

## Stranger Awareness

I'm sure as parents, we've all told our children "stay away from strangers". But, did we tell our children who a stranger is? What a stranger does? What a stranger looks like? Probably not.

A stranger is anybody they do not know! No matter how nice a person looks, no matter how nice a person acts, no matter what a person says, If your child does not know them, then they are a stranger, and they should stay away.

Strangers can look like anybody. Kids often judge people by their outward appearance. If a person looks bad, kids think that they must be bad. Likewise, if a person looks nice, kids think that they must be nice. An example I often use in the classroom is to have the kids imagine two particular people in their mind. In one instance, I ask them to imagine a person who is dirty looking, possibly has greasy hair, a beard, tattered dirty clothing. This person seems frightening because he or she looks frightening. Then I have them imagine a nice looking person. This person could be a male or a female, young or old. This person is clean looking, dressed very neatly. This person seems nice because he or she looks nice.

I now have them think back to the "dirty looking" person and the "nice looking" person. I give them some additional information about each. I explain to them that maybe this dirty looking person is one of those people we refer to as homeless. Maybe this person can't afford to buy anything better to wear, or even go somewhere to clean himself. They may be a very good person on the "inside", but their outward



appearance scares people. I also explain to them that the "nice looking" person may be dressed this way to make himself more appealing to children. Maybe this person is a child molester. Their nice appearance, manner and friendly talk is part of their lure to attract and confuse children.

Because children are trusting and vulnerable, they can fall for offers from people they don't know who seem kind and friendly, but are not! When we talk about strangers who are child molesters and child abductors, the bad guys, or strangers, **DON'T ALWAYS LOOK BAD!** This is the type of person, the dangerous stranger, we are going to discuss in this paper. Many times, the child molester is known to the child. In this discussion, however, we are going to limit our discussion to the child molester and child abductor the child does not know!

Most strangers your child meets in their day to day activities are well-meaning and are not to be feared. Your child will pass by people they don't know all the time. Usually the child won't even notice them. Perhaps they might make eye contact, or even exchange a "hello"

or a friendly nod. But it is a reality of this world we live in that there are strangers out there who would hurt our children.

Who, then, do we look for? Remember, the friendly stranger is a dangerous stranger. The type of stranger who would molest or abduct a child is going to be overly friendly toward the child. He or she has to! To be able to get close enough to the child, the stranger has to gain the child's confidence and trust. That can be accomplished by being friendly. The type of stranger who would molest or abduct a child will usually be an adult. They could, however, be as young as a teenager or as old as someone's grandfather. Children should not be fooled by a person's age! The type of person who would molest or abduct a child could be either a man or a woman. Don't let your child be fooled by their sex. Remember! These dangerous strangers try to trick children with their kindness, gifts, and favors. This is how they gain the child's confidence and trust and get them to do anything the stranger wants.

Now, we've described this type of child offender. His victims are children. We've said he or she will usually be an adult, any age and any sex. They will be overly friendly, to gain the acceptance of the child. Our question now is, where might your child, or any child, encounter such a person? The answer is just about anywhere. More specifically, anywhere you might expect to find an abundance of children. On the street walking to a friend's house, or perhaps riding their bicycle, in a park playing alone or perhaps even with other children, at the shopping mall where parents drop off children all the time, around school playgrounds and the routes children take to and from school. All of this does not mean that the dangerous stranger will be found in these places, it does mean that they might.



Now that we know where these dangerous strangers might hang around, when do you think a child might be approached by a person like this? Usually when the child is alone. This makes sense, if you are one of these people. The dangerous stranger or the child abductor does not want any interference with his crime. He does not want any witnesses. He does not want anyone around who might help the child, or who could understand what this person is trying to do. What the stranger wants is the privacy to deal with the potential victim one on one. In this situation, the only person a child is left to rely on for help is the child himself! The child molester or dangerous stranger is hoping your child knows nothing about how they operate, that they know nothing about the tricks and lures a child molester uses to trap a child. They are hoping your child finds them friendly and nice, nice enough to do exactly what the stranger wants them to do.

