

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 it has become part of the lexicon. The media and other professionals often use this phrase as a slogan to try to educate children about how to avoid dangerous situations and individuals. When well-intentioned professionals and parents/guardians use the phrase “stranger danger” it may mistakenly convey only strangers harm children. The message of “never talk to strangers” does not fully educate children about how to stay safer.

What does “stranger danger” really mean, and do children benefit from an outdated and misleading message? Here’s what we have learned about the “stranger-danger” concept.

- Children don’t get it
- Adults don’t practice it
- Children need to know how to recognize and avoid potentially dangerous situations
- Adults need to know risks to children are greater from someone they know

This is why the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) does not support the “stranger-danger” message. The majority of cases have shown most children are not taken by a stranger, but rather are abducted by someone they know.

When questioned, children will often describe a “stranger” as someone who is “ugly or mean.” They do not perceive attractive or friendly people as “strangers.” If someone talks to a child or is even around a child more than once, that person may lose his or her “stranger” status to the child. The child may then think he or she “knows” that person. Children also want to be helpful, thrive on adult approval, and respond to adult authority. So if someone with ill intent asks a child to perform a task or tells a child something has happened to a loved one, there is a good chance the child may be tricked into going with that person.

The “stranger-danger” message becomes even more confusing for children because they may not be able to tell by looking at someone whether that individual is “good” or “bad.” Wouldn’t it be great if we could simply recognize and point out the “bad” people to our children? Adults often break the rule of “don’t talk to strangers” in a number of different situations. Adults, however, have the benefit of experience, judgment, and decision-making skills. Children do not. And even adults, at times, may misperceive potential dangers. So if we are not always able to identify “bad” people, we certainly cannot expect our children to be able to do so.

Children need to be empowered with positive messages and safety skills that will not only build their self-esteem and self-confidence but also help keep them safer. Children need to learn how to recognize and avoid potentially dangerous situations. If they become involved in a dangerous situation, children need to learn effective steps they can take to remove themselves from the situation. Children do not need to be told the world is a scary place. They see it through a variety of media, hear it from adults, or may even personally experience violence. Children need to know their parents, guardians, or other trusted adults — people whom the parents/guardians have come to rely on and with whom they and their children feel comfortable — are there for them if they are in trouble. Children also need to know the majority of adults in their lives are 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 lost they may be surrounded by many rescuers who could help them. If children perceive these people as “strangers,” they may not speak or reach out to them. There have been cases in which a child’s rescue was delayed because the lost child was afraid to call out to the “strangers” when rescuers were nearby. Parents and

guardians cannot be with their children every second of the day. We need to give our children “safety nets,” the plans and people you’ve put in place to contact so your children know there is always someone available to help them. These individuals may include uniformed law-enforcement or security officers and store/business personnel wearing nametags.

The safety messages need to be tailored to specific circumstances, such as being lost outside. Parents and guardians should teach children to

- Stay put and not wander away from where they first became lost. Staying where they are increases children’s chances of being found unless that place becomes too dangerous because of severe weather or another potentially threatening situation. In that case children need to go to the nearest safe spot and wait for rescuers.
- Make noise either by yelling, blowing a whistle, or attracting attention in some other way. This may help bring someone to their rescue.

Parents and guardians should make child safety part of a child’s everyday life in a reassuring way by practicing these skills. Whether it is checking first with a trusted adult, taking a friend, or avoiding and getting out of potentially dangerous situations, there are easy “what-if” scenarios you may practice with your children to make sure they understand and “get it.” Make outings to a mall or the park a “teachable moment” to make sure your children understand the safety messages and are able to use them in real-life situations. Children will begin to learn what to do if they become lost or are in danger by practicing these “what-if” scenarios with you on a regular basis. You can also use these opportunities to reassure your children you are there for them, and remind them there are other people who also are able to help them.

NCMEC believes it is time for everyone to retire use of the “stranger-danger” message. By realizing child safety is much more than a slogan, we can then arm our children with relevant, age-appropriate messages to help empower and protect them from potentially dangerous situations. Having strong parental, guardian, and caregiver supervision and attention is vital to keeping our children safer.

For more information about child-safety topics, visit our website at www.missingkids.com or contact us at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678).

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