

Teaching Safety Skills to Toddlers

By Janelle Durham, MSW. Parent Educator for Bellevue College. www.gooddayswithkids.com

As parents, we work hard to keep our children safe through child-proofing their environment to minimize the possible risks they encounter. However, we also want to teach them ways to protect themselves and avoid injury. We start when they are toddlers, by teaching them to assess their situation for safety vs. risk, and by teaching skills that reduce their risk of harm.

When teaching safety, think “prepare, don’t scare.” Scaring your child by over-protecting, hovering, or gasping with fear whenever they move can create a fearful child. Preparing your child by teaching them how to explore their environment wisely and with caution when warranted is very empowering.

The Language (and Body Language) of Safety: Interpreting Situations for your Child

When our children are little, they have no experience with what is safe and what is not. They rely on us to help them learn. Babies begin “social referencing” at 8 – 12 months. When they encounter something new, they look at their parents for information. If you’re smiling, and verbally encouraging them, they move toward it. If you look worried, they may move away or move more cautiously.

You can help them to interpret the safety or risk potential in a situation by your responses when they do their check-in. It may help you to think about a few different levels of risk potential:

- Green = it’s totally safe, I have no worries. When your child looks to you for input: put on a big smile, nod, and verbally encourage exploration.
- Yellow = minor risk of harm to child (or property), but easy to avoid harm if they exercise a little extra caution. Look positive but thoughtful, lean forward to show you’re paying extra attention, say calmly and quietly “be careful of the edge” or “gentle touch” or “it’s fragile, hold it carefully” or “watch your feet” – something that tells them what to do to be safe.
- Orange = risk of harm to child, and they must actively work to avoid it. Look concerned (not scared) and attentive. Stand up and move closer. Use a strong voice to tell them what the risk is and what they need to do. Emphasize the important words. “The oven is hot. Move over there” or “that would be a big fall – go that way, back to the slide” or “I don’t want you to slip and fall. Use walking feet at the pool” or “it’s not safe to run in a parking lot – hold my hand.”
- Red = imminent risk of harm, child must immediately stop, or you must intervene. (Save this for when you really mean it, so they take it very seriously.) Look intensely alert, and either scared or angry (whatever gets their attention). Move toward them. Use your strongest, most urgent voice, and as few words as possible to tell them what to do. “Stop!” “Danger! Back up!” “Hands up – don’t touch!” *After* they’re out of harm’s way, *then* explain the situation.

Teaching Safe Behaviors

The most common causes of childhood injuries are falls, animal bites, drowning, poisoning, burns and motor vehicle accidents. It’s important for parents to safety-proof, but we also need to teach our kids how to be careful about these risks. For example, if a parent always gated the stairs and never let his child use them, think what could happen the first time she encountered un-gated stairs...

Preventing falls / Moving safely:

- Practice safe movement on low climbers and short stairs to practice skills for higher places.
- Use safety language to let them know when they’re moving into dangerous territory.

- Model how to move carefully, demo how to pay close attention to hand-holds, foot holds, being cautious around heights, etc. Teach that sometimes it's safest to sit down and scoot.
- Encourage them to trust their instincts: "You're looking worried. That is really high, isn't it? I think you'll be OK if you're careful. If you want, I can help you do it, or I can get you down."

Preventing bites / Interacting with animals:

- Teach your child to always ask the pet's owner before touching it. (No touching wild animals.)
- Teach gentle touch – say the words, model the behavior, hold your child's hand to guide.
- Teach that all animals' food dishes are always off-limits. (And so are cat litter boxes!)

Preventing drowning / Staying safe around water:

- Enroll your child in swim lessons by age 3 – 5. (But don't count on it to "drown proof" them.)
- Teach your child to move slowly and carefully around water – getting in and out of the bath tub, walking around the pool, etc. Point out that wet ground is slippery, and these places are full of hard surfaces that hurt to fall on, and that falling into water is very dangerous.
- If your child plays in a tub or pool with other children, set strict limits on horseplay (i.e. no pushing anyone's head under the water!)

Preventing poisoning:

- Get Mr. Yuk stickers from Poison Control. Use them, and teach your child what they mean. (Note: dangerous substances should be kept out of child's sight and reach. Mr. Yuk stickers are your back-up plan, in case something accidentally gets left out.)
- Teach your child to always ask you before eating anything.

Preventing burns:

- Teach the word "hot" and model that they should move away from things you call hot.
- Teach "hands up" and model how to keep their hands away from something dangerous.

Motor vehicle, bicycle, and pedestrian safety

- In the car, they need to know car seat use (and seat belt use) is non-negotiable. They must ALWAYS ride buckled in. No exceptions! Even when just moving the car a few feet.
- If you are waiting in the car for something, keep your child buckled in. You can move to sit next to them to read a book or play while you wait, but don't let them play in the car.
- When riding a bicycle or other wheeled vehicle, make the bike helmet mandatory. Model the importance of this by always wearing a helmet yourself.
- In parking lots, teach that we never play near cars, and we always hold hands.
- When crossing roads, teach to look both ways, listen for cars, then cross.
- Play "red light, green light" game or freeze tag for practice stopping when you say so.

No Substitute for Adult Supervision!

Although this handout is all about teaching safety skills, it's essential to remember that young children *can't be responsible* for keeping themselves safe! There is so much about the world that they don't know that they can get themselves into danger without realizing it. And even if they *do* realize there's a risk, that knowledge won't always prevent them from doing it – they don't have the impulse control to resist their urge to try something new. Children rely on careful adult supervision to keep them safe.

More ideas at: <http://life.familyeducation.com/safety/toddler/53828.html>