

Teaching Safety Skills to Our Children



by JULIE LOWE

For over twenty years I have worked with numerous churches, ministries, and families after the children under their care experienced abuse and mistreatment. I have met with many parents who ask heart-wrenching questions. They wonder how their child could have gotten caught up in online bullying, sexting, pornography, