



gretchen's
house

So you want to know more about...

Strangers & Safety

Safe or Sorry?

You don't want to scare your child, but you want her to be safe. When is it too early to start talking about personal safety?

Around the age of four years, many children begin straying farther from parents and caregivers. At the park, or a store, they may disappear momentarily or ask to walk alone. This happens because children become more peer-focused and because many feel **invincible**. This is a good time to start having conversations about personal safety. Parents can say, "I like to stay close so I can keep you safe."

Don't just talk about **strangers**. Speaking about many different kinds of safety—crossing the street, walking on wet surfaces, using scissors carefully, etc.—will emphasize a general approach: parents keep kids safe. This approach will also avoid scaring children unnecessarily about people in the

world around them. Families can role-play—discuss whether various situations and activities are safe or dangerous. Families can also plan what to do when the smoke detector goes off, what to do if you get separated at the mall, what to do if you get home from school and mom/dad/the babysitter isn't there yet, etc. Feeling empowered helps *anyone* react better in an emergency and this kind of rehearsal will help your child develop coping skills.

Children can't do much about the threats and dangers we share with them, consciously or unconsciously. This information, combined with their skewed perception of reality, can lead to real **anxiety**. Adults should keep most of our worries (and even many of our precautions) to ourselves. When Michigan began posting the addresses of registered sex offenders, concerned parents asked us what we would do differently now that we'd learned

there were known sex offenders in the community. But the situation was not more dangerous than before we had this information. Families, schools, and communities need to have systems and practices in place **before** a perceived threat, rather than **in reaction** to it.

So what's a **safe** community for young children? One in which children under the age of eleven are always **supervised** (children ages 12-16 need limited supervision, too); one that includes **designated adult caregivers** whenever a parent isn't around; one in which children recognize and are friendly with **community helpers** such as police, security guards, and rescue workers. Parents should **know any adults** their children spend time with. Children should understand **appropriate interactions** with non-family members.

What is a Stranger?

The word "stranger" can imply someone who is strange *looking*. If you use the term "strangers" when discussing safety with your child, it's important to explain what it means. In short, a stranger is someone you don't recognize or don't expect.

Many child safety programs steer away from the word "stranger" and suggest that children need to learn to pay more attention to the way people act than to the way they look in order to be safe. Tricky people do tricky

things, such as offering children bribes—candy, or money; asking for help (grown-ups should ask grownups for help); being secretive; or asking kids to break their parents' rules. Role-playing is a good way to clarify what constitutes tricky behavior.

Tricky people can also be family members or neighbors. Children are much more likely to be sexually abused by a relative or trusted adult than by a complete stranger, so it's important for children to trust their

instincts. Parents can support the development of this skill by listening and responding appropriately. For example, if a young child doesn't want to spend time with people s/he doesn't know well, don't force the issue. It's important not to **override** children's natural wariness in new situations and with new people.

Children need to know what to do when they feel tricked: **Respond "NO!" Run away** and call for **help**. And **tell** their parents what happened.

Ages & Stages: Independence and Safety

Public restrooms: children under age 7 must be accompanied by an adult in a public restroom or locker room, even if this means using the facilities designated for the opposite sex. Some public pools, etc. insist that children over 7 years old use gender-appropriate facilities. You can ask a staff person to accompany your child through the locker room, or you might ask a parent with other children to do so.

Stores and shopping malls: children over the age of 3 often won't sit long in a stroller. Shopping malls are a good place for them to begin walking rather than riding, but don't expect to get much shopping done. Your little explorer will require your **undivided** attention. If your child disappears, immediately ask a store employee for

help. Stay in the vicinity where you last saw him in case he's hiding. Because children ages 5 and up can quickly slip away, be sure they recognize the employee uniforms in the stores you frequent so they can get help if they are lost. The biggest danger in most stores is that children will hurt themselves on merchandise or fixtures.

Overnights: children may want to sleep overnight anytime between the ages of 6 and 11. Some children never warm to sleeping away from home, so don't push it. They may be happier having friends over at their house. If you want your children to occasionally spend the night with nearby relatives, start doing this early—when they are big enough to sleep through the night—so they'll feel comfortable as they get older.

Who, What, When & Where: Talking About Privacy

You should begin conversations about privacy with your children as soon as they begin *talking* about their private parts, generally between the ages of 2 and 3.

Who should touch children's private parts? Only parents (or close relatives who care for them), caregivers, and doctors or nurses (with a parent present).

What is acceptable contact? Washing the genitals with a washcloth or diaper wipe, or helping a child wipe after toileting. Rather than going into graphic detail about what constitutes appropriate touching, explain to your child what you're doing as you clean her up after toileting.

When should adults other than parents perform these kinds of tasks? A regular babysitter (or familiar grandparent) might be expected to give a child a bath. Show regular caregivers how to clean your child's genitals.

When children are between 4 and 5, they may insist on privacy when toileting or bathing or they may experiment with invading other people's privacy (opening the bathroom door or trying to touch parents' bodies). They may also explore other children's bodies. This is all perfectly normal. It's important to react matter-of-factly: "It's okay to explore your own body but I like to keep mine private."

Frequently Asked Questions

How do you screen staff? We conduct criminal record checks and licensing checks on all new hires. We require personal and professional references for all employees. New staff are not left alone with the children. When I/T (i.e., high contact) classrooms require a substitute teacher, we use a regular sub or rearrange staffing in the other rooms so a familiar staff person can take care of the I/T children.

My child is terrified of strangers. Be sure to avoid discussing crimes against children or watching the television news in front of your child. Children can be deeply affected by even small snippets of information without proper context. Take time to show your child the many things you do to stay safe—locking doors, wearing seatbelts, wearing bike helmets, etc. Help your child learn

to trust particular adults (teachers, relatives, etc.) by demonstrating your own comfort around them and showing your confidence in their skills. Most childhood fears are stages. Anxiety that persists or interferes with normal activities should be evaluated by a professional.

I know for a fact there are sex offenders in our neighborhood. I'm tempted to point them out to my six year old so he will avoid them. This may terrify your child. It might confuse him: he may think that "bad guys" are identifiable by physical attributes or location. It could also divert his attention from other potentially dangerous adults and/or situations. Better to discuss your concerns with other parents in the neighborhood to brainstorm ways that you can protect the children in your community.