

STRANGER DANGER

There is a strong shift away from the old rule of "never talk to strangers" to "never go anywhere with anyone without asking permission first". A child who has been taught to never talk to strangers may feel they have nowhere to go if they find themselves lost in a shopping centre or other public place. As parents we need to emphasise who is a "stranger". Your definition and your child's may be quite different. Engage with your children to help them understand that a stranger is simply someone whom they do not know. We do not know if someone is good or bad just by looking at them. Rather, we need to teach our children about "strangeness", which is way down at the feeling level. This is about helping kids recognise that something doesn't feel right, and then to trust and act on those feelings.

Five ways to enforce the new rule:

1. Never go anywhere with anyone without asking permission first. This is the new fundamental rule to keeping kids safe. This rule must NEVER be broken. Regardless of if it is a school, public or family function, work with your children to ensure they always ask an adult for permission before going off with ANYONE. Classic "what if" scenarios are worth their weight in gold. "You are at school and walking back to class after snack when a man comes up to you and says he is looking for his son's class. He asks you to go with him to show him where it is. Do you go?" Use tempting scenarios that are relevant to your child, such as puppies or toys, and discuss safe options and strategies in each case.
2. Your personal alarm. Children have an innate sensitive personal alarm, which we can teach them to use. This is their natural defence system. Work with them to identify and recognise the physical and environmental signals that cause their alarm to sound. Knowing that a rush of adrenalin will cause physiological changes in our bodies and activate our personal alarm is a good start. A child's personal alarm will present the same physical and emotional cues that an adult's will.
3. Trust your instincts Have you ever gotten "the creeps"? Maybe it's the idea of snakes, mice or heights that does it for your child. Encourage them to draw on how it feels when they get the creeps. Instincts are those feelings you get when something or someone makes you feel uncomfortable. Instincts are the physiological changes that happen to our body when our personal alarm goes off. Physiological changes include noticing that you feel scared or nervous, your tummy feels upset and your heart is racing. And you know what? Our personal alarm is right 100% of the time.
4. Personal space vs. safety zone. Most kids understand the concept of personal space. How many times have we heard, "Stop invading my personal space!" Most people feel comfortable within an arm's length of others. However, do your kids recognise their safety zone? Teach your child to be aware of their surroundings. If a "strange" person is too close, suggest they back away and maintain their safety zone. A safety zone is much bigger than your personal space – at least three giant steps bigger.
5. Safe places, safe people. There are times when a child must ask for help quickly and instinctively. We already know that not all strangers are bad, that most strangers will help a child who is lost or upset. It is situations that are safe, not places. Talk with your child and reinforce that he or she must ALWAYS use his or her skills with ALL people, including those presumed safe. Encourage your child to tell an adult they trust when someone or something has frightened them. As parents we need to empower our children with self-confidence and trust in their ability to sense when something is just not right. It doesn't matter if they can articulate it; they just have to feel it. For more ideas to keep kids safe visit the Daniel Morcombe Foundation.

Submitted by: Catherine Gerhardt

To find out more about Catherine Gerhardt's great work about keeping kids safe online and offline visit Kidproofsafety.com.au