

PERSONAL SAFETY GUIDELINES: HELPING ADULTS EDUCATE CHILDREN & TEENS

Primary prevention stops harm before it happens—meaning it prevents those who hurt others from doing so. Sadly, children and teens are harmed each day and must be protected from people willing and able to hurt them. Protecting children and teens from violence and inappropriate sexuality is up to adults. Our job is to be aware of warning signs and hurtful behavior, to know how to respond to potentially dangerous or harmful behavior in children and adults, to supervise and guide our own children and teens, and to help protect all children in our communities.

While it is not up to children to protect themselves, there are skills they should be taught so they know how to help. Teaching personal safety to children and teens is not a one-time conversation. Rather, JWF encourages adults to discuss personal safety as often as possible and in a positive manner. It is important to provide children and teens with multiple opportunities to develop and practice their ability to distinguish between *safe and unsafe situations, not people*. One of the most valuable outcomes of these ongoing personal safety discussions is maintaining a close relationship with children that will serve to guide and protect them throughout their youth. Use these guidelines to start personal safety conversations with children and teens:

SET THE TONE

Encouraging children and teens to talk about personal safety requires a calm, open and responsive tone. Children and teens need to know that they can speak with the trusted adults in their lives about safety and sexuality. By bringing up personal safety topics often, adults reinforce their willingness and receptivity to talk about these important topics. Remember to tell children and teens that they are loved unconditionally and will always be loved no matter what happens or what kinds of questions they ask.

USE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

It is important for adults to be open to questions and stories about bodies, touching, privacy and personal space. Experts highly recommend that adults teach correct names for private body parts along with accurate names for other body parts. Additionally, adults should use language that is respectful of all backgrounds and experiences. Children learn tolerance, acceptance and empathy from adults who reinforce positive social behaviors.

The language you use to talk to children about safety should be age-appropriate, cognitively appropriate, and emotionally appropriate. Do not assume that because a child has good verbal skills that he/she can be spoken to like an adult.

MONITOR YOUTH ACTIVITIES

Adults are responsible for monitoring children's activities. Not only should adults be aware of where children are at all times, they should also pay attention to what types of television shows they watch, computer games they play, music they listen to, friends they spend time with, etc. Staying involved in children's and teens' lives helps adults to better guide their decision making, problem solving and safety planning and identify potentially risky behaviors.

KNOW THEIR FRIENDS

Children spend lots of time with friends and at friends' homes. Parents and caregivers should know their children's friends' names, addresses, phone numbers and email addresses, parents' names and parents' contact information. Additionally, parents and caregivers should share their family rules with children's friends and their parents so that clear expectations and guidelines for behavior are established.

SET APPROPRIATE LIMITS

Children and teenagers thrive when there are clear boundaries and rules to guide their actions and decisions. Help children navigate the world more safely by establishing and posting understandable rules for your family. For example, establish rules about the type and the amount of time children are allowed to play video games, watch television and/or use the computer. Likewise, children need to know how to set and respect personal space boundaries.

TEACH CHILDREN: HOW TO RESPOND

Children and teens should be taught how to respond to peers and adults in potentially harmful or uncomfortable situations. Children are often confronted with peer pressure, bullying, violence, and potentially harmful sexuality. Adults should spend time talking to children about how they can safely respond to these situations so that they don't experience or perpetuate harm.

TEACH CHILDREN: TO DO NO HARM

Just as children and teens should be taught how to avoid risky or dangerous situations, they also need to be taught to help protect others by not perpetrating violence or participating in harmful behaviors. For example, children should be taught not to bully or intimidate anyone, not to share secrets or gossip about others, and not to forward harmful or explicit materials online. Children and teens need to be aware that emotional, physical and sexual violence are all harmful behaviors that are in many cases illegal.

TEACH CHILDREN: HOW TO SPEAK UP

Children and teens need to be taught how to be engaged bystanders who know what to do when they see potentially harmful or dangerous situations. Teach children to tell trusted adults immediately if they witness or hear about situations that seem unsafe or are sexually inappropriate or confusing. Remind children that they are part of a larger community that cares about and protects each other.

PERSONAL SAFETY RULES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS

Few parents can conjure thoughts and images more frightening than the abduction and/or harm of their children. For most parents these fears result in brief, directive exchanges instructing their children never to talk to strangers. Unfortunately, stranger danger education is difficult for children to comprehend and not based on facts about missing and sexually exploited children and teens. Instead of teaching stranger danger, use these rules to help protect and guide children and teens:

CHECK FIRST

Children and teens should be taught to check first with parents and caregivers before going anywhere with anyone, accepting gifts, or allowing someone to photograph them. Additionally, children should check first with parents before sharing any private information including their home address and telephone number or school name.

HANG-OUT IN GROUPS

Encourage children and teens to walk to and from school, wait at the bus stop, go out into the community, and spend recreational time in groups. Parents should know the names, phone numbers, and email addresses of all children's and teens' friends and their parents and/or caregivers.

TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

Teach younger children how to recognize their instincts and what to do if they are scared or confused. All children, teens and parents should honor their instincts in determining safe versus unsafe situations.

TELL ALL SECRETS

Children and teens should be taught the difference between secrets and surprises (surprises are kept quiet for a short time and never harm anyone, like a surprise birthday party). Children should *never* be asked to keep secrets.

SAY NO, GET AWAY, TELL AN ADULT

When a child feels uncomfortable, is touched inappropriately or is otherwise harmed, he/she needs to be taught to say 'no' loudly. Then he/she should get away from the situation and tell a trusted adult immediately.

DIAL 911 IN EMERGENCIES

All children and teenagers need to know how to call 911 for emergency situations. Children should be taught that 911 calls are free from any phone, what types of information the 911 operator will need, and not to hang up until told to do so by the operator.

KNOW ALL ABOUT YOU

Children and teens need to know their phone number, address, parents' or caregivers' numbers, along with other important contact information like their school information and numbers of trusted adults or neighbors.

REMEMBER THE 3 ONLINE SAFETY RULES

Children and teens need to be taught 1) never to give out personal information online; 2) not to meet online friends in person without a parent or caregiver; 3) to tell a trusted adult if they receive online communication that is scary, confusing or harmful.

REPORT SCARY OR EXPLICIT EMAILS

Children, teens and parents should report all scary, confusing or sexually explicit emails to www.cybertipline.com or 1-800-THE-LOST. Additionally, online communication that contains references to violence or the intent to harm anyone should be reported to local law enforcement authorities.

FIND FIVE TRUSTED ADULTS

Parents/caregivers should help children and teens develop a list of five trusted adults and their phone numbers so that they can contact them if they ever need additional help or guidance.

PLAY WHAT IF GAMES

Play what if the games with children to teach and reinforce safety and healthy sexuality messages.

Log on to the JWF website www.jwf.org or call 800.325.HOPE [local 651.714.4673] for more information.