

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

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Many parents worry a great deal about stranger danger. They worry that “the world is more dangerous than when I was a kid”. That’s despite the fact that rates of child abduction have been steady for over 20 years, and child sexual abuse has declined 62% from 1992 to 2010. Because of their fear, parents limit children’s time playing outdoors, and limit kid’s unsupervised play or independent exploration of their worlds. Kids miss out on many of the health and mood benefits of outdoor time, spend a lot more time being sedentary indoors, and have few opportunities for independent decision-making and the problem-solving that will help them be independent adults.

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?

For a child age 1 and up

- Teach them their name and their parents’ name(s)
- Tell them they need to stay near you out in public. Set boundaries – tell them where it’s OK to go and what’s not OK. If they violate limits, have consequences, such as leaving the park.
- When going anyplace you might become separated, put your contact info somewhere on them (e.g. a card in their pocket.). Take a picture with your phone of them and what they’re wearing.
- Teach healthy touch: high fives and fist bumps, patting on the back, brief hugs, etc. Don’t force your child to give a hug to someone if they are not comfortable.
- Teach them names for their body parts. Use commonly used terms for private parts (e.g. penis or vagina), not family euphemisms. Feeling comfortable with these words makes it possible for a child to explain if something inappropriate happens.
- Under three years old, I don’t talk about “tricky people.” But, if I am in a situation where I feel uncomfortable, I show it with my body language, and I tell my child “I don’t feel safe right now. We’re going to leave.” Even at this age, I want to start teaching them to trust their instincts.

For a child age 3 and up

Everything listed above, plus:

- Be sure they know their address, parent’s names, and parents’ phone numbers.

- If you go somewhere you might get separated (the zoo, an amusement park, a large event), talk to them about the importance of staying close to you the whole time. Tell them that if they look around and can't find you, they should stop where they are and you will find them.
- By the time they are three, teach them that the parts of their body that are covered by a swimsuit are private. They should be kept covered around other people, and other people should not touch them there, except for parents or caregivers who are briefly helping to clean them, or a doctor, when the parents are in the room.
- Help them know what adults you trust. Tell them: "if you ever feel scared or need help, _____ and _____ are adults you can talk to."
- Talk to them about how to find a trustworthy stranger if they become separated from you and need help. Tell them to look for a person who is working – help them identify workers – they're standing behind the check-out counter, or they're wearing a uniform. Or tell them to go to another parent – someone who has a child with them.
- Talk to them about "tricky people" and what behaviors are red flags. (See below.)

As your child gets older, and more independent:

Everything listed above, plus

- They should know contact info for multiple trusted adults, and have a plan for how they could contact them. (e.g. where to find a phone)
- If going someplace you may get accidentally separated, or choose to separate, have a plan in advance for where you would meet up again. Make sure they can describe it to you, and from time to time, ask them "do you remember where our meet-up place is? Can you point to it?"
- A responsible adult should always know where they are. Set boundaries on where they can go, ask that they check in from time to time, and require that they check in if their plans change.
- In the places they frequent, they should be able to list "safe spots" where they could go for help if they were feeling worried. They should know how and why to call 9-1-1.
- They should know never to answer the door when they are home alone.
- They should know never to approach a stranger's car. If someone calls them over to a car, they should not go.
- When out and about, they should use the buddy system, not go places alone.
- Set a family password so that if you ever need to send someone to pick them up in case of emergency, your child could ask for the password to be sure it's really someone you sent.
- Tell them to trust their instincts. If they're worried about something, they should talk to you or another trusted adult who can help them problem-solve. Better safe than sorry...

- Give kids examples of “tricky behavior”; have them describe how they would respond.
- Don’t talk about “bad touch” because sometimes sexual touch can feel good or can “tickle.” Instead, talk about “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, that it’s not the child’s fault and they will not be in trouble with you.
- Explain that you’re teaching safety rules because they’re more mature and responsible. You want to give them more freedom, but you need to know that they know how to stay safe.

Why Not Teach Stranger Danger?

For decades, parents and educators have taught the idea of stranger danger. There are several flaws to this message:

- It creates a culture of fear. It can be frightening to a child to be out in public when they’ve been told that all the strangers are to be feared.
- Talking about “bad people” means that our children are on the lookout for people who look and act evil: the mustache-twirling, black-clad villain. Most people who perpetrate crimes against children are nice looking and quite charming.
- Talking about “odd looking” or “dangerous looking” people or “people who don’t look like us” can lead to racial profiling and prejudiced attitudes.
- Creating fear of strangers might mean that our children are afraid to seek help from adults when needed – such as a lost child who is too frightened to approach a security guard to help find their parents, or a lost child who evades rescuers because they are strangers to him.
- Crimes against children are much more likely to be perpetrated by someone the child knows than by a stranger. For example, 90% of sexual abuse is by someone the child knows.

I want my children, and the children I work with, to feel safe in their world. I tell them, through words, body language, and my interactions, that the vast majority of people are good people. Even a stranger who looks very different from the people I interact with every day is most likely a good person.

But, when children are around three years old, it’s good to start talking about “tricky people.” They’re not a certain kind of people (like strangers, or like people whose skin is a different color from my own) but they are any person who displays certain odd behaviors. Those *behaviors* should raise red flags for a child, and let them know they should check in with a trusted adult for advice on how to respond.

What are Tricky People?

Here are some things to tell your child to watch out for. Tricky people may:

- *ask kids for help* (e.g. help finding a lost puppy). If safe grown-ups need help, they ask other grown-ups. If an adult asks a child for help, the child should tell a trusted adult.
- *try to arrange for alone time with a child*. Let your child know not to go somewhere alone with one adult unless a trusted adult has told them it's OK.
- *try to make one particular kid feel special, lavishing praise and gifts*. Tell your child that if someone offers to give them something (candy, money, a kitten), they should not take it, they should say that they need to ask their parents if that is OK.
- *ask kids to do something that breaks the family rules, or just doesn't feel right*. Teach your child to trust their instincts... if something gives them an "uh-oh" feeling, it's likely not safe.
- *ask kids to keep a secret from their parents or their teacher, or threatens* something like "if you tell anyone, I won't be your friend anymore" or "if you tell, you'll be in big trouble". Any time this happens, a child should tell their parent or a teacher.
- *touches a child a lot (tickling, wrestling, asking for hugs), and gets angry or unhappy if the child says no to the touch; 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*. See above for more on how to talk to your children about this topic.
- *tells the child "there's an emergency. You need to come with me right now."* Note: For children over 5, it can be a good idea to establish a password (see above).

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. Never dismiss their concerns.

Letting Your Child Out of Your Sight

Deciding to let a child play outside unsupervised, or let an older child go places without you, requires a leap of faith on your part. It can be scary to take that risk. But remember that keeping them at home and in sight at all times also creates risks – it limits their potential to be active, independent, decision-making people. Part of parenting is teaching our kids the skills they need to know so that later on, they don't need us so much any more. Addressing "tricky people" is just one of many things that we do to prepare them to be out in the world on their own.

For more details on all these topics, and links to resource to learn more, check out:

<https://gooddayswithkids.com/2017/02/13/tricky-people/>