

10 Tips for Teaching Children About Strangers

One question we regularly get asked is, **“How do I teach my child about strangers?”** For more than 40 years we have been teaching this exact topic to physical educators, community groups, and parents through our seminars. Today **we want to share 10 of these tips with you.**

Sometimes we take for granted that children possess the ability to make good decisions regarding their own safety. You may find yourself thinking that this information is just “common sense.” True. Yet, each individual child needs to be taught these tips, and they must be reinforced often before it becomes common sense to them.

First, let’s take a look at the 10 tips. Then, we will explain each below.

1. Learn to recognize who is a stranger versus who is a trusted adult.
2. Know what to do if someone bothers your child.
3. Awareness skill: Have a code word.
4. Refusal skill: Don’t accept rides from strangers.
5. Refusal skill: Don’t let strangers in your home.
6. Refusal skill: Never accept anything from strangers.
7. Awareness skill: Never go near a stranger’s car.
8. Action skill: Don’t stay with a group of friends who aren’t following the rules about strangers.
9. Action skill: Get an adult to help an adult.
10. Action skill: Know how to break free if grabbed and where to run.

1. Who is a stranger? versus Who is a trusted adult?

Who is a stranger? It can seem like a simple question to answer. In many ways it is, yet it can quickly become confusing for a child. Therefore, keep it simple. A stranger is anyone who is unfamiliar to your child, even if they seem friendly. We recommend teaching that a stranger is anyone whom you, as their parent, have not said it is okay for them to talk to. From this starting point, you can introduce your child to a variety of scenarios overtime, and each time reinforce the rule and explain why the situation is an example of a stranger. How can it become complicated for a child? Here are a few scenarios:



A) The person is friendly.

In movies and television, strangers are usually scary men with dark sunglasses. Children naturally want to be helpful. This is why the ploy of asking a child to help look for a lost puppy can work on a child. A friendly man, woman, teenager, or even child can still be a stranger.

B) The person offers a reward.

The offer of candy, movie tickets, toys, balloons, money, electronic devices, and more are just a few tactics to lure a child away. The child may focus on the reward and be distracted from the fact they don't actually know this person.

C) The person is an adult they have met before.

This is why the guideline, "someone you have said it is okay to speak with" is crucial. When you were previously present and spoke with an adult, or teenager, and your child interacted with them in a positive way, they may believe this person is no longer a stranger. When they don't see this person as a stranger, they won't apply the rules for dealing with strangers.

D) They make friends with a peer (child).

When your child is at school, the playground, or enrolled in an activity, they will make friends. You probably encourage this. However, until you have met the parents of those children and told your child that it is okay, they should not go to their new friend's house. A child may not see another child as a stranger, and when invited, go with them.

E) Even police officers, fire fighters, and postal workers are strangers.

When a child needs help, they can look for one of these "helpers." However, if they come up to your child, they are still a stranger. We recommend you teach your child to seek you out immediately.

These are only a few of the scenarios that can complicate "Who is a stranger?" for a child. However, if you constantly reinforce the guideline of "a stranger is someone who you have not said it is okay to speak with," and discuss each of these scenarios and how they should respond, you will arm your child with the crucial knowledge that can make them safer. Many of the remaining tips deal with rules for each of the above scenarios.



2. Know what to do if someone bothers your child.

If a child is bothered while at the playground or anywhere else, they should tell you that it happened. You need to remind your children of this, but there is another point to consider, one that can be difficult.

As parents, you should not panic or overreact in front of your child. You shouldn't scold or yell at them for being somewhere alone. Definitely, you shouldn't forbid them from ever going there again because of what you have just learned. All of these actions punish the child for their willingness to inform you of what occurred. If you punish them out of concern for their safety, it will ensure that they keep the next incident in their lives a secret. It is hard, but you should remain calm, talk with your son or daughter, and let them know how proud they made you. Remind them to stay alert and be careful.

Once you have taken care of your child, you need to take some additional actions. Call the police. Notify the authorities at school and the area where they were playing. You may want to drive down to the playground or school area a couple of times and watch from a distance yourself while your child is there. Your concern is great, but it should not override the positive action your child has taken and the praise they deserve.

3. Awareness skill: Have a code word.

Sometimes there are situations when a parent is unable to pick up a child such as a car breakdown or a family emergency, and it becomes necessary for someone else to give the child a ride home. In these circumstances, the child could be put into an awkward situation because they have been taught not to interact or accept rides with strangers. If a neighbor, friend of the family, or relative is able to give them a ride, they should have a way of knowing that you have given them permission to accept the ride. Here it helps to have a word that only the parents and child knows. The word should not be obvious or easily guessed, and the child should know not to tell it to anyone, even friends. In an emergency situation, the parent can tell the person who will pick the child up the word. Once used, the word would need to be changed.

4. Refusal skill: Don't accept rides from strangers.

When school is in full swing, it is a good time to remember that it is not safe to take rides with strangers. Sometimes it begins to rain or snow, unexpectedly. It seems easier to take a ride from a helpful stranger than to walk the rest of the way. Sometimes a child may miss their bus or ride and be left behind, wondering what to do. If someone drives up and offers a ride home, the child should say "NO." Remind them, that they don't know the person or people in the car. No matter what they say, don't get in. Practice this with them. Examples: Say, "no," even if they say your mother sent them to pick you up; say, "no," even if they say they are a visiting aunt or uncle and that you were a baby when they last saw you. Teach them to go back into the school, and to ask to use the office phone or ask for help.



