

The Changing Face of Safety Education

Reproducible

“Don’t talk to strangers” has forever been the slogan of personal safety education. However, we now know that this can cause more harm rather than equip children with a safety strategy to help protect themselves.

“Stranger” is an abstract concept and difficult for children to understand, as “stranger” has often been associated with “bad,” “mean,” or “ugly”. Children become confused when someone they don’t know speaks to them nicely, looks “friendly,” or introduces himself/herself in a position of authority.

This “stranger” approach to safety becomes confusing to children, as adults interact and speak to “strangers” everyday. Research indicates that children are much more likely to be abducted or sexually exploited by someone they know or with whom they have come into contact. Therefore, the “stranger” theory is an ineffective approach to protect children from victimization.

There are situations in which children will need to approach a “stranger” for help. So more importantly, they must learn how to make safe choices about the type of individual they should approach in an emergency situation.

Additionally, most children are uncomfortable being impolite to adults. In most cases this is appropriate. However, they must be taught that if their safety is at risk or if they are feeling uncomfortable, it is okay to respond without concern for the feelings of the individual. This also heightens awareness about the messages adults communicate to children and their expectations of how to interact with adults. Many parents expect their children to express affection toward particular adults even when their child is uncomfortable doing so. Adults need to keep the lines of communication open and actively listen to children.

About half of sexual assault victims who reported to a sample of police services in 2003, were assaulted by a friend (10%) or acquaintance (41%), 28% by a family member, and 20% by a stranger. Children under 12 years of age were most often victimized by family members. In comparison, youth aged 12 to 17 were most frequently victimized by acquaintances (47% and 40% respectively).

Statistics Canada, Sexual Offences in Canada (Catalogue no. 85-002-XPE, Vol.23, no.6)

As noted above, children are often victimized by someone they know, as opposed to a “stranger”. For this reason, we strongly encourage that the “stranger” concept be removed from child personal safety language and replaced with the Kids in the Know seven root safety strategies.