

# Keeping Kids Safe is the Most Important Thing: Part 1 – Key Messages

By Pearl Rimer

People from all over the world want to do their best to ensure the safety of the children in their care. “Street-proofing” and “stranger danger” were terms used in the past to describe information about keeping kids safe. These are now being replaced with terms like “personal safety” because the reality is that most children are harmed by someone known or trusted. As a result, safety messages for children and teens have changed so that they apply to any situation.

Parts 1 and 2 of the resource sheet “Keeping Our Kids Safe Is The Most Important Thing!” offer up-to-date information for staff to share with clients as we work together to keep kids safe.

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## Talking to Children about Personal Safety

Talking to children about making good, safe choices and respecting themselves and others is one of the most effective ways to keep them safe. However, one discussion is not enough. Children learn best through repetition and reinforcement. Keep the lines of communication open and be sure to listen. Talk to your children every day about what’s going on in their lives (e.g., school, friends). Try to listen to what they have to say without judging them. This will strengthen your relationship. Do not talk about “good” and “bad” secrets. All abuse takes place under a veil of secrecy, and some offenders manipulate children into believing that “this is a good/special secret between us.”

Be sensitive to changes in your child’s mood and behaviour. They may be a sign that your child has a problem. Sometimes children are embarrassed about a situation or may worry about upsetting you. Let them know that they can come to you with any kind of problem. Also tell them that, although you hope they would come to you, it’s okay to go to another adult they trust, then help them to identify

other safe adults. Empower children by encouraging them to *keep telling* until someone helps them. Make sure they know that they are *not* responsible for protecting themselves—it is the responsibility of adults to protect children.

## Setting Rules for Safety

Explain to your kids that it is your responsibility to keep them safe, and that it is important that you *always* know where they are, who they are with, what they are doing and when they are expected back. Have them check in regularly when they are not at home. Tell them that if they want to change their after-school plans, or go from one place to another, they are to call you *first* then check in with you when they arrive at their destination. In North America, it is common for children to have sleepovers at each others’ homes. In these cases, make sure to meet and speak to the parents. Wherever your children go, ask about supervision. Get the address and phone number each time they move from one house to another. Be sure that you know how to reach your children at any time.



### Being a Role Model for your Child

As children become older and more independent, explain to them that knowing where they are is basic safety and not an issue of controlling their whereabouts or mistrusting them. Be a role model for your children by making sure they know how to get in touch with you, or someone else they can go to for help, at any time. Be sure to tell your children that if they are ever in a situation where they feel uncomfortable or unsafe, and want to be picked up right away, they can *always* call you, and that if there is peer pressure to go someplace that makes them uncomfortable, it's okay to make an excuse (e.g., they have to babysit younger siblings).

### Talking to Children about Touching

Teach your children that there are different kinds of touch and that sometimes people touch kids in ways that are not okay. Make sure your children know that no one, *not even someone they know*, has the right to touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. Children should be taught that the “uh-oh,” “yucky,” “creepy” or “weird” feeling (what

adults refer to as “a gut feeling” or “intuition”) is telling them something isn't right. Do *not* focus on “private parts.” Offenders typically “groom” their victims to trust them by touching children in ways that are not intrusive and, on the surface, do not appear to be inappropriate (e.g., stroking their hair). Let your child know that if they feel uncomfortable, it is *always* okay to tell you or another trusted adult. We cannot expect children to understand the motives of offenders or be responsible for avoiding them.

Make sure children understand that secrets about touching should never be kept, even if someone they know well tells them to keep it a secret – *all touching can be talked about*. They have a right to say “no” to any touch that makes them uncomfortable or any situation where they are feeling threatened. Tell them that in these types of situations they do not have to be polite, and they are not being rude by saying “no.” Make sure they understand that it might be too scary to say no, and that that's okay. They should talk to an adult they trust about what happened, even if they couldn't say no.



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Funded by: Citizenship and Immigration Canada / Financé par: Citoyenneté et Immigration Canada

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