5. Refusal skill: Don't let strangers in your home.

Many children arrive home from school before either of their parents arrives home from work. Unfortunately, a criminal can figure this pattern out in only a few days. Younger children are more vulnerable to a stranger's request to use the phone because of an emergency. Children need to be reminded that the door should remain locked to all strangers.

It is also important to clarify the wide range of people that make up the group we call strangers. Once we convince children that police officers are helpers that afford benefits and safety, and that it's important to help people who are in real need, we exclude these people from being considered strangers. Even if the stranger indicates that they are a police officer, they should be denied entrance. A child will actually say, "It wasn't a stranger; it was a man who needed help and had to use our phone!" They will say, "It wasn't a stranger; it was a police officer!"

When the child is home alone, he or she should be instructed not to let anyone in. It is better for them to direct the stranger to a neighbor's house. These children should have a phone number that they can call immediately. They should also have a place that they can go to for safety if they become afraid and need to leave the house. This might be a neighbor's house, public store, or relative. Discussing the complexities of strangers, helping others, and safety should be done often to meet each child's changing maturity, self-confidence, and understanding of the world that surrounds them.

6. Refusal skill: Never accept anything from strangers.

A common ploy by child abductors is to exploit a child's natural desire to be helpful by encouraging the child to help find a lost kitten or puppy. It is difficult to determine what goes through the mind of a person who is willing to kidnap a child. It is important to realize that these people exist, and without constant reinforcement, our children can fall prey to them. Our primary defense is educating children that to help an adult, they must find another adult that they already know. You can avoid creating paranoia in your child and still arm them with the knowledge to say, "no," by telling them short stories (parables). When you identify in two or three different ways how they can help, you ensure they keep their distance from strangers and their cars. Remind them of the rule, "to help a big person, find another big person."

7. Awareness skill: Never go near a stranger's car.

The strongest safety rule would be to not speak with the person in the first place because they are a stranger. But at first, the child may not realize they are, in fact, a stranger. A child should be taught to recognize the family car. They can do this by drawing a picture of it, knowing the color, type, and number of doors. Perhaps you have a unique sticker in the window. The rule we recommend is that a child should speak louder if the stranger can't hear or go get a parent to help them, but no one should ever approach the car. By approaching the car, they risk being pulled into it.



8. Action skill: Don't stay with a group who aren't following the rules about strangers.

This one can be hard for a child. They need to be taught that leaving to get help and telling you about is not “tattling.” Never underestimate the power of peer pressure. It is an ever-present force in a child’s life. Your child might be following the rules about strangers, but if someone in their group is not, then your child needs to know that it is time to leave, where to go, and what to do. If they have the means to contact you, such as a cell phone, they should do so immediately.

9. Action skill: Get an adult to help an adult.

If a stranger asks for directions or needs help finding something they have lost, like a kitten or puppy, remember this very good rule: To help a big person (an adult) you should go get a big person.

We all want to help other people, but it’s important to know how. As you grow up and get older you will be able to help in different ways. Right now, the best way to help is to follow the rule. Tell them to wait, and then quickly get a big person, an adult like mom or dad, to help them. Remember, you can help big people by getting another big person.

10. Action skill: Know how to break free if grabbed and where to run.

Even if a child does everything right, they can still be grabbed. Therefore, it is important to teach them basic self-defense skills with the goal of breaking free, drawing attention, and running away. We teach many of these skills every day in our classes, and we would like to share one of them with you now. It is called a circular arm breakaway.

An attacker typically grabs a child with a straight across wrist grab, a cross wrist grab, or a sleeve grab with the intention of pulling the child out of sight and into a secluded area. A straight-across wrist grab occurs when an attacker uses his hand to grab the child’s opposite arm, like a mirror image. For example, the attacker’s right arm grabs the child’s left arm. A cross-wrist grab occurs when an attacker uses his hand to grab the child’s same arm by reaching across the front of his body. For example, the attacker’s right arm grabs the child’s right arm. In all three of these attacks the child can escape using a circular arm breakaway.



The circular motion of this technique involves a change of direction that takes advantage of the strength of the attacker to assist the child in escaping from the grab. Swing your arm in one direction, and then quickly reverse direction and complete three or more large circles in the opposite direction. Your arm should be straight, and the large sweeping motion of the circles should come from movement (rotation) at the shoulder joint. The direction of the circles does not matter. Whether you swing clockwise or counter clockwise, both motions are effective to escape the grab. The extra circles you complete once freed are important. They visually distract the attacker and prevent him from immediately grabbing you again. As you become free and continue these extra circles, back away from the attacker. Then run for help. An attacker will not pursue the child, but will now be afraid of being seen and will flee.



When teaching this technique, be aware of two things.

First, by reversing the circular flow, the child has added the strength of the attacker to their own because the attacker will have automatically tried to return their arm to its original position of control. Therefore, it is important for the child to move their arm in one direction with a quick motion and then reverse the circle in the other direction just as quickly.

Second, do not allow the child to pull the attacker onto them. This strengthens the attacker's grip and reduces the effectiveness of the circular motion.

We are very passionate about child safety education. These are only a few of topics that can make a real positive difference for a child's safety in a constantly changing world.

Whom do you know who can benefit from these tips? Please share this with them.

Together we can make the world a little safer, one child at a time.