

Teaching kids safety strategies -- without scaring them

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(WebMD) -- My daughter is 4 years old, and I knew it was time to worry. She's beautiful and trusting and weighs 30 pounds. Would she have any idea what to do if someone tried to overpower her? Would she muster the courage to scream and kick?



Those are the kinds of questions that haunt parents these days, and I knew it was high time to do something about my concerns. But where to start? Every day, it seemed, there were "teachable moments," yet so far I'd done no conscious teaching. What about all those personal safety tips that children should be drilled in -- "Don't talk to strangers" and the like? Instead, I was worried about what I might be teaching without thinking about it -- my polite exchanges, for instance, with the male stranger in the supermarket checkout and the panhandler on the street?

What messages was my daughter taking away from such encounters?

FBI statistics indicate that last year 2,100 juveniles were reported missing every single day -- that's 750,000 for the year. Of these, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children listed more than 114,000 cases involving physical threats or harm and nearly 32,000 cases as involuntary kidnappings or abductions. Our children are at risk. And, like me, most parents worry endlessly but feel uncertain about what to teach our children and how to protect them without scaring them to death.

It's hard for parents, says Donna Chaiet, president and founder of Prepare and Impact Personal Safety, a national series of hands-on child safety programs, because they are so uncertain about their own ability to protect their children. "Parents aren't nervous about showing a child how to safely use scissors or cautiously cross the street, because we know how to do those things," she says. "But when it comes to child (personal) safety, we have enormous anxiety about how to do it right."

Rethinking some of the old rules

Talking to people like Chaiet, I realized that I needed to relearn some things myself. A lot of what I was taught when I was young has since been reconsidered.

Take the old notion of "stranger danger." It turns out that of all children who are reported as kidnapped in the United States each year, fewer than 100 were the victims of someone they didn't know at all, according to Gavin de Becker, a leading expert on predicting violent behavior and the author of the best-selling book "Protecting the Gift." Besides, "stranger" isn't an easy concept for a young child to grasp. At

what point in a conversation does someone cease being a stranger? What about that man in the grocery store line?

De Becker says that the real safety issue isn't strangers, but strangeness -- inappropriate behavior and a child's vulnerability to the process of being persuaded. Rather than concentrating on the distinction between stranger and friend, says the new thinking, we should educate our children about common lures and ploys; teach them to trust their own feelings when something isn't quite right; and reassure them that it's OK to say no to adults -- including those they may know well -- who do or say something that makes them feel uncomfortable or scared.

Giving kids the skills they need

A few years ago, some safety educators distinguished between "good touching" and "bad touching." But this distinction has proved largely ineffective. For one thing, it applies an objective standard to a subjective experience -- too fine a line for most adults, let alone most children. It fails, too, because it is a message absorbed only on an intellectual level, says Chaiet. When presented with a real threat, it's common to freeze up and not to be able to think or evaluate at all. When danger is present, kids need to know how to act quickly and not ponder. "The distinction between good touching and bad touching doesn't get kids to tell the person to stop," says Chaiet, "and it doesn't get them out of there."

That's why many of the programs widely used today focus on different kinds of training -- active skills that children can use in emergencies, and skills they are more likely to use because they have had some practice. Prepare and Impact Personal Safety concentrates on what Chaiet calls "adrenaline-based" training. The idea is to teach kids what to do by letting them actually feel what it's like to be threatened and to fight back.

In a typical class, a 7-year-old gets to practice talking back to and warding off a padded attacker -- striking back, running away, and yelling. The child role-plays "every level of boundary violation," from inappropriate touch, lying, and bullying, all the way up to physical assault. The process, says Chaiet, decreases a child's anxiety by increasing his or her sense of self-reliance and providing the child with a plan of action. The children are taught to use what gives them their power -- their voices and movement.

Taking those first steps

Somewhat anxiously, I sat down with my daughter to watch a video called "Can't Fool Me" from Yello Dyno, a retailer of child safety educational products. In the video, catchy song lyrics are set to familiar tunes that contain fundamental messages and tools for child safety ("Take three steps back." "Run like the wind!").

There were parts that made my daughter anxious and parts she loved. We talked a lot about what she had seen and heard during the video. For days, she was singing lyrics from songs she had heard just once ("Yell, yell, yell!").

A week later, I asked my daughter what she might say if someone she didn't know tried to get her to follow him to help find a lost puppy. She smiled at me sweetly, then screamed, "Get out of my face!"

It seemed like a good start.