

Stranger danger

Teaching your children to be wary of strangers is no doubt one of your top parenting priorities, but it's equally important for them to feel safe in the world and to know that there are people they can trust. Here's how to encourage your kids to take responsibility for their own safety when it comes to the potential danger posed by a stranger.

A few years ago, when my son was about three years old, he disappeared from my side at a flea market. I was panic-stricken and darted in and out of the crowds, frantically looking for my little lost boy... until I heard a familiar roaring sound. It was unmistakable, that roar came into our house on more or less the same day as the Lion King DVD. I followed the roar and found my son, perched like Simba the lion, on a lone rock. He roared at anyone who even vaguely tried to come near him, in particular a very nice young man who wanted to help him find his mommy.

It was then that I realised that perhaps I'd overdone it, just a little, on the 'never talk to strangers' speech. But while some onlookers thought him rude, I must admit, I was secretly proud of how seriously he'd taken my warnings.

According to Helen Macdonald, an educational psychologist based in Johannesburg, paedophiles usually seem to be the nicest and friendliest people you could ever meet. They appear to be balanced and well-adjusted members of society, but in fact they are masters of manipulation. So if we can't spot them from a mile off, we can't expect our children to either. As a general rule, for the sake of safety, all strangers must be considered dangerous. And a stranger is quite simply, anyone that you don't know.

How to stranger-proof your child

Sitting your children down and giving them a pep talk about the baddies of the world is not going to cut it. Have you ever noticed how almost everything you say goes in one ear and out the other? Despite what we may think, it's not because our children can't be bothered to listen to us, it's because their auditory, or listening, skills are not yet fully developed.

According to Helen Macdonald, kids in the two-to-12 age category are far more likely to remember something visual. Here's an age-by-age breakdown of how to teach your children about strangers in a way that they'll remember.

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Toddler tools

Little ones learn through play so get down to their level and make a game of it. Get out the dolls, finger puppets or action men and role-play a scenario where your child encounters a stranger. You can act out various scenes where a stranger pulls up in a car and offers your child a lift, or a sweet, or tries to touch them inappropriately. Allow your child to take a turn to play the various characters and use the opportunity to question their thinking.

Practice for primary school

It takes a while, but from the age of about seven, children are able to think more logically and can understand cause and effect thinking – so says Helen Macdonald. You should continue to appeal to the child's sense of imagination and let them find solutions to their own problems by posing hypothetical questions. For example, make up a story that involves a stranger and allow your child to add to the plot. Let them ponder the following questions: Who is a stranger? What would you do if you were lost? Who can you go to for help? Who should you stay away from?

Don't get into telling your child that their answers are right or wrong, rather give guidelines and explain the rationale behind them. You could say 'If mom was lost in the shops, she would go to someone who works in the shop, probably wearing a uniform, and ask for help'.

Practice makes perfect so give your kids an opportunity to interact positively with strangers by letting them pay the shop attendant, for example, or encouraging them to talk to the waitron in a restaurant. Teach them to converse confidently with a stranger and they'll have the self-assurance needed to tell a stranger to back off, when necessary.

On target with teens

This is a somewhat tricky age group. The best way to make sure you get through to your teen is to establish open communication from an early age.

Learn to really listen to your child, and they will really listen to you. If you have a mutual, respectful relationship with your teen, a simple heart-to-heart chat about strangers will deliver the message quite successfully. Also learn to negotiate and compromise, so that the parameters of safety as well as your child's wishes can be agreed upon and respected.

The best way to bond with your child or teen, says Helen, is to show empathy and to spend time together. Eating meals as a family at the table and pursuing hobbies together will go a long way towards laying the right foundations.

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If your teen can see that you understand and respect their feelings, they will more than likely understand and respect yours. You can't just lecture and command – they'll switch off – you need to explain in detail why certain things like hitchhiking, are forbidden.

The trouble with technology

Today's kids are techno-junkies. They spend hours surfing the net, meeting in chat rooms and SMS-ing one another. Make sure that your child understands the dangers that lurk in chat rooms – namely sexual predators! If they want to meet face-to-face with someone they've met online, make sure it's during the daytime, in a public place with a parent present, albeit in the background. Have a secret code or signal that they can give you if they need rescuing.

Mind your manners

The other way children learn of course, is by example. They imitate our behaviour to the finest detail so make sure that you are always pleasant and polite when talking to strangers. There is no harm in greeting or thanking a stranger and your child will learn to do this from you. Make a habit of asking strangers for help, for example, asking a shop attendant where to find the peanut butter. Explain to your child that it's okay to ask the nice lady for assistance, but it's not ok to accept gifts from her, or to leave the shop with her.

Is there something wrong?

Children don't always know how to communicate upsets and fears, but you'll know if something is wrong from their behaviour. If your child exhibits any of the following, heed those alarm bells and investigate the situation:

- * Regressive behaviour, such as a return to bedwetting and thumb sucking.
- * Mood swings and angry outbursts.
- * Eating and sleeping disorders.
- * A sudden onset of separation anxiety.
- * Fear of a particular person or place.

Help from Helen

Educational psychologist Helen Macdonald has these top tips:

* Be extra vigilant about strangers if your child is ADHD. Many are very impulsive and act before they think.

* Tackle the trap of materialism. Modern kids are very materialistic and can easily be lured from a place of safety with the promise of a remote control car or swanky new cellphone.

* Safeguard the school run by choosing a school that has strict security measures in place. If you are unable to fetch your child from school, written consent should be given before your child is released into someone else's care.

Whistle while you work...

The best safety tool you can give your child is a whistle. Hang a small whistle on a chain around their neck and let them wear it under their clothes. If your child gets into trouble, they should blow the whistle as loud as they can to attract attention.

So long stranger

Some Your Family readers share their strategies for making children aware of the dangers strangers can pose:

Diane Taim is a stay-at-home mom to Jonathan (2) Sarah (4) and Daniel (6)

'The rule in our house is: big people must speak to big people. If someone comes to the gate, my kids know to call an adult. They also know not to talk to, or accept things from, a stranger unless Mom or Dad says it's okay. The same goes for the phone, big people must speak to big people; my children don't give out any personal information to strangers on the phone.'

Tracy Snow works full-time as a marketing consultant and is single mom to Jennifer (6)

'As a mom, I know I can't always be there to protect my child and I can't afford to keep her in the dark when it comes to stranger danger. We've discussed the potential threat of strangers in full and when we're shopping she knows to stay glued to my side. We've made a game of it, I say "by my..." and she says "side" as she hops to my side.'

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Louise Boshoff runs her own catering business from home and is mom to Wesley (7)

‘When my son was a baby, I made a point of letting all my friends and family hold him because I didn’t want him to be too reliant on me. As a result, he doesn’t suffer from separation anxiety and he’s not afraid of strangers. But, he is aware of stranger danger and knows beyond the shadow of a doubt that no one (other than mom or the doctor) may touch him where his underpants are. He was taught that at nursery school and we’ve reinforced it at home.’

Useful contacts

* Helen Macdonald, Educational Psychologist (011) 791 5146

* SACMEC (South African Centre for Missing and Exploited Children) 0861 647746 or visit www.missingkids.co.za

* The SAPS Family Violence, Child Protection and Sexual Offences Unit (012) 393 2363

* Childline 08000 55 555

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