

Talking About Stranger Safety

[Courtesy of Scholastic Canada](#)

Have a calm, honest, age-appropriate conversation with your child about meeting strangers and avoiding potential dangers.

Here's how.



We've all encountered the child at the playground, or in the mall, who won't respond to a friendly comment or question, no matter how innocent its intent. We can only assume that her well-meaning parents instilled in her a fear of strangers in their attempt to protect her. Although actual incidents of abductions and overtures from strangers are statistically rare, it's natural for parents to want their children to feel safe, secure, and cared for, so headlines about missing children strike fear in their hearts. The dilemma is this: How can we educate children to be alert to possible dangers and at the same time encourage them to feel safe and confident in exploring their world?

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children maintains that it is much more beneficial to children to help them build the confidence and self-esteem they need to stay as safe as possible in any potentially dangerous situation they encounter, rather than teaching them to be wary of strangers or "on the lookout" for a particular type of person. Based on what we know about those who harm children, danger to children is greater from someone they or their family know than from a complete stranger.

Although talking about potential dangers with children may not be pleasant, it pays off in terms of prevention. If you discuss "what if" scenarios in a calm, age-appropriate manner, you strengthen your child's ability to face the world with confidence and self-assurance.

Age-Specific Safety Strategies

Conversations should begin at an early age, with information tailored to the age of your child and adjusted over time. Discuss safety issues in a positive, open and reassuring manner, modeling a calm but realistic problem-solving style. A matter-of-fact approach will make your child aware that he is capable of dealing with life's realities. Even the youngest child can be taught simple rules about personal safety, such as his whole name, address, and phone number, the names of his parents, who to call in an emergency, and how to use the phone to call 911. Here are some points to keep in mind:

- **Preschoolers** (ages 3 to 5) are inquisitive, but they're focused on themselves. Since they're not apt to be tuned in to the possible motivations of others, they may be easily fooled. Teach your young child simple facts such as her name and address. She can learn about expected behavior in different situations through games and dramatic play.
- **Elementary school-age children** (ages 6 to 9) are concerned with issues of right and wrong and can learn basic safety rules. Since they want to cooperate and please adults, they may be tricked by a seemingly tempting situation. At this age, children learn best through concrete examples, role-playing, and repetition of rules.

- **Tweens and teens** (ages 10 and up) become more capable of judging the consequences of a potentially dangerous situation. They are likely to be in unsupervised situations more often and are influenced by their peers, and therefore, they may think they should act "cool." Your child still benefits from ongoing discussions of risks, using real-life situations as examples.

- **Being Aware of and Available to Your Child**

In any discussion of potential dangers your child may face, it's important to consider your own child's personality and temperament. Some children are naturally cautious in new situations. Others may respond more readily to friendly overtures and promises, and therefore need more guidance. Some parents may be reluctant to point out potential dangers, but keeping children uninformed is not an option. The effects of the media are powerful, and children of all ages watch television, hear news reports, and listen to adult conversations.

Your child needs to know that his parents, caregivers, teachers, or other trusted adults are there to help if he has doubts, questions, or concerns about his safety. When sensational events about children are in the news, discuss them to make sure your child's impressions are accurate. These talking points can help:

- **Talk openly about strangers.** Don't assume that your young child actually knows what the word "stranger" means. Be sure she is aware that a stranger is anyone she doesn't know. In a calm but firm manner, instruct her to never go anywhere, get in a car, answer questions, or accept anything from strangers - even if the person seems friendly. Stress the fact that strangers shouldn't be asking children for help or giving them things. Remind her that it's sometimes okay, however, to ask strangers for help. Children should know that certain people, although strangers, can be sources of help — a police officer, a mall security person, a store salesperson, or a mother with children.
- **Help your child identify a safety net of trusted adults and places,** such as stores, schools, libraries, churches, synagogues, and homes of neighbors. Discuss safe routes to use on the way to and from school and other destinations, as well as places to avoid, such as deserted areas and parking lots.
- **Discuss what your child should do if he is separated from you, his caregiver, or his teacher in a public place.** Make sure he knows he should go to an employee or security guard and not leave the site.
- **Encourage your child to trust her intuition and to take action when she senses she is in danger.** Tell her not to worry about being polite, but to make a lot of noise, run away, scream, shout, kick, or punch. Teach the NO-GO-TELL system. Your child should: 1) Say *NO* if someone tries to touch her or makes her feel scared or uncomfortable, 2) *GO* quickly away from the situation, and 3) *TELL* a trusted adult.
- **When your child is old enough to go out alone, demand that he tells you the three Ws:** *who* I'm going with, *where* I'll be, and *when* I'll return home. Make sure your child informs you anytime his plans change.
- **Make safety part of your routine everyday life.** Alert your child to ploys that manipulative people may use to ingratiate themselves. Role-play some scenarios on a trip to a park or mall or other public place. For example, you might ask, "Suppose a person in a car asks you for directions? What if someone you don't know comes to pick you up at school or at a playground? What if they say I sent them? What if they ask for your help in finding a lost pet? Or ask if you want to do something that sounds fun?" Practice these and other scenarios on a regular basis to reinforce safety concepts.
- **Establish home and phone safety rules.** When your child is old enough to stay home alone, she should keep the door locked and never answer questions over the phone or at the door.
- **Be aware of your child's internet activities.** Predators use online chat rooms and other Internet resources to arrange face-to-face meetings with children. Many internet service providers and browsers provide parent-control options to block certain material from coming in to your child's computer. Special filtering software is also an option for blocking objectionable material. Use these tools and stay involved in your child's activities.