

Do your children know what to do when they encounter a stranger? Are you comfortable letting them answer the phone, go to a friend's house to play, or stay home alone?

Go over the following safety tips with your children, using familiar examples (such as your home, their school, and whatever paths they might take to get from place to place) to which they will relate and understand. Make sure that your children know their safety is important to you, and encourage discussion. Remember, the idea is not to make your kids paranoid, but to make them smart and safe.

### Defining "Stranger"

Anyone that your child does not know is a stranger. This includes grocery store cashiers, people walking down the street, and even policemen. Explain to your children that strangers come from all walks of life, and may wear nice clothes, dirty clothes, or even a uniform. Since uniforms can confuse the issue for children, particularly younger children, help them to understand that the mail carrier, even though he or she comes every day, is also a stranger.

Also teach your children the difference between "okay" strangers and "unknown" strangers. Examples of "okay" strangers include law enforcement officials, firemen, nurses and other medical staff, and school bus drivers. "Unknown" strangers include just about anyone else, even some who may wear uniforms such as delivery men or repair crews. "Okay" strangers are called that because it's "okay" for your child to go to them if they need help, while it's "unknown" if it's okay to do so with an "unknown" stranger.

### The Stranger Rules

Teach your child the following safety rules when dealing with strangers. Of course, this isn't to say that your children can't or shouldn't be nice and polite, but they need to be smart.

- Never talk to strangers.

- Never take anything from a stranger, such as candy, treats, or money, unless you have your parents' specific permission.

- Never accept a ride from a stranger.

- If a stranger asks you for directions, stay away and find a trusted adult. Strangers shouldn't be asking kids for directions.

- Never tell a stranger your name, or where you live.

- Never tell anyone that you are home alone. If someone calls on the phone or knocks on the door, tell them that Mom or Dad is busy and take a message.

- If a stranger in a car is bothering you, turn and run the other way.

- If a stranger tries to follow you on foot or tries to grab you, RUN, SCREAM, and find a trusted adult or your parents and tell them what happened. Dangerous strangers don't like being the center of attention.

### Safe at Home

Even if your children don't spend time at home alone, they should still know the following rules about answering the door or the telephone. You might be in the backyard or upstairs, but to a dangerous stranger, that might be just as good as you being gone.

- Never open the door to a stranger.

- When someone knocks on the door or rings the doorbell, look through the peephole and call out "Who's there?" If it's for Mom or Dad, tell the person to wait, and leave the door locked while you go get Mom or Dad. If Mom and Dad aren't home, tell the person that they're busy and to come back later. If it's important, you can take a message, but NEVER open the door. (Parents: you may want to leave a stepstool near the front door for smaller children to look through the peephole.)

- If the person at the door won't go away, or if they start banging on the door or trying the doorknob, and you get scared, call 911.
- Don't give out information over the phone. If someone calls and asks "Who's this?" don't give out your name, but ask for the caller's name and whom they're calling.
- Just like at the door, never tell anyone over the phone that you're home alone. Tell them that Mom or Dad is busy, and take a message.
- If you ever get uncomfortable or scared by anything that the caller says, hang up the phone (don't worry about being rude!).
- Always tell Mom or Dad about all phone calls, even if they don't make you uneasy.
- If your parents have an answering machine, let it pick up instead so that you don't have to deal with it.

### **Street Smarts**

Being safe outside is just as important as being safe at home. Make sure your children understand how to stay safe, and what to do if that safety is ever compromised.

- Always walk with a friend. Remember there is safety in numbers: dangerous strangers usually pick on kids walking alone.
- Always stop and look both ways before crossing the street. Only cross at corners, never in the

middle of the block. Make sure that there are no cars coming or that they are stopped for you before crossing. If the intersection has a crosswalk signal, use it and wait for it to change to "walk" before stepping out into the street.

- Have your mom or dad (or both) walk with you along your school route, and the routes to friends' houses that can't be seen from your front yard, to make sure that it's completely safe.
- Stick to the same, safe routes. Don't take shortcuts. Never hitchhike. If you take a different path, and something happens, no one will know where to find you.
- If you think that you are being followed, find a trusted adult or go into school or the nearest store, and tell them what's happening.
- If you ever feel scared, or that you are in danger in any way, RUN, SCREAM, and find a trusted adult right away. Remember, dangerous strangers don't like attention.

### **In an Emergency**

Teach your children about calling 911. Explain to them that if someone gets hurt or very sick, if there's a fire, a car accident, or other similar occurrence, or if they get lost, they can call 911 from any phone, for free, including pay phones. Make sure to also explain to them that 911 is serious, and it's not funny to prank call it—their prank 911 call could tie up the line for someone who really needs it.