One of the safest things we could do to help our children is to encourage them to avoid places where these dangerous strangers might hang out. However, that is next to impossible. We could always have them stay next to us when we're out, but that isn't always possible either. There is one logical thing we can do. We can sit down with our children and teach them how these dangerous people operate. That way, they will be able to spot trouble as it begins to develop and be able to respond to it quickly. Arming them with knowledge gives them power over these dangerous strangers. Since they will only have themselves to rely on in most cases, it makes sense to give them as much information as possible so they can stay safe.

How can we teach our children to spot the tricks and lures these dangerous strangers might use? How can we teach our children to be alert and safe? Even if your child knows how to avoid trouble, trouble might find him. It's best that the child know basic safety rules and apply them in every stranger situation. Remember, the child will usually encounter strangers when they are alone. They will have to rely on what they know to keep them safe.

A good rule of thumb, when dealing with anyone the child does not know, is to keep about an arm's distance, or about three feet, between them and anyone they do not know. This distance is more commonly referred to as personal space. We will usually allow only those people we know well, such as relatives and close friends, inside this space. This space becomes a buffer zone for those people we do not know. It is a reaction space. If some begins to penetrate the space, and we don't know them, the distance we allow ourselves gives us time to react.

Let's talk about some basic safety rules every child should know when it comes to dealing with strangers:

1. Never accept rides, candy, gifts, money, etc., from strangers.
2. Never get close to cars occupied by people you don't. Be careful if they call out to you to come closer for help or directions. It's easy for a stranger to pull you into a car if you get close enough. Don't be fooled by people who claim to know you or your parents. That does not mean that you know them.
3. Never give your name, address, phone number or any information about yourself to someone you do not know.
4. If you are home by yourself, do not open the door to anyone you do not know.
5. If you are home by yourself, don't tell people on the phone that you are alone. Tell them that your mom and dad are busy and can't come to the phone right now. Offer to take a message and tell them your mom or dad will call them back.



6. Avoid strangers who hang around public restrooms or playgrounds and want to play with you are your friends.

Since the dangerous stranger will usually approach a child when the child is alone, teach your child that there is safety in numbers. It is safer for a child to be with other children, like on playgrounds or playing about in the neighborhood. Children off alone are the easiest mark for danger. They are more susceptible to any kind of attention since they are often looking for something to do or something to keep them busy.

We should not set our children apart from other children by personalizing their clothes, lunchboxes, book sacks, etc... It singles out the child and makes him or her more vulnerable to a stranger who can use their name to call out to them. When a child hears his or her name, they develop an immediate trust. Keep personalized items at home.

Don't set your child apart from the rest of the children by dressing him like a "little rich kid." Strangers are drawn to children who look like they have money. Don't dress them in a coat and tie, or expensive clothing when the rest of the kids are wearing blue jeans and sweatshirts. Save expensive clothing for special days.

It is hard for a parent to decide when a child is old enough to be out alone. By this I mean to play or do anything away from the house. If you have to set a cut-off age, probably seven is too young. If you allow your child to play or go beyond your immediate neighborhood, you should walk that area with the child to find the safe areas.

When your child is out playing or perhaps running an errand for you, tell them not to take short-cuts on their route. Children like to do this because it makes them feel smart. But, it is really not the smart thing to do! Dangerous strangers might hide and wait in places like this. These short-cuts might be through alleys, across wooded lots, down paths that go through deserted areas, across open fields. Children should be taught to stay away from places like this as well as vacant buildings.

