

# Child Protection

## CHILD PROTECTION

**A**s a society, our efforts to prevent crimes against children have not kept pace with the increasing vulnerability of our children. After hearing the tragic stories about abducted or exploited children, most parents are surprised to learn that many crimes against children **can be prevented**. This brochure is about child protection.

The most important key to child safety is effective communication with your child. Remember, children who do not feel that they are listened to or who do not think that their needs are met in the home are more vulnerable to abduction or exploitation. The first step you should take is to establish an atmosphere in the home in which your child feels truly comfortable in discussing sensitive matters and in relating experiences in which someone may have approached the child in an inappropriate manner or in a way that made the child feel uncomfortable. The simple truth is that children are often too afraid or confused to report their experiences and fears. In some ways, you should treat your children as you would your adult friends—allow them to talk freely about their likes and dislikes, their friends, their true feelings.

Unfortunately, the rising awareness of crimes against children has left many families with a real sense of fear. You and your child need to be careful and aware, but you do **not** need to be afraid. Talk to your child in a calm and reassuring manner, being careful not to discuss the frightening details of what might happen to a child who does not follow the safety guidelines.

## THE EXPLOITER OR ABDUCTOR: NOT A “STRANGER”

**“S**tay away from strangers” is a popular warning to children to prevent abduction or exploitation. Unfortunately, however, many children are abducted or exploited by people who have some type of familiarity with them but who may or may not be known to the child’s parents.

The term **stranger** suggests a concept that children do not understand and is one that ignores what we do know about the people who commit crimes against children. It misleads children into believing that they should only be aware of individuals who have an unusual or slovenly appearance. Instead, it is more appropriate to teach children to be on the lookout for certain kinds of **situations** or **actions** rather than certain kinds of individuals.

Children can be raised to be polite and friendly, but it is okay for them to be suspicious of any adult asking for assistance. Children help other children, but there is no need for them to be assisting adults. Children should not be asked to touch anyone in the areas of their body that would be covered by a bathing suit or allow anyone to touch them in those areas.

Often exploiters or abductors initiate a seemingly innocent contact with the victim. They may try to get to know the children and befriend them. They use subtle approaches that both parents and children should be aware of. Children should learn to stay away from individuals in cars or vans, and they should know that it is okay to say **no**—even to an adult. Since children are often reared to respect adult authority and never to be a tattletale, parents should explain why the child’s personal safety is more important than being polite. Children should also be taught that there will always be someone who can help them.

Remember, a clear, calm, and reassuring message about **situations** and **actions** to look out for is easier for a child to understand than a particular profile or image of a “stranger.”



## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO PREVENT CHILD ABDUCTION AND EXPLOITATION

- ▶ Know where your children are at all times. Be familiar with their friends and daily activities.
- ▶ Be sensitive to changes in your children's behavior; they are a signal that you should sit down and talk to your children about what caused the changes.
- ▶ Be alert to a teenager or adult who is paying an unusual amount of attention to your children or giving them inappropriate or expensive gifts.
- ▶ Teach your children to trust their own feelings, and assure them that they have the right to say **no** to what they sense is wrong.
- ▶ Listen carefully to your children's fears, and be supportive in all your discussions with them.
- ▶ Teach your children that no one should approach them or touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. If someone does, they should tell you immediately.
- ▶ Be careful about babysitters and any other individuals who have custody of your children. Obtain references from people you trust and see if you can have access to background screening information about these individuals. Many states give people access to sex-offender registries and criminal histories.

## BASIC RULES OF SAFETY FOR CHILDREN

**A**s soon as your children can articulate a sentence, they can begin the process of learning how to protect themselves against abduction and exploitation.

Children should be taught

- ▶ If you are in a public place, and you get separated from your parents, don't wander around looking for them. Go to a checkout

counter, the security office, or the lost and found and quickly tell the person in charge that you have lost your mom and dad and need help finding them.

- ▶ You should not get into a car or go anywhere with any person unless your parents have told you that it is okay.
- ▶ If someone follows you on foot or in a car, stay away from him or her. You should not get close to any car, unless your parent or a trusted adult accompanies you.
- ▶ Grownups and others who need help should not be asking children for help; they should be asking older people.
- ▶ No one should be asking you for directions or to look for a "lost puppy" or telling you that your mother or father is in trouble and that he or she will take you to them.
- ▶ If someone tries to take you somewhere, quickly get away from him (or her) and yell or scream, "This man (woman) is trying to take me away" or "This person is not my father (mother)."
- ▶ You should try to take a friend with you, and never go places alone.
- ▶ Always ask your parents' permission to leave the yard or play area or to go into someone's home.
- ▶ Never hitchhike or try to get a ride home with anyone unless your parents have told you it is okay to ride with him or her.
- ▶ If someone wants to take your picture, tell him or her **no** and tell your parents or teacher.
- ▶ No one should touch you in the parts of the body that would be covered by a bathing suit, nor should you touch anyone else in those areas. Your body is special and private.
- ▶ You can be assertive, and you have the right to say **no** to someone who tries to take you somewhere, touches you, or makes you feel uncomfortable, scared, or confused in any way.



## DETECTING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

**S**exual exploitation should not be confused with physical contacts that are true expressions of affection. A warm and healthy relationship can exist if adults respect the child and place reasonable limits on their physical interaction.

Child molesting is often a repeat crime. Many kids are victimized a number of times. The reality of sexual exploitation is that often the child is very confused, uncomfortable, and unwilling to talk about the experience to parents, teachers, or anyone else. **But they will talk** if you have already established an atmosphere of trust and support in your home, where your child will feel free to talk without fear of accusation, blame, or guilt.

Parents should be alert to these indicators of sexual abuse

- ▶ Changes in behavior, extreme mood swings, withdrawal, fearfulness, and excessive crying.
- ▶ Bed-wetting, nightmares, fear of going to bed or other sleep disturbances.
- ▶ Acting out inappropriate sexual activity or showing an unusual interest in sexual matters.
- ▶ A sudden acting out of feelings or aggressive or rebellious behavior.
- ▶ Regression to infantile behavior.
- ▶ A fear of certain places, people, or activities, especially being alone with

certain people. Children should not be forced to give affection to an adult or teenager if they do not want to. Be alert to signs that your child is trying to avoid someone and listen carefully when your child tells you how he or she feels about someone.

- ▶ Pain, itching, bleeding, fluid, or rawness in the private areas.

## CHILD PROTECTION IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EVERYONE

**B**ecause children cannot look out for themselves, it is our responsibility to look out for them. Every home and school should establish a program that effectively teaches children about safety and protection measures. As a parent, you should take an active interest in your children and listen to them. Teach your children that they can be assertive in order to protect themselves against abduction and exploitation.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children has developed a publication titled, *Guidelines for Programs to Reduce Child Victimization: A Resource for Communities When Choosing a Program to Teach Personal Safety to Children* that is available upon request.

And, most importantly, make your

home a place of trust and support that fulfills your child's needs—so that he or she won't seek love and support from someone else.



NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
**MISSING & EXPLOITED**  
CHILDREN®

**OJJDP** Office of Juvenile Justice  
and Delinquency Prevention  
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