

KNOW THE RULES...

GENERAL TIPS FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS TO HELP KEEP THEIR CHILDREN SAFER

While many parents and guardians feel they are faced with new and unprecedented challenges when trying to keep their children safer in today's fast-paced and increasingly global society, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children offers these common-sense, general safety tips to help parents and guardians put these challenges into perspective.

1. Make sure you know where each of your children is at all times. Know your children's friends and be clear with your children about the places and homes they may visit. Make it a rule for your children to check in with you when they arrive at or depart from a particular location and when there is a change in plans. You should also let them know when you're running late or if your plans have changed so they can see the rule is for safety purposes and not being used to "check up" on them.
2. Never leave children unattended in an automobile, whether it is running or not. Children should never be left unsupervised or allowed to spend time alone or with others in automobiles, as the potential dangers to their safety outweigh any perceived convenience or "fun." Remind children to **never** hitchhike, approach a car or engage in a conversation with anyone within a car they do not know and trust, or go anywhere with anyone without getting your permission first.
3. Be involved in your children's activities. As an active participant, you'll have a better opportunity to observe how the adults in charge interact with your children. If you are concerned about anyone's behavior, take it up with the sponsoring organization.
4. Listen to your children. Pay attention if they tell you they don't want to be with someone or go somewhere. This may be an indication of more than a personality conflict or lack of interest in the activity or event.
5. Notice when anyone shows one or all of your children a great deal of attention or begins giving them gifts. Take the time to talk to your children about the person and find out why the person is acting in this way.
6. Teach your children they have the right to say **NO** to any unwelcome, uncomfortable, or confusing touch or actions by others and to get out of those situations as quickly as possible. If avoidance is not an option, children should be taught to kick, scream, and resist. When in such a situation, teach them to loudly yell that the person is not their father/mother/guardian and then immediately tell you if this happens. Reassure them you're there to help and it is okay to tell you anything.

7. Be sensitive to any changes in your children's behavior or attitude. Encourage open communication and learn how to be an active listener. Look and listen for small cues and clues that something may be troubling your children, because children are not always comfortable disclosing disturbing events or feelings. This may be because they are concerned about your reaction to their problems. If your children do confide problems to you, strive to remain calm, noncritical, and nonjudgmental. Listen compassionately to their concern, and work **with them** to get the help they need to resolve the problem.
8. Be sure to screen babysitters and caregivers. Many states now have a public registry that allows parents and guardians to check out individuals for prior criminal records and sex offenses. Check out references with other families who have used the caregiver or babysitter. Once you have chosen the caregiver, drop in unexpectedly to see how your children are doing. Ask your children how the experience with the caregiver was, and listen carefully to the responses.
9. Practice basic safety skills with your children. Make an outing to a mall or park a "teachable" experience in which your children can practice checking with you, using pay telephones, going to the restroom with a friend, and locating the adults who can help if they need assistance. Remember, allowing your children to wear clothing or carry items in public on which their name is displayed can bring about unwelcome attention from inappropriate people who may be looking for a way to start a conversation with your children.
10. Remember there is no substitute for your attention and supervision. Being available and taking time to really know and listen to your children helps build feelings of safety and security.

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Q&A on CHILD SAFETY

What are the most important things parents and guardians should know when talking to their children about this issue?

Don't forget your older children. Children 11-17 are equally at risk to victimization. At the same time you are giving your older children more freedom, make sure they understand the important safety rules as well.

When you speak to your children, do so in a calm, nonthreatening manner. Children do not need to be frightened to get the point across. Fear can actually work at crosspurposes to the safety message, because fear can be paralyzing to a child.

Speak openly about safety issues. Children will be less likely to come to you if the issue is enshrouded in secrecy. If they feel you are comfortable discussing the subject matter, they may be more forthcoming to you.

Do not confuse children with the concept of "strangers." Children do not have the same understanding of who a stranger is as an adult might. The "stranger-danger" message is not effective, as danger to children is much greater from someone you or they know than from a "stranger."

Practice what you talk about. You may think your children understand your message, but until they can incorporate it into their daily lives, it may not be clearly understood. Find opportunities to practice "what if" scenarios.

Teach your children it is more important to get out of a threatening situation than it is to be polite. They also need to know it is okay to tell you what happened, and they won't be a tattletale.

What are the most important things parents and guardians should tell their children about this issue?

Children should always **check first** with you or a trusted adult before they go anywhere, accept anything, or get into a car with anyone. This applies to older children as well.

Children should not go out alone and should always **take a friend** with them when they go places or play outside.

It's okay to say **no** if someone tries to touch them or treats them in a way that makes them feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused and to get out of the situation as quickly as possible.

Children need to know they can **tell** you or a trusted adult if they feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused.

Children need to know there will always be someone to help them, and they have the right to be safe.

What is the biggest myth surrounding this issue?

The biggest myth is that the dangers to children come from strangers. In the majority of cases the perpetrator is someone the parents/guardians or child knows, and that person may be in a position of trust or responsibility to the family.

What advice would you offer parents and guardians who wanted to talk to their children about this issue?

Parents and guardians should choose opportunities or “teachable” moments to reinforce safety skills. If an incident occurs in your community, and your children ask you about it, speak frankly but with reassurance. Explain to your children that you want to discuss the safety rules with them, so they will know what to do if they are ever confronted with a difficult situation. Make sure you have “safety nets” in place, so your children know there is **always** someone who can help them.

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