

## THE STRANGER-DANGER MYTH

“Don’t talk to strangers” has forever been the slogan of personal safety education. However, we now know that in the majority of cases statistics have shown that most children are victimized by someone they know. The message of “don’t talk to strangers” does not fully educate children about how to stay safe.



A “stranger” is an abstract concept that most children have difficulty understanding. When questioned, children will often describe a stranger as someone who is “ugly, “mean” or “creepy”. Therefore, **would-be child abductors often make themselves look “friendly” and “nice” in order to coax children to willingly follow them.** The “stranger” approach to safety is also confusing to children as they see their parents interacting and talking to strangers everyday. As well, situations may arise in which children may need to approach a “stranger” for help: for example, the child gets lost in a public place, misses his school bus, etc.

Children need to be empowered with positive messages and safety skills that will not only build their self-esteem and self-confidence but also help keep them safer in everyday situations, both in the real world and online. The Missing Children’s Network recommends that parents reinforce the following safety strategies with their children:

- Encourage your child to always trust his instincts and remind him that he has the right to say NO! to anyone - a family member, a neighbour, a friend, a teacher, a coach, etc. who asks him to do something that leaves him feeling scared, confused or uncomfortable. If your child ever finds himself in such a situation, he should speak to a safe adult as soon as possible.
- Make sure that your child always asks for your permission before going anywhere. As the parent, you are responsible for your child’s comings and goings. You need to know where your child is and with whom at all times.
- Identify safe people and places that your child can approach if he ever needs help: for example, a store employee, a security guard, a police officer, etc. In an emergency situation, children need to know that there is always someone available to help them.
- Remind your child the importance of always being in the company of a friend when playing outside or when walking from one place to another.

## THE STRANGER-DANGER MYTH

### Teach your child to recognize and avoid potentially dangerous situations by role-playing "What-if ...":

Parents should make safety part of their child's everyday life by practicing safety skills in a positive and reassuring manner. What-if ... scenarios allow the child to problem-solve on his own and acquire the confidence to identify and avoid risky situations.

The following are examples of "what-if ..." scenarios to practice with your child:

- Q.** What would you do if someone grabs you in a public place or on the street?  
**A.** Tell him to yell very loudly "This is not my mother/father! I need help" Help them practice how it would sound to yell loudly.
  
- Q.** What would you do if someone in a car stops and asks you where the corner store is located?  
**A.** Advise him to keep a distance of at least three giant steps between himself and the car. If the person asks the child to go to the store with them, say NO! Remind your child that an adult should always ask another adult for help.
  
- Q.** What do you do if someone you met online asks you where you live?  
**A.** Instruct your child to never divulge personal information, because we can never know for sure with whom we are really communicating with. Remind your child that it is easy for a person to lie about their age or where they live when they are hiding behind a screen and a keyboard.

The Missing Children's Network urges parents to make safety education an ongoing dialogue in their homes. Safety education helps build a child's confidence and prepares them for dangerous situations that they may encounter when home alone, surfing the Net, traveling to-and-from school or getting lost in public places. The more confidence they have in their abilities to ensure their own safety, the more prepared they will be to confront difficult situations that may arise later in life ...in the classroom, in relationships with others and in the workplace.

