Stranger Awareness

Each year, many children disappear in the United States. Most child abductors are people the child knows. Sometimes the abductor is a stranger. As your child reaches age 3, begin teaching stranger awareness. Use a calm and caring manner when teaching these concepts to a young child. The goal is to empower your child and instill confidence rather than fear. Teach the concepts you feel your child is ready for, adding more information later. Make this an ongoing process as your child matures.

Concepts to Teach Your Child

- A stranger is anyone you don't know.
- Never give your name or address to a stranger.
- The rules change when your parents aren't there. It may be OK to talk to a stranger when your parents are with you, but not when you're on your own.
- You can say "no" to a stranger.
- Never get in a car or go anywhere with a stranger.
- Never take anything from a stranger.

Many child abductions are carried out by a non-custodial parent. If your family is in this situation, you may need to teach your child some specific skills. The Polly Klass Foundation has excellent tips at pollyklass.org.

Teach additional concepts as your child gets older and is away from you more often to walk to school or play in the neighborhood.

- Be cautious in public restrooms. Go with a friend if possible.
- Walk home with a friend whenever possible or call home when you leave so your parents will know when to expect you.
- Use the same route when going to familiar places.
- Play where there are people around, such as parks and playgrounds.
- Avoid playing in secluded areas.
- If you become lost or need help, go to someone "official," such as a store clerk rather than asking a stranger.

Things Your Older Child Should Know

- What numbers to call in an emergency (911 in most areas)
- His or her full name, parents' names, address and phone number, including area code
- How to make a long distance call
- How to reach parents at work
- A "secret" family password that parents can give to a person who may have to pick up the child unexpectedly
- How to answer the door and phone safely
- The areas of the body that are private — those covered by a bathing suit
- That touch for play, teasing or affection has to be OK with both people and has to be safe
- Things that make you uncomfortable should not be a secret
- That you can say no to an adult or walk away if you feel uncomfortable
- How to recognize the uneasy feeling you get when someone touches or treats you inappropriately, and the three rules to follow if you get that feeling:

    1. Yell "no!"
    2. Get away
    3. Tell a grown-up you trust

Parental Responsibilities

- Know your child's friends.
- Know what your child is wearing each day.
- Be involved in your child's activities and meet his or her friends' parents.
- Have a family "password."
- Question any gifts your child brings home.
- Never leave a young child unattended in a car, shopping area or other public place.
- Avoid putting your child's name in a visible place on clothing, backpacks, etc. Update your child's height and weight on an annual basis, and keep a current photograph.
- When your child is ready to stay alone, be sure he or she has emergency numbers and the number of a friend or neighbor to call for immediate help.

Talk to your child periodically and review stranger awareness concepts. Read books or watch videos on the subject together. You can ask your local librarian for suggestions. Role play with your child, for example, "What would you do if a man at the playground asked you to help find his little kitten?"

Then pretend to be the stranger. Help your child think through what to do. Talking about these issues can be scary, but good education and communication will help keep your child safe.

Strangers on the Internet

The Internet can be a dangerous tool used by sexual predators to prey on children. As a parent, it's your responsibility to monitor computer activities.

- Keep your computer in a public part of your home so you are able to monitor your children's activities. Do the same with smartphones and devices that have access to the Internet. Consider collecting all devices at bedtime.
- Teach children not to give out personal information: name, address, phone number, school name, etc., without a parent's permission.
- Teach children to never agree to meet someone they met online.
- Teach children to never send pictures or other personal material to someone they met online.
- Establish time limits for your child.
- Teach children to immediately report if someone online says to "keep this a secret from your parents." That is a WARNING SIGN.
- Know your children's screen names and passwords. Know what platforms your children use and the passwords to all of them.
- Use technology to block platforms or sites you don't want your child using.
- Frequently check the history on your child's computer or device.

Avera

To learn more, email the Family Life Educators at **familylifeeducators@avera.org**, visit **Avera.org/Childrens** or call **605-322-3660**.

PEDS-587016