



STRANGER DANGER

Part of teaching children about safety includes teaching them about the potential danger of strangers. Teaching a child on the autism spectrum about “stranger danger” and how to react in a dangerous situation is complicated by social and communication difficulties. However, it is particularly important given the high rate of autistic children who wander away. Additionally, children on the autism spectrum are more likely to be alone than with friends as they get older and more independent, thus creating more opportunity for abduction or assault.

Begin by teaching your child who is a stranger.

A simple definition of “stranger” is someone who is not well-known to the child and the child’s family. Just because someone knows your child’s name does not make them familiar. Similarly, if the stranger tells your child his name or wears a name badge, it does not mean the person is no longer a stranger. You should review with your child who you consider to be “well-known,” and perhaps have pictures of them to review. (Visuals are often helpful in teaching children on the autism spectrum.) You might want to include examples of people who are not well-known to your family, such as those you might pass on the street. Make sure your child understands that a stranger doesn’t necessarily look “strange.” The stranger may dress and look like everyone else.

Also, make sure your child realizes that strangers are also people that your child may interact with online, such as through online video games or chat rooms. Your child should never give out his or her real name, age, and location to anyone online. Often children, particularly children on the autism spectrum, think that they are “friends” with online gaming partners or chat room participants. It is important that your child understands that these individuals are strangers and may not be who they appear or claim to be. Autistic individuals are often very trusting, so this may not be an easy concept to understand.

Distinguish between “safe” strangers and everyone else.

Safe strangers are people your child can ask for help if your child is lost, scared, or threatened. These include uniformed police officers, firemen, and security guards, teachers, and store clerks behind a cash register. A safe stranger will never try to harm your child. If a “safe stranger” ever tries to hurt your child, including improper touching, your child should not consider the person “safe” any longer. When you are in the community with your child, practice pointing out “safe strangers” so your child recognizes one when and if he or she needs to rely on one for help.

Teach your child what to do when approached by a stranger.

Many parents simply teach the rule: “Don’t talk to strangers.” But this simply isn’t enough. For one thing, there are times when it is okay to talk to strangers, for example when the stranger is with a trusted adult, such as mom or dad, or when the stranger is a safe stranger, such as the clerk at McDonalds or a security guard if the child is lost.

Teach your child never to accept candy or presents from a stranger, not to approach a car of someone if they are not sure who is in the car and that the person is “safe,” and never to walk off with a stranger. Though you have likely spent countless hours teaching your child to respond when spoken to, it is important to teach your child that it is sometimes okay not to respond. If your child feels unsafe, he or she should run away from the stranger. If your child is verbal, teach your child to say “NO!” Additionally, saying, “This is not my mom/dad” or making other noise will usually draw the attention of other adults in the area who can help or who will at least deter the stranger from approaching your child. Whenever possible, your child should run to a public place and ask for help from a “safe stranger.”

Role play different scenarios to help your child prepare for situations that are likely to occur. You may also want to use Social Stories™ to help your child learn about stranger danger. Some of the situations you may want to review include online interactions, someone looking for help finding a lost dog or asking for directions, or someone offering your child a ride. Teach your child warning signs of danger, such as an adult asking your child to disobey his or her parents or to act without permission, someone asking your child to keep something a secret, or anytime an

unknown adult asks a child for help. Also practice how your child will communicate with the “safe stranger,” taking your child’s verbal abilities into account. Even children who are typically very verbal may have trouble communicating when under stress. At least having a form of identification to show will be a start, particularly if it mentions that your child has a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and may have trouble communicating.

Related Articles:

- [Elopement](#)
- [Bullying](#)

Additional Resources:

- [What to Teach Kids About Strangers](#)
- [Stranger Danger Role Playing Scenarios](#)

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