



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Growing Independence and Staying Safe

Talking about safety with your child is never one and done. For a toddler, safety means getting buckled into the car seat for every ride. For a teenager, it means calling a parent to pick them up in a situation that's too much for them. There's a lot to talk about in between. And it's never too early to start.

As the parent of a young child, you are used to knowing where they are and who they're with. As kids get more independent, you may worry about the people and situations they'll encounter when you're not nearby. Here are some tips for helping children handle these situations safely.

Say no

You can begin by teaching a toddler that their body belongs to them. They get a say in who touches them and when. This introduces the idea of boundaries and consent long before a child reaches their teenage years.

Things to practice:

- **Don't force your child to greet relatives with a hug.** You can give them a choice of a high five, a wave, or whatever suits them.
- **Teach that "no" and "stop" are powerful words.** Encourage kids to speak up when they don't want to be touched or tickled.
- During required activities like bathing and dressing, **offer your child small choices.** "Do you want to wash your hair first or your arms?" These choices show children that their feelings matter.

Don't go

Young children are curious and trusting. You may worry that they will follow anyone, anywhere. Young children do best with simple rules. "Always check with me before going anywhere or taking anything. It doesn't matter who is asking."

Things to practice:

- **Play pretend to help your child learn what to do.** Try asking, "What would you do if someone you did not know asked you to come see their puppy?" "What if they offered you a mountain of ice cream? A chance to meet a real princess?" Keep it playful, with lots of chances to practice.
- **Make sure your child care provider knows who is allowed to pick your child up.** Alert them to any custody issues that limit access to your child.
- **Make up a family code word and teach it to your child.** Share that word with any adult sent to pick them up. Teach your child: If the person does not know the word, do not go with them.



Do tell

In reality, “stranger danger” is very unlikely. Most harm to children comes from someone they already know — a friend, neighbor, or family member. Encourage your child to tell you about anything that makes them uncomfortable.

Things to practice:

- **Use correct, clear language for body parts.** Just as we teach children names for “head,” “shoulders,” and “toes,” we should use accurate terms for male and female body parts. This helps children talk openly and safely about their bodies.
- **Teach children that no one can touch the private parts of their body.** Remind them they will not be in trouble for telling you if this happens.

Plan well

Losing sight of your child in a crowded store can be terrifying. Planning ahead can make it easier to find each other again.

Things to practice:

- **Teach children their full name and your phone number.**
- **Make a family plan for what to do if you get split up in a crowd.**
- **Go over the plan before busy outings like a fair or a store.**
- **Let your child know that it’s okay to ask a stranger for help in an emergency.** If your child gets lost, they can look for a family with children nearby.

Teaching children about safety is one of the most loving things a family can do. Children feel more secure when they know what to do in new situations. Safety talks work best when they happen in small pieces over time.

Have more questions?

Talk to your baby’s healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

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