

# KNOW THE RULES...

## GENERAL TIPS FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS TO HELP KEEP THEIR CHILDREN SAFER

While many parents and guardians feel they are faced with new and unprecedented challenges when trying to keep their children safer in today's fast-paced and increasingly global society, the **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®** offers these commonsense, general safety tips to help families put these challenges into perspective.

- 1.** **Make sure you know where each of your children is at all times.** Know your children's friends and be clear with your children about the places and homes they may visit. Make it a rule for your children to check-in with you when they arrive at or depart from a particular location and when there is a change in plans. You should also let them know when you're running late or if your plans have changed to show the rule is for safety purposes and not being used to "check up" on them.
- 2.** **Never leave children unattended in a vehicle, whether it is running or not.** Children should never be left unsupervised or allowed to spend time alone or with others in vehicles as the potential dangers to their safety outweigh any perceived convenience or "fun." Remind children to **never** hitchhike, approach a vehicle, or engage in a conversation with anyone within a vehicle they do not know and trust. Also they should never go anywhere with anyone without first getting your permission.
- 3.** **Be involved in your children's activities.** As an active participant you'll have a better opportunity to observe how the adults in charge interact with your children. If you are concerned about anyone's behavior, take it up with the sponsoring organization.
- 4.** **Listen to your children.** Pay attention if they tell you they don't want to be with someone or go somewhere. This may be an indication of more than a personality conflict or lack of interest in the activity or event.
- 5.** Notice when anyone shows one or all of your children a great deal of attention or begins giving them gifts. **Take the time to talk to your children** about the person and find out why that person is acting in this way.
- 6.** Teach your children they have the right to say **NO** to any unwelcome, uncomfortable, or confusing touch or actions by others and to get out of those situations as quickly as possible. If avoidance is not an option, children should be taught to kick, scream, and resist. When in such a situation, teach them to loudly yell, "This person is not my father/mother/guardian," and then immediately tell you if this happens. Reassure them you're there to help and it is okay to tell you anything.
- 7.** **Be sensitive to any changes in your children's behavior or attitude.** Encourage open communication and learn how to be an active listener. Look and listen to small cues and clues indicating something may be troubling your children, because children are not always comfortable disclosing disturbing events or feelings. This may be because they are concerned about your reaction to their problems. If your children do confide problems to you, strive to remain calm, reassuring, and nonjudgmental. Listen compassionately to their concern, and work **with them** to get the help they need to resolve the problem.
- 8.** **Be sure to screen babysitters and caregivers.** Many jurisdictions now have a public registry allowing parents and guardians to check out individuals for prior criminal records and sex offenses. Check references with other families who have used the caregiver or babysitter. Once you have chosen the caregiver, drop in unexpectedly to see how your children are doing. Ask your children how the experience with the caregiver was, and carefully listen to the responses.
- 9.** **Practice basic safety skills with your children.** Make an outing to a mall or park a "teachable" experience in which your children practice checking with you, using pay telephones, going to the restroom with a friend, and locating the adults who may be able to help if they need assistance. Remember, allowing your children to wear clothing or carry items in public on which their name is displayed may bring about unwelcome attention from inappropriate people looking for a way to start a conversation with your children.
- 10.** **Remember there is no substitute for your attention and supervision.** Being available and taking time to really know and listen to your children helps build feelings of safety and security.

**1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)**

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# About CHILD SAFETY

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**OJJDP** Office of Juvenile Justice  
and Delinquency Prevention  
Office of Justice Programs • U.S. Department of Justice

## What are the most important things parents and guardians should know when talking to their children about this issue?

- Don't forget your older children. Children from age 11-17 are equally at risk of being victimized. At the same time you are giving your older children more freedom, make sure they understand the important safety rules as well.
- When you speak to your children, do so in a calm, reassuring manner. Children do not need to be frightened to get the point across. Fear may actually work at cross-purposes to the safety message, because fear may paralyze children.
- Speak openly about safety issues. Children will be less likely to come to you if the issue is enshrouded in secrecy. If they feel you are comfortable discussing the subject matter, they may be more forthcoming to you.
- Do not confuse children with the concept of "strangers." Children do not have the same understanding of who a stranger is as an adult might. The "stranger-danger" message is not effective, as danger to children is often much greater from someone they or you know.
- Practice what you talk about. You may think your children understand your message, but until they are able to incorporate it into their daily lives, it may not be clearly understood. Find opportunities to practice "what if" scenarios.
- Teach your children it is more important to get out of a threatening situation than it is to be polite. They also need to know it is okay to tell you what happened and they won't be a tattletale.

## What are the most important things parents and guardians should tell their children about this issue?

- Children should always **check first** with you or another trusted adult before going anywhere, accepting anything, or getting into a vehicle with anyone. This applies to older children as well.
- Children should not go out alone and should always **take a friend** with them when they go places or play outside.
- It's okay for children to say **no** if someone tries to touch them or treats them in a way to make them feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused. When this happens they need to get out of the situation as quickly as possible.
- Children need to know they may **tell** you or another trusted adult if they feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused.
- Children need to know they have the right to be safe. And when needing help children should keep asking until they get the help they need.

## What is the biggest myth surrounding this issue?

The biggest myth is dangers to children come from strangers. In the majority of cases the perpetrators are people the parents/guardians or children know, and these people may be in a position of trust or responsibility to a child and family.

## What advice would you offer parents and guardians who wanted to talk to their children about this issue?

Parents and guardians should choose opportunities or "teachable" moments to reinforce safety skills. If an incident occurs in your community, and your children ask you about it, speak frankly but with reassurance. Explain to your children you want to discuss the safety rules with them so they will know what to do if they are ever confronted with a difficult situation. Make sure you have "safety nets" in place, so your children know there is **always** someone available to help them.

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