Keeping Kids Safe is the Most Important Thing: Part 2 – Developmental Factors

By Pearl Rimer

Even though key prevention messages include "Secrets about touching should *never* be kept, even if someone you know really well tells you to keep it a secret" and "Touching is never secret – *all touching can be talked about*," developmental factors have an impact on children's ability to tell someone what is happening. Preschoolers typically define a secret as something whispered into a person's ear. As children mature, they begin to understand that a secret means something specific is being hidden, no matter how it has been told to them.

Who do Children Consider Strangers?

Adults need to understand how children define a stranger so that children are not blamed or punished if they do "talk to a stranger." It is clear to adults that a stranger is someone they don't know; however, a young child defines a stranger based on three key things: how someone looks (children usually describe strangers as men who look "scruffy" or "creepy"); how often the child has seen the person or had contact with them; and parental/caregiver interaction with that person. For example, if your child answers the phone and a telemarketer asks for you by name, your child will likely answer their questions (e.g., offering specifics such as that you are not home). Even though we tell our children to say things like, "Daddy is busy and can't talk right now," if the child does not think of the person as a stranger, they may not follow through.

These perceptions persist into adolescence. We often tell teens not to talk to strangers on the Internet. However, in their minds, if they have become close with a person they have been communicating with over time, they believe they "know them well," even if they've never met. Do not threaten to take away children's computers or cell phones. (This will inhibit disclosure and puts the blame on them for something a possible offender has done.) Instead, acknowledge to teens that you know people sometimes "flirt" over the Internet, but if things begin to feel "creepy," they should tell an adult they trust.

Consider a Child's Emotional Response

No matter what the situation, it is difficult to "think straight" when our emotions have been triggered. For this reason, it is not fair to expect children to figure out that a situation may be dangerous and to think of and follow through on a plan of action. The classic example we rehearse with our children is, "What if a stranger asks you to come and help look for his daughter's puppy and he says that she is home crying because the dog is lost." If children were to encounter this situation in real life, they would likely feel sorry for the little girl and become emotional. They may go with the person, no matter what they have practiced with you, and they should not be blamed for this.

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Avoid the Use of Scare Tactics

When something awful happens to a child/youth in the community, parents/caregivers tend to use scare tactics in an effort to keep kids safe; however, these kinds of strategies only make children more nervous and less able to cope. The two main things that kids need to hear when they become aware that something 'bad' has happened to another child are that most people want to help children, and what the adults are doing to help keep them safe (e.g., keeping the doors locked, parents sleeping with their door open so they can hear if the kids need them).

Avoid Harsh Punishments

Children often find themselves "in trouble" because they were somewhere they should not have been, or were with people they were not supposed to be with. Often, if children have broken a rule, they will think that they cannot go to a parent. It is important to remember that children break rules and make mistakes—we all do; it's part of learning.

Adults need to understand that if they use harsh physical or emotional punishment, it will be unlikely that their child will come to them, and this makes it hard for parents to keep children safe. Harsh punishment does not make children respect their parents; it makes children fear them. There is considerable research on the physical punishment of children, and no studies have found corporal punishment to be beneficial. In fact, it can lead to injury and many negative long-term effects (e.g., it increases the likelihood of children exhibiting oppositional, aggressive and delinquent behavior or experiencing mental health problems, and contributes to poor parent-child relationships).

Keeping Secrets for Friends

Explain to your children that if a friend tells them that they are "in trouble" (e.g., they are being bullied, mistreated in a relationship, are hurting themselves or are thinking of hurting themselves), and that friend asks them not to tell anybody, it is nonetheless important that they tell an adult they trust. Even though children may worry about loyalty, emphasize that these kinds of problems are too big for kids to handle on their own. Even adults need help from other adults when they have problems or are worried. Their friend may be angry at first but, in time, will probably be thankful.

Let Your Child Know They Can Come to You

A child's age, developmental level and experience all affect the way they understand prevention messages. These factors, along with the power of the abuser and how abusers often try to trick children, can make it difficult for children to talk to adults. Make sure your child knows that they can come to you no matter what and that you will listen. Their safety is the most important thing!

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