adults have the benefit of experience, judgment, and decision-making skills; children do not. And sometimes adults are wrong. So, if we can’t identify “bad” people, we certainly can’t expect our children to.

Today, kids need to be empowered with positive messages and safety skills that will build their self esteem and self confidence while helping to keep them safer. Kids don’t need to be told the world is a scary place. They watch the news, hear adults talking, and may even

experience violence firsthand. Rather, they need to know their parent, guardian, or another trusted adult is there for them if they are in trouble; and most adults they encounter in their lives are basically good people.

When we tell children to “never talk to strangers,” we have effectively eliminated a key source of help for them if they are in trouble. If they’re lost, they may be surrounded by many “strangers” who could conceivably help them if they would only ask. Since we know parents and guardians can’t be with their children every second of the day, we need to give children “safety nets” of people they can go to if they need help. Those individuals may include uniformed law-enforcement or security officers; a store salesperson with a nametag; the person in an information booth at a mall or other public venue; or a mother with children. In specific situations such as being lost outside, the safety messages need to be tailored to those circumstances.

- ★ A child should never wander away from where they first became lost. If they stay put, chances are better that they will be found more quickly.
- ★ If the child gets lost in conditions like a thunderstorm or near an overflowing riverbank, then the child needs to go to the nearest safe spot and wait for rescuers.
- ★ Children should make noise either by yelling, blowing a whistle, or just attracting attention. This will help in bringing someone to their rescue.

Parents and guardians can make child safety part of a child’s everyday life in a non-threatening way by practicing some of these skills. Whether it’s checking first with a trusted adult, taking a friend, or avoiding and getting out of dangerous situations, there are easy “what if” scenarios to practice with your children to make sure they “get it.” Make outings to a mall or park an opportunity to reinforce these skills. That way they won’t have to wonder what to do if lost or in danger. Do this on a regular basis to make sure it becomes second nature. At the same time reassure them you are there for them, and remind them there are other people who can help.

NCMEC believes the time is now for our society to retire the “stranger-danger” message; realize child safety is much more important than a slogan; and make sure we are arming our children with relevant, age-appropriate messages that will empower them. Remember, there is nothing on earth that beats our parental, guardian, and caregiver supervision and attention in helping to keep our children safer.

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