

Teaching about “Tricky People” vs. “Stranger Danger” and other ways to reduce your child’s risk of harm

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

Many parents worry a great deal about stranger danger: conjuring up nightmares about kidnapping and sexual abuse. These fears may cause them to keep their children safe inside, but then the children miss out on the benefits of outdoor play, and independent exploration of their world.

What are some things you can do to keep your child(ren) safe from people who would do them harm? What do they need to know to be safe when you’re not right by their side?

- Who they are and how to find you:
 - For a toddler: Teach them their name and their parents’ name(s).
 - A young child (3 – 6) should know their address and their parents’ phone numbers.
 - An older child should know how to contact multiple trusted adults, how to get to safe places, and how and why to call 9-1-1.
- Where they can go:
 - For a toddler or preschooler, let them know the boundaries of where they can go and where they can’t, and set limits such as “you must hold my hand in the parking lot.”
 - For older children: Set boundaries on where they go, ask that they check in from time to time, require that they check in if their plans change. Encourage the buddy system.
 - Have consequences (at any age) if they violate their boundaries. If they get sad or mad when you enforce limits, remind them your job is to keep them safe.
- What to do if you become separated:
 - For a toddler, put your contact info in their pocket, have a current picture of them, and keep a close eye on them. In very busy places, carry them in a stroller or backpack.
 - For a preschooler, talk about the importance of staying close to you. Tell them that if they look around and can’t find you, they should stop where they are and you will find them.
 - For an older child, have a plan in advance for where you’d meet again. Make sure they can describe it to you, and check in occasionally to be sure they know how to find it.
- Teach and model healthy touch. Don’t force your child to hug someone if they are not comfortable.
 - Teach toddlers names for private body parts (e.g. penis or vagina), not family euphemisms.
 - By age three, teach that the parts of their body that are covered by a swimsuit are private. They should be kept covered, and other people should not touch them there, except caregiver who are briefly helping to clean them, or a doctor, when parents are in the room.

- As they get older, tell them to be wary of “secret touch” that the other person wants you to hide from people, or touch that makes them feel wrong after it happened. Let children know that if inappropriate touch happens, it’s not the child’s fault and they will not be in trouble.
- Talk about safe people and unsafe people
 - Under three years old, let them know who are the adults that you trust. Demonstrate that with your body language, and your words. “If you ever need help, you can ask _____.”
 - For preschoolers:
 - Tell them how to find a trustworthy stranger if they need help. Tell them to look for a person who is working – someone standing behind the check-out counter, or wearing a uniform. Or tell them to go to another parent who has a child with them.
 - Talk about “tricky people” and what behaviors are red flags. (See below.)
 - For older kids: Give examples of “tricky behavior”; have them describe how they’d respond.

Stranger Danger or Tricky People?

For decades, parents and educators have taught the idea of *stranger danger*. But this can create a culture of fear, causing a child to be so afraid of strangers that they don’t seek out help when they need it. Also, most crimes against children are actually perpetrated by someone the child knows well.

Instead, talk about “tricky people” who display certain behaviors. Those *behaviors* should raise red flags for a child, and let them know to check in with a trusted adult for advice on how to respond.

Tricky people may:

- ask kids for help (e.g. help finding a lost puppy)
- try to arrange for alone time with a child
- try to make one particular kid feel special, lavishing praise and gifts
- ask kids to do something that breaks the family rules, or just doesn’t feel right.
- ask kids to keep a secret from their parents or their teacher, or threaten them
- touches a child a lot (tickling, wrestling, asking for hugs) even if the child says no; touches a child in a private area, asks a child to touch their private areas, asks to see a child’s private areas, asks to take pictures of private area, or shows a child their private areas.

Teach your child that any of these tricky behaviors are a red flag, and they should share them with you or another trusted adult. If a child comes to you with concerns, always take them seriously.

For more details on all these topics: <https://gooddayswithkids.com/2017/02/13/tricky-people/>