



Jacob Wetterling Foundation

Help Keep Kids Safe: Five Tips for Parents and the Community

By Nancy Sabin, Executive Director, Jacob Wetterling Foundation

1. Set the tone

Use a calm, vigilant and reassuring tone. When people are scared or stressed out, they don't think and act as smart as they otherwise could. Children pick up our cues, so if we're scared, they'll be scared. We need to act SMART, not SCARED so we make the choices that are in our best interests. When news is difficult, children need reassurance that "We're doing everything we can to make sure you're safe."

2. Talk about the rules for your family. Tell your children:

√ Don't go with any adult who asks you for your help...adults should ask other adults for help, they shouldn't ask kids.

√ Most of the people in this world are good, but some are not. I want you to stay away from dangerous situations and behaviors, not certain kinds of people, just because they're strangers. Remember on the first day of school when you met strangers who were your bus driver and your new teacher? They turned out to be good people who helped you. Remember that some people are strangers, most of them are good and they can help you too when no one else is around. A child is most likely to be sexually exploited by someone they know or have seen. They don't think of them as a stranger such as a priest, a coach or a neighbor. Throw out the word, "stranger" because kids just don't understand what it means.

√ It's ok to keep surprises, but never keep a secret. Surprises don't hurt others and are usually for just for a short time. Secrets are usually kept for a long time and they often hurt people. If someone asks you to keep a secret, tell your parents right away.

√ If you're separated from me (the parent or caregiver) in the Mall or somewhere else, try to find a mom who has children and tell her you're lost. Never leave the building with ANYONE except me, your caregiver.

√ Let's hold hands wherever we go in public, because then people know I'm taking care of you. Don't go off to play by yourself unattended.

√ **Check first** with me, your caregiver, before going anywhere with anyone or before accepting anything from anyone.

3. Play interactive “what if” games throughout your child or teen’s life, in order to continuously reinforce personal safety.

For example, ask your child when you’re in the Mall, “What if we got separated, who would you run to for help? Why would you pick who you did? Again, one of the safest bets is to run to a mom with children.

4. Reassure and regularly communicate with your children at all stages in their lives.

Communicating only in times of crisis doesn’t encourage children to come forward with needs and concerns in everyday situations. Ask them to show you how to go online and where some of their favorite places are.

5. Report any unusual activity that you witness, related to children or adults within your community.

If your intuition or “guts” tell you something is odd or wrong, it probably is. Speak up. Check things out further. Trust your instincts and tell your kids to do the same! When trying to head off “risky situations”, look for these types of Red Flags:

- Adults who want to spend time with your child in unique or isolated situations
- Children who suddenly withdraw from other children and want to spend more of their time with a particular adult
- Children who are receiving unexplained gifts, cell phones, event tickets, clothes, etc.
- Adults who take children to special places where they do not take other children or adults
- Adults who spend long periods of time alone with a particular child in private places (i.e., long trips, overnights, secluded parks/buildings).

PLAY WHAT-IF GAMES WITH CHILDREN & TEENS

What-if games are a great way to help children and teens think about how to handle potentially dangerous situations. Adults can use what-if questions to spark conversation with children and teenagers while they are in the car, the store, or at any other shared time. It also gives adults insight into how children make decisions. What-if games are most effective when they are used often and in non-threatening situations. Try out the following scenarios with kids you know and then get creative and make up some of your own!

What would you do if...

Your brother's friend gave you \$20, but said to keep it a secret?

There is a big difference between surprises and secrets. Surprises are kept quiet for a short time and when everyone finds out about the surprise they are happy—like a surprise birthday party. Secrets are something you are asked to keep quiet about for a long time, maybe even forever. You should never be asked to keep a secret. If someone asks you to keep a secret, any kind of secret, tell an adult you trust right away.

Someone sent you a picture on the Internet that made you feel uncomfortable?

Don't delete the email or chat, just turn off your monitor and tell your parent or caregiver about the picture. Never respond to offensive or dangerous E-mail, chat, or other online communications. Your parent can tell law enforcement about the situation or report the email to Cyber Tipline ®.

Your neighbor offered you a ride home from school so that you don't have to walk?

You should always check first with your parent or caregiver before going anywhere with anyone—even if you know them. Also, remember to make a special code word that only your family knows, like "popcorn." Don't go with anyone who doesn't know the code word.

You told an adult about something that made you sad or afraid, but they didn't believe you?

Not all adults, even people who care about you and want to help, always know what to do to keep kids safe and happy. You deserve to be safe and to share your feelings with trusted adults. Tell as many people as you need to, like your teacher or youth group counselor, until someone understands and helps.

Someone is watching you and your friends play at the park and that makes you feel scared?

Always trust your feelings, even if you have been wrong before. Leave the park right away and tell a trusted adult what happened. Remember to tell all of the adults in charge that you and your friends left the park and where you are playing now.

A person you met online invites you to meet him/her at the mall?

Never meet online friends in person by yourself, you should take your parent or trusted adult with you when you meet them. Also, remember never to give out any personal information over the Internet, like your name, address, telephone number or the name of your school.



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