

# Awareness of Danger and Stranger Danger

“My son has little awareness of danger and will try and run out in the road or escape out of the window.”

There are a number of reasons why your child may do this. Although there may be a lack of understanding as to why they should not, it is important to make sure there is not anything else that is giving them reason for the behaviour. For example, our natural reaction when someone is in danger is to react strongly to make sure they stay safe. Some children enjoy being chased, or like the attention they get. If this is the case, when removing your child to safety do so with the minimum amount of eye contact and communication. Just say, 'No running' and reinforce this with a no running or no climbing symbol.

If this is particularly problematic whilst walking along the road, try and provide distractions to keep your child's mind off running away. This can be done either by pointing out things in the environment, singing their favourite song or have them bring something along that can distract them. This way they will also get attention when they are not running out on the road as well as being distracted.

Social stories™ were developed by Carol Gray to help people with an ASD to understand social situations. They are short descriptions of a particular event, situation or activity. You may find it useful to write a story on why we cannot run out on the road or go out the window. Because social stories are written out, they provide visual information as well as spoken and can be referred to before an event. For example, before you go out for a walk you could read out the story on why it is we do not run out into the road, and it is important to keep hold of Mum's hand. Using images in the story (clipart or actual photos etc) can also help reinforce the point you are trying to make).

You may also find it useful to role play crossing the road safely. Many toy shops sell road safety signs, car mats and toy cars and you may find it useful to play out different scenarios to show your son why it is dangerous to run out into the road.

Sometimes it can be easier to adapt the environment rather than the person's behaviour. For example, a number of companies sell alarms and locks for doors and windows that will go off when someone opens the door, or will only open a window a small amount.

## **STRANGER DANGER**

Teaching children about “stranger danger” is about teaching the possible dangers they may face as they are out in the world. But, this is not as simple as saying, “Don't talk to strangers.” For example, you could tell children that it is safe to talk to strangers when they are with a grown-up they know (such as when a child is with Mum at the grocery store and the nice older woman asks what her name is).

We need to teach our children to be functionally weary of strangers. It's important that children feel confident rather than fearful. Having information will help them know what to do rather than being afraid if a stranger approaches them.

The following information applies for ALL children, but is particularly relevant to many children/young adults with Autism. Also, as in the information above, using Social Stories™ to reinforce your message would be a very beneficial thing to do.

## Educating children on good vs. bad strangers

Children should be taught that not all people they don't know are dangerous. They need to know the difference between "good strangers" and "bad strangers". They should know that there really are more good people than bad and that, occasionally, kids may need to approach a stranger for help. They may get lost in a store and need help finding you. Teach your children about the best possible stranger to approach for help.

When in public, a good rule of thumb is to teach children to ask an employee (who is easily identified by a uniform or name badge). If your child cannot find an employee, or is not lost in a store, they are better off approaching a woman for help. Although female 'predators' exist, they are far less common than male 'predators'. Also, approaching a Mum with children is usually a good bet.

### Ploys by 'Predators' and What to Do

Some strangers can be very persuasive. Tell your children that adults don't usually need help from a child. It makes more sense for them to ask another adult for directions, finding a lost pet, etc. Children should be taught to never go anywhere with an adult they don't know.

Predators can be sneaky. They may tell your child that he is a friend of yours and you sent him to pick up your child. Or, the predator may tell your child that you have been injured or are sick and the child has to come with the predator to come see you.

### ***What to tell your child if you can't pick him up:***

Explain to your child that you will never send anyone he doesn't know to pick them up. Tell them if anyone says otherwise, the person is lying and they should get away from the stranger as fast as they can.

If you don't have a group of trusted people who could pick up your child in an emergency, choose a **password** that you will give to your child and the person picking up your child. The password should be something important to your family that would be difficult for a stranger to guess.

Tell your child never to go with anyone who doesn't know the password and change the password frequently.

## 9 Stranger Danger Tips to Teach Your Children

1. Know your name, address, and phone number (this will help if the child needs help from the police to get home or contact you).
2. Never walk anywhere alone (this is great for older kids too).
3. Trust your instincts. If you feel you are being followed or something is not right, find help right away.
4. If a stranger approaches you, you do **not** have to speak to them.
5. Never **EVER** approach a stranger in a motor vehicle. Just keep walking.
6. Do not accept sweets/candy or other "presents" from a stranger.
7. Never walk off with a stranger - **no matter what!** (Unless they are a uniformed Policeman etc)
8. If someone is following you, try hard to remember the license plate of the vehicle and tell a trusted adult right away.
9. If a stranger grabs you, do anything you can to stop him from pulling you away or dragging you into their car. Drop to the ground, kick, hit, bite, and scream. Get the attention of others who can help you. Scream out, "This is not my Dad," or "This is not my Mum!"

With children who have Autism, many of the above can present great problems. Using the aforementioned Social Stories™ CAN POSITIVELY REINFORCE the content of the message and its importance. But remember – ASD children can be VERY literal in what is said to them! You must remain calm and factual so as not to cause undue stress and worry, while simultaneously emphasising the importance of your message. This can often be a very difficult balancing act!

Given that a great many of our youngsters with Autism can be very, VERY literal in their interpretation of the things we say, here is one mother's views and thoughts about Stranger Danger!...

### **“Everyone is a Stranger at First!”**

My boy is 11 and I thought that by now all the years and years of us reading Social Stories™ and role playing would have sunken in. I thought he would have understood the concept of Stranger Danger; I couldn't have been more wrong!

Recently, I watched my boy approach a strange man in a park sitting on a bench who had called him over. The minute it took me to race across the field was pure hell. When I reached my boy and dragged him away loudly stating so the man would hear that “WE DON'T TALK TO STRANGERS” there were tears in my eyes.

I thought it could not get any worse, until my boy looked at me confused and very innocently said, “But Mummy, he told me his name. He is not a stranger anymore. How will I ever meet any new friends if I do not talk to strangers? Everyone is a stranger at first!”

I knew then that I needed to figure out a different way to make my boy comprehend this concept.

### **How to Teach about Strangers**

Below is what I came up with after much research and after many conversations with both my children. It is not perfect, it is not a one size fits all solution to the problem, but it is a start. Read it and then please... TALK TO YOUR KIDS!

What is a Stranger? I realised that my son needed a more defined idea of what a stranger is.

Pattie Fitzgerald from Safely Ever After suggests that we replace the word “Stranger” with “TRICKY PERSON”.

She goes further as to say that we need to remind our kids that: “It's not what someone looks like, it's what they say or want to do with a child that makes them unsafe or ‘TRICKY’.”

### **Safe Strangers, Safe Buildings.**

Since many of our kids are rule followers, we can use that to our benefit. However, we need to be careful how we do it. Telling them, “We never talk to strangers” could actually be dangerous.

What if they get lost, or someone IS trying to hurt them? Some safety experts point out teaching children that a police officer is the only person they can reach out to for help is not a good idea as one may not be around when a child is lost or needs help. Instead children should be taught that if they are lost, they should find a store and ask a member of staff or someone in charge for help, or ask a mother with children.

### **The Never, Never Rule.**

There is one rule that we CAN and should install that can help keep our kids safe. Fitzgerald calls it the NEVER NEVER RULE.

“Never: accept sweets/candy or treats, enter someone's home, go for a walk, or get in a car with someone unless you have your parent's permission FIRST.”

I have my own Never Rule too. I will NEVER EVER just assume that my kids get it. I will continue to revisit the idea of “TRICKY PEOPLE” often. I hope you will too.

Sharon Fuentes

Certainly ‘food for thought’! ☺