Usually, all of us will experience a feeling inside us when we are afraid, confused, or uncomfortable. This is called instinct. Teach your children that if an experience makes them feel frightened, they should act on that feeling. They should be taught to tell someone, usually a parent or an older person they trust, about the experience that made them feel uncomfortable. This person can talk to the child and help him or her express their fears and explain their feelings. What I tell the kids in school is to (1) Say no! A "no" can be simply ignoring the person, shaking their head, or, if need be, a scream and a yell. (2) Get away! When a child says no, in any fashion, he needs to leave, to remove himself from the person or area. No means no! (3) Go and tell someone! This goes back to that feeling we all get when something doesn't feel right. By telling someone, the child will feel better. The person to tell should be a parent or an older person the child trusts. Also, by telling someone like parents, they can go and check out this situation. This will keep their child and any other child safe. Saying No, getting away, and telling someone works. This is a very basic yet very important safety rule for all children to use when dealing with strangers or strange situations. In our school presentations, we explain to the kids that the type of dangerous stranger we have been talking about will do or say certain things to lure the child. If the child uses the basic stranger awareness information discussed earlier, the child will recognize these lures or signals and will not fall prey to the tricks these people use.



We use certain role play situations to emphasize to the children that strangers can look, act, and even converse like any other person. They will, however, do and say certain things that the child needs to identify in order to put into operation the basic safety rules. One situation we use as an example is to have a volunteer from the class pretend he is at a shopping mall and is confronted by an overly friendly elderly man. Knowing that this person is a stranger, the child is subjected to questions that might be lures. It is up to the child to decide whether to apply the stranger safety rules. Another situation has a student volunteer pretend he is walking down the street and is approached by a person in an auto. This person needs help with directions. Again, the child does not know if the stranger has good intentions or not. In reality, it doesn't matter! The bottom line is that in all the situations, the child did not know the person, and should not take a chance in determining whether its safe or not. The safe thing to do is apply the safety rules; say "No", get away, and tell someone. Remember, the child cannot risk the chance in finding out whether the situation with a stranger is safe.

What about a persistent stranger? Here are a few tips! If your child is walking down the street, and believes he or she is being followed by someone in a car, tell them to quickly turn and run the opposite



direction. It would be hard for the car to make a quick turn. Also, as the child turns, they can get a description of the car and possibly the occupants. They might also get a license plate number. They should be taught to run to the nearest person they find - a policeman, someone working in their yard, a clerk in a near-by store - and tell them they are having trouble. While the child should always avoid strangers who approach them, It's o.k. for the child to ask an adult who they do not know for help. In every instance, the child should look for someone who belongs in the place that the

child is in.

Using the same example we just discussed, If your child is walking down the street, or in that fact, walking anywhere, and someone is following them, making them nervous, the child could quickly turn and confront the person. The child could ask, very specifically and loudly, "why are you following me? I don't know who you are! Leave me alone and don't bother me! All this is designed to bring attention to their situation. Attention brings witnesses. Strangers do not like witnesses. Usually the stranger will back off and leave. But if they don't, the child should run and scream, run to an area where there are other people and get help.

Do children have to be physically strong to defend themselves from the dangerous stranger. Not really. What they really need is honest, truthful information. They need to learn to use their heads. They need to be armed with certain information they can draw on when they are faced with potentially dangerous situations.

Does your child know his full name, address and phone number? He should. A lot of children just don't know this basic information. A child who does not know his name, address and phone number is missing a major defense. He is more likely to panic if lost or separated from his parents. He has no way of getting home or calling for help. Teach your child how to use the telephone to make emergency phone calls. Teach them how to dial "911" and how to dial "0" for the operator. Teach them how to ask for help.

Does your child know who they should go to for help should they get lost? They should look for someone in a uniform, a policeman, a security guard, a bus driver, mailman, etc..., They should look for someone who belongs in the place they are, meaning, to look for someone who has a reason for being where they are. A sales clerk working in a store (who can be recognized by a name tag or store uniform). A customer does not necessarily belong there. This type of explanation can be used in almost any situation.



It is important that once the child finds someone who can help them, they be able to explain exactly what their problem is! This seems simple, but remember, when we are scared or frightened, we sometimes forget even the simplest things. The child might be screaming or crying, and the person who wants to help can't find out what might be wrong. Knowing their name, address and phone number, plus keeping a cool head will be to their advantage.

