

# Teaching Safety Skills

By Janelle Durham, MSW. Parent Educator. [www.GoodDaysWithKids.com](http://www.GoodDaysWithKids.com) [www.InventorsOfTomorrow.com](http://www.InventorsOfTomorrow.com)

## Prepare, Don't Scare

As parents, we want to keep our children safe. But if we shield them from all possible sources of harm, then they are actually at more risk because they haven't learned any safety skills for themselves. It's important that children understand that they *can* get hurt in order for them to understand that sometimes they need to be careful to avoid getting hurt. We don't want to teach fear, but we do want to teach reasonable caution. And we want to teach them skills that will keep them safe when we're not there to protect them.

## Levels of Risk: What Needs to Be Child-Proofed and What can be Explored?

Whenever you and your child enter a new environment, or try a new activity, take a moment to assess the risk level. If you're in a very child-safe environment like a children's play area, where there's very little risk of any injury, relax and let them explore. Whenever there is some risk, communicate to them – calmly without broadcasting anxiety – this is somewhere we need to pay attention and use our safety skills.

Level	Definition	What Parents Can Do	How to Communicate to Child
Green	Safe – no worries.	Relax! Sit back and let your child discover the world! No need to guide their play.	When your child looks to you for input: put on a big smile, nod, verbally encourage exploration.
Yellow	Some risk, but really the worst that might happen is minor injury to person (bump or bruise) or to property (a mess to be cleaned up or non-valuable item broken).	If you feel comfortable, allow your child to explore these things as they learn about their world. Observe them at play. Offer suggestions or demonstrate new skills as needed, but then back off to let them practice. Respond calmly to bumps and bruises.	Look positive but thoughtful, lean forward to show you're paying extra attention, say with a calm voice "just be careful" or "gentle touch" or "it's fragile, so hold it carefully" or "yes, but watch your feet." You can also <i>ask them</i> what they need to do to stay safe.
Orange	Risk of harm to child – injury that might require medical treatment.	When child encounters these situations under your supervision, talk with them about the risks so they know they need to use caution. Tell them <i>specifically</i> what they need to do to stay safe. These hazards should be removed from places where the child is left unsupervised. When you're there to supervise, teach safety skills.	Look concerned (not scared) and attentive. Stand up and move closer. Use a strong voice to say what the risk is and model what they need to do. "The oven is hot. Move over there" or "that would be a big fall – go that way" or "it's not safe to run near cars – hold my hand." You can also ask <i>them</i> to describe the risk
Red	Situation could turn from harmless to life-threatening in one unsupervised moment.	Remove hazards (e.g. don't leave poisonous items, sharp knives, or buckets of water out), block them off (e.g. fenced swimming pools, window locks on second-story windows, gun safes) or closely supervise the child at all times (e.g. when your child is playing near a busy road). Rules should be clearly explained, non-negotiable and followed every time.	In situations of imminent danger: Look <i>intensely</i> alert. Move toward them. Use your strongest, most urgent, most non-negotiable voice, and as few words as possible to tell them exactly what to do to stay safe. "Stop!" "Back away!" "Hands up!" Remove them from the situation if needed. After they're out of harm's way, <i>then</i> explain the situation.