

What to teach children about strangers

Information about the differences between strangers that children should look out for and strangers children can trust.

Children see strangers every day in shops, in the park, and in their neighbourhoods. Most of these strangers are nice, normal people, but a few may not be. Parents can protect their children from dangerous strangers by teaching them about strangers and suspicious behaviour, and by taking a few precautions of their own.

Who is a stranger?

A stranger is anyone that your family doesn't know well. It's common for children to think that "bad strangers" look scary, like the villains in cartoons. This is not only untrue, but it's dangerous for children to think this way. Pretty strangers can be just as dangerous as the not-so-pretty ones. When you talk to your children about strangers, explain that no one can tell if strangers are nice or not nice just by looking at them and that they should be careful around all strangers.

But don't make it seem like all strangers are bad. If children need help - whether they're lost, being threatened by a bully, or being followed by a stranger - the safest thing for them to do in many cases is to ask a stranger for help. You can make this easier for them by showing them which strangers are okay to trust.

Who are safe strangers?

Safe strangers are people children can ask for help when they need it. Police officers and firefighters are two examples of very recognisable safe strangers. Teachers and librarians are adults children can trust too, and they are easy to recognise when they're at work. But make sure that you emphasise that whenever possible, children should go to a public place to ask for help.

You can help your children recognise safe strangers by pointing them out when you're out in your town. Also show your children places they can go if they need help, such as local shops and restaurants and the homes of family friends in your neighbourhood.

Recognising and Handling Dangerous Situations

Perhaps the most important way parents can protect their children is to teach them to be wary of potentially dangerous situations – this will help them when dealing with strangers as well as with known adults who may not have good intentions. Help children recognise the warning signs of suspicious behavior, such as when an adult asks them to disobey their parents or do something without permission, asks them to keep a secret, asks children for help, or makes them feel uncomfortable in any way. Also tell your children that an adult should never ask a child for help, and if one does ask for their help, teach them to find a trusted adult right away to tell what happened.

You should also talk to your children about how they should handle dangerous situations. One way is

to teach them “No, Go, Yell, Tell.” If in a dangerous situations, kids should say no, run away, yell as loud as they can, and tell a trusted adult what happened right away. Make sure that your children know that it is okay to say no to an adult in a dangerous situation and to yell to keep themselves safe, even if they are indoors. It’s good to practice this in different situations so that your children will feel confident in knowing know what to do. Here are a few possible scenarios:

- A nice-looking stranger approaches your child in the park and asks for help finding the stranger's lost dog.
- A woman who lives in your neighborhood but that the child has never spoken to invites your child into her house for a snack. • A stranger asks if your child wants a ride home from school.
- Your child thinks he or she is being followed.
- An adult your child knows says or does something that makes him or her feel bad or uncomfortable.
- While your child is walking home from a friend’s house, a car pulls over and a stranger asks for directions.

What Else Parents Can Do

In addition to teaching children how to recognize and handle dangerous situations and strangers, there are a few more things parents can do to help their children stay safe and avoid dangerous situations.

- Know where your children are at all times. Make it a rule that your children must ask permission or check in with you before going anywhere. Give your children your work and mobile phone numbers so they can reach you at all times.
- Point out safe places. Show your children safe places to play, safe roads and paths to take, and safe places to go if there’s trouble.
- Teach children to trust their instincts. Explain that if they ever feel scared or uncomfortable, they should get away as fast as they can and tell an adult. Tell them that sometimes adults they know may make them feel uncomfortable, and they should still get away as fast as possible and tell another adult what happened. Reassure children that you will help them if they need it.
- Teach your children to be assertive. Make sure they know that it’s okay to say no to an adult and to run away from adults in dangerous situations.
- Encourage your children to play with others. There’s safety in numbers!