Another important defense the child has against the stranger is their right to say "no" to a grown-up when something feels wrong. Saying "no" to a grown-up, or any person in authority is tough for most kids. Parents need to give children the right to say "no" and kids need to know that they have their parents approval. Strangers who would want to hurt or abduct children simply aren't interested in kids who resist them. Saying "no" works. When we tell kids to say no, get away, and tell someone, we are usually the persons they come to tell. We need to explain to the kids that it's alright and the safe thing to do. This will make the child feel better.



Parents need to develop a relationship with their kids that allows for an open and honest discussion about their bodies. Children should feel comfortable talking to their parents about this subject, as comfortable as it would be talking about a scraped elbow. The fact is, most kids can't identify their body parts, or they find it too embarrassing to talk about. How then, can these children, who are afraid or uncomfortable to talk about their bodies, explain to someone that they have been touched in a way that they don't like? It's only when kids feel comfortable talking about all their body parts that they can distinguish between something called good touch and bad touch, and tell you about it.

Mentioned earlier, another way parents can prepare children to spot trouble or deal with potentially dangerous situations is through role-playing, or, in other words, playing "what if" games. What if games are simple. The parent comes up with a potentially dangerous situation, and the child is expected to come up with an answer. Listen very carefully to the answer! It does not matter if the child comes up with the wrong answer. Remember, this is a learning process. It's better to come up with the wrong answer in practice than to come up with the wrong answer on the street. It's up to the adult to direct the child to the right answer. So, Listen and don't stop when you think the child understands. Dig deeper, ask "why", "why not". Play the "what if" game thoroughly.

A way to make it harder for the dangerous stranger to get through to our kids is to use something called a "code-word". It's the best system around to defend against the stranger who tries to get a child to go off with him, one who claims to have been sent by the child's parents or says it's alright with the child's parents. Using the code-word is simple. The child and the parents agree on a certain word. It can be any word. The important thing is that it is a word known only to the child and the parents. From then on, your child knows never to go off with anyone unless that person uses the code word. No matter what the person says, no matter what the person does, unless the person uses the code word, your child knows he cannot go off with them. A trick some child abductors use is faking an emergency. They approach a child and immediately describe a situation where their father was in an accident and their mother wants this stranger to bring the child to the hospital. This is a situation where the code-word is so important. These dangerous strangers know that a scare like this would cloud a child's mind and hopefully get the child to drop his defenses.

Another trick is to fake authority. A man dressed in a suit claims he is a policeman. He displays a badge and an identification card. He says the child will have to come with him or the child will be arrested. What can the child do? If the person is really a policeman, he won't mind if the child checks with a near by neighbor or adult. In fact, a real policeman will probably go to an adult and encourage them to check him out. This helps eliminate any confusion in the child's mind. Remember, the child abductor does not want any witnesses, or anybody else knowing what's going on. That's the signal for the child to look for and recognize about this type of stranger.



A dangerous stranger might pretend to need help. An adult in an auto might approach a child and ask for help in hunting for a lost puppy. The adult might ask the child to get in the car with them and look while the adult drives. The adult might sound desperate, fearing for the safety of the puppy, and plead for the child's help. Remember, never get into a car with someone you don't know, no matter what they say or do! Also, adults should ask adults for help, not children. There can be many variations of this trick.

One of the hardest lures for a child to turn down is the one involving gifts and favors. A stranger might approach a young girl sitting on a park bench. The stranger begins a conversation about how pretty the girl is and asks if she has ever considered being a model or actress. This gets the child's attention. The

stranger might attempt to get the girl to accompany him to another location where they can work on a deal to surprise her parents. He then may give her a necklace or even money to prove his intentions. No matter how tempting, children should not take gifts, money or accept favors from strangers.

In conclusion, I think we all realize that talking to our children about certain dangers is not an easy thing to do. It's hard to believe that there are people in our world that would hurt or abduct our children. It's not easy teaching children safety rules that might not seem polite or respectable to adults. Children have a right to know what might threaten their safety as well as having a right to know what to do in a dangerous situation. Learning how to protect themselves is a part of their growing up. It increases their confidence and self-reliance. We, as parents, feel better knowing they can cope with problems when we are not with them.