

Safety Planning with Your Young, School-aged Child

Safety is an issue that weighs heavily on parents since it does not come naturally to children. As a parent, you can establish guidelines and limits to protect your child without stifling his or her need to become more independent.

Here are a few tips on how to keep your child safe from some of the most common hazards that exist for young school-aged children.

Set Family Guidelines

Hold a family meeting where safety rules and practices are discussed, established and practiced through drills.

- Discuss with your child how to safely go about his or her daily routine in your neighborhood.
- Set safety guidelines such as always walking a certain route to school, only crossing the street in the crosswalk and not using shortcuts that take your child down infrequently traveled paths or alleys.
- Make a strict rule prohibiting playing with matches and lighters. This is the most prevalent cause of fire-related deaths among young children.
- Hold fire drills to practice leaving your home safely in case of an emergency.

Practice with Simulated Situations

There is a difference between reciting safety rules and knowing how to act in an emergency.

- A young child may be able to tell you he or she will always cross in a crosswalk and look both ways, but experts say that most children younger than 10 have not developed the skills needed to judge the speed of oncoming traffic. This skill is crucial to being able to safely cross a busy intersection.
- Your child may tell you that he or she will never talk to a stranger, but your child is probably not prepared for the ploys used to coerce children in actual situations.
- Young children may be able to tell you how to escape the house in a fire, but unfortunately a very young child alone in a fire may panic and hide under the bed instead of following your instructions

Experts stress the importance of practical role-playing safety drills rather than verbal quizzes to instill real safety skills in children.

Practice Bicycle Safety

Taking the training wheels off of your child's bicycle can be an important symbol of his or her journey towards independence. If you do not instill the principles of bike safety in your child, it can come at a high price.

- Do not push your child to bike independently until he or she is ready and has developed the necessary motor skills and cognitive abilities.
- Police officers caution parents against buying bikes that are too large in the hopes that their children will grow into and get an extra year's use out of them. A bike that is too large will be difficult for your child to control. Buy your bike from a reputable bicycle shop and ask the salesperson to help you select a bike that fits your child today, not next year.
- Purchase a helmet that fits your child securely, and insist that he or she wear it at all times when riding. Head injury is the most common cause of death and disability in bicycle accidents. Your child is 14 times more likely to be killed in a bike accident if he or she is not wearing a helmet.
- Do not let your child ride at night even if he or she has reflectors or lights on the bike.

Store All Firearms Securely

- According to Safe Kids Worldwide, nearly two-thirds of gun-owning parents with school-aged children believed they kept their guns safely away from their children, but a recent study of first and second graders showed that up to 80 percent knew where the guns in their homes were hidden. If your guns are not locked up, your children can get to them.
- Children as young as three years old have the strength to pull the triggers of many popular gun models.
- Studies show that most children under eight years old cannot reliably distinguish between toy guns and real firearms. If you choose to have a gun in your home, do not just hide it. Lock it up.
- Find other ways to protect your family without compromising your child's safety. Consider storing other home defense items such as a taser, bat, or pepper spray in hard-to-reach and locked areas.

Stranger Danger

The risk of a child being abducted by a total stranger is actually quite low, but when it happens, it is an enormous tragedy. Here are some precautions you can practice with your children:

- Map out the neighborhood. Show your kids the way they should walk to their various activities when they are old enough to do so. Find alternatives to walking alone, such as going with an older sibling to a friend's house or walking with a classmate to the football field after school.
- Explain to your kids the importance of keeping away from unknown adults. If someone physically approaches or assaults them, let them know they should make as much noise as possible to draw attention to the attacker and to run away if possible. Teach them to yell, "No! You are not my parent!"
- Make it clear which adults they can turn to, such as a familiar neighbor or a police officer, if they feel uneasy about a suspicious person. Teach them to trust their instincts and not be embarrassed to act immediately if they feel threatened.
- Rehearse some common ploys used by perpetrators and discuss your child's response. Ploys include pretending to know the child or her family, such as "Your mother asked me to pick you up," or even, "Your mother was in an accident and the doctor sent me to bring you to the hospital." Although some experts suggest using a "safety word," that may encourage your child to engage in a conversation with a stranger. Tell your child you will never send a stranger to get them.
- Avoid dressing your child in clothes with his or her name prominently displayed, as a perpetrator will use this to feign an acquaintance with the child.

- Some perpetrators pretend they have lost a puppy or kitten and ask the child to help search. Studies have shown that children will fall for this trick even when they know all about stranger danger. Protect your child against this ploy by having him or her practice a response. Instruct your child to yell, "No, this is not my parent!" while running away to get help from a familiar adult.
- The simplest ploy used by perpetrators is to pull over under the guise of asking the child for directions. Caution your child never to approach a vehicle if he or she does not know the person inside. Practice these situations and observe your child's response.

Bear in mind that although the thought of a kidnapping or assault by a strange adult is frightening, it is rare. Your child is more likely to be harmed by someone you know and trust. If your child is uneasy in the company of any adult, listen, find out why and take action to protect him or her.

Some Final Thoughts

No message on child safety would be complete without mentioning the two leading causes of accidental injury in young children.

- Make sure your windows and screens are grated to prevent falls. Talk with your children about the dangers of climbing up onto high places like fire escapes and roofs. Falls are the leading cause of accidental injury and death in young children.
- Make sure your child uses seat and shoulder belts that fit whenever riding in a car.

Resources

- Safe Kids Worldwide: www.safekids.org
- U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission: www.cpsc.gov
- Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives: www.atf.gov
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA): www.nhtsa.dot.gov

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