

Security Check...does your preschooler know these five essential rules?

By Liza N. Burby, *Parents.com*, *Parents Magazine*, January 2009

Worried your child might misinterpret well-intentioned warnings about strangers, secrets, and other safety issues? Learn how to talk to kids about strangers to they'll be safe, not scared.

How to Talk About Strangers

You're always happy to see your child bound up to another kid on the playground and make a new pal. But it's a little unnerving when your preschooler approaches an adult he doesn't know and starts chatting away. "Social skills and independence blossom at ages 4 and 5," says Charles Shubin, MD, associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Maryland in Baltimore. "Even a kid who used to hide behind your leg six months ago may now feel comfortable engaging anybody and everybody she meets."

That makes these years prime time to talk about safety. But many parents don't know exactly what to say. Young kids can be frightened if you don't choose your words carefully. And they can misinterpret well-intentioned warnings about strangers, secrets, and other safety issues. So it's smart to establish specific rules and explain them in a nonthreatening way. If you're feeling tongue-tied, our advice can help get the ball rolling.

Instead of: Don't talk to strangers

Say: Check with me or your dad or your babysitter before talking to another grown-up.

"The concept of a stranger can be hard for a young child to grasp," says Nancy McBride, safety director for the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, in Alexandria, Virginia.

"For instance, your kid may see the clerk at the bank more often than he sees his aunt who lives across the country." So rather than relying on a 4-year-old's interpretation, McBride says it's best to have your child get permission from you before he strikes up a conversation or goes anywhere with any adult other than his parents. You could instruct your child to ask if it's okay or to look at you and you'll nod or shake your head.

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Instead of: Don't take candy from a stranger

Say: Don't take anything from anyone except your parents, babysitter, teacher, or friend's mom or dad on a playdate.

"Kids this age are very literal," says Dr. Shubin. "So when you warn them not to accept candy, they're not likely to interpret it to also mean that they shouldn't take a balloon or crayons." So it's best to tell your child to check with you before accepting anything. To make sure your kid gets it, role-play a few scenarios. For instance, pretend to be a stranger who asks your child if she wants a cookie. Even if your daughter says "No thanks," see how she'll react when pushed. Counter with "I asked your mom and she thinks it's okay" to see whether she'll give in or hold firm.

Instead of: Don't leave my sight

Say: Don't go where you can't see me.

"When you ask some children who wandered off from their parents why they strayed away, they'll tell you they thought their parents could still see them," says Michelle Lubahn, health and wellness coordinator for Children's Hospital of Orange County, in Orange, California. That's why kids need specific boundaries. "If you're at the park, for example, you may tell them 'You can play on the swings and slides here. But if you want to go elsewhere, tell me and I'll come with you,'" says Lubahn.

Instead of: Don't keep secrets

Say: A surprise is the only secret that's okay to keep.

Some parents use the two terms interchangeably -- and that confuses kids. If you tell your child to keep a secret about Daddy's birthday gift or Grandma's party, you are undermining the rule that no grown-up should ever tell you to keep a secret from your mom or dad. At this age, especially, you want to send the unambiguous message that Mom and Dad have a right to know everything anyone says or does to him.

And...try these great publications to help your kids learn about stranger safety:

Once Upon a Dragon, Jean E. Pendziwol

Stranger Safety, John Walsh & Julie Clark

Never Talk to Strangers, Irma Joyce

What's the Safest Thing to Do? Safety Tots International

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