

Teaching about “Tricky People” vs. “Stranger Danger” and other ways to reduce your child’s risk of harm

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Many parents worry a great deal about stranger danger: with nightmares about kidnapping and sexual abuse. But the true risk of these things happening is very small. And if those fears lead parents to keep their children inside the house and away from other people, this can mean that the children miss out on the benefits of outdoor play, and building social skills through lots of casual interactions.

There are many things you can do to help keep your child(ren) safe from people who would do them harm while still allowing them freedom to explore. Here are some things they need to know to be safe:

- Who they are and how to find you:
 - For a toddler: Teach them their full name and their parents’ name(s).
 - A young child (age 3 – 6) should know their address and their parents’ phone numbers.
 - An older child should know how to contact multiple trusted adults, how to get to safe places, and how and why to call 9-1-1.
- Where they can go:
 - For a preschooler or early elementary, let them know the boundaries of where they can go and where they can’t, such as “you can be in the front yard, but can’t go out the gate.”
 - For older children: Set boundaries on where they can go, ask that they check in from time to time, require that they check in if their plans change. Encourage the buddy system.
 - Have consequences (at any age) if they violate their boundaries. If they get sad or mad when you enforce limits, remind them your job is to keep them safe.
- What if you become separated:
 - For a toddler, in very busy places, carry them in a stroller or backpack or require that they hold your hand. You can try to teach them that if they ever look around and can’t see you, they should stop where there are, and you will come to find them. But realistically, they likely won’t remember that under stress. So, at busy events, put your contact info in their pocket, have a current picture of them on your phone, and keep a close eye on them.
 - For a preschooler, talk about the importance of staying close to you. Tell them that if they look around and can’t find you, they should stop where they are and you will find them.
 - For an older child, tell them your plan on where you’re going. Have a plan for what to do if you become separated – where they should wait, where you’ll meet up again. Make sure they can describe it to you, and check in occasionally to be sure they know how to do it.
- Teach and model healthy touch.
 - Don’t force your child to hug someone if they are not comfortable.
 - Teach toddlers correct names for private body parts (e.g. penis or vagina), not family euphemisms, so they have the language to talk about any issues with these body parts.
 - By age three, teach that the parts of their body that are covered by a swimsuit are private. They should be kept covered, and other people should not touch them there, except for a

caregiver who is briefly helping to clean them, or a doctor, when parents are in the room. They should also know not to touch other people in these places, even if asked.

- As they get older, tell them to be wary of “secret touch” that another person wants them to hide from people, or touch that makes them feel wrong after it happened. Let children know that if inappropriate touch happens, they should let you know and they won’t be in trouble.
- Talk about safe people and unsafe people
 - Under three years old, let them know who are the adults that you trust. Demonstrate that with your body language, and your words. “If you ever need help, you can ask _____.”
 - For preschoolers to early elementary: Tell them how to find a trustworthy stranger if they need help. Tell them to look for a person who is working – someone standing behind the check-out counter or wearing a uniform. Or tell them to go to another parent who has a child with them. Talk about “tricky people” and what behaviors are red flags. (See below.)
 - For older kids: Give examples of “tricky behavior”; have them describe how they’d respond.

Stranger Danger or Tricky People?

For decades, parents and educators taught the idea of *stranger danger*. But this can create a culture of fear, causing a child to be so afraid of strangers that they don’t seek out help when they need it. It can also lead to racism/fears of people who are different from them in some way. And it ignores the reality that most crimes against children are committed by someone the child knows well, not strangers.

Instead, talk about “tricky people” who display certain behaviors. Those *behaviors* should raise red flags for a child, and let them know to check in with a trusted adult for advice on how to respond.

Tricky people may:

- ask a child to help them (e.g. help finding a lost puppy)
- try to arrange for alone time with a child
- try to make one particular kid feel special, lavishing praise and gifts (grooming)
- ask kids to do something that breaks the family rules, or just doesn’t feel right
- ask kids to keep a secret from their parents or their teacher, or threaten them
- touch a child a lot (tickling, wrestling, asking for hugs) even if the child says no; touch a child in a private area, ask a child to touch their private areas, ask to see a child’s private areas, ask to take pictures of private area, or show a child their private areas.

Teach your child that any of these tricky behaviors are a red flag, and that if they experience them, they should talk to you or another trusted adult. If a child comes to you, always take them seriously.

Resources:

For more details on all these topics: <https://gooddayswithkids.com/tricky-people/>

There are good kids’ books on how to say no to touch they don’t want (like when grandma wants to pinch their cheeks): *My Body Belongs to Me* from *My Head to My Toes* by Pro Familia, *Miles is the Boss of his Body* by Schiller, *We Say what’s OK* by Bowers. *No Means No* by Sanders.

There are also books about consent amongst peers: these can be helpful if a) your child doesn’t like to be touched, *or* b) your child wants to hug *everyone all the time*. *Don’t Hug Doug* by Finison, *How to Hug a Pufferfish* by Peterson, *Can I Give You a Squish* by Nelson, and *Rissy No Kissies* by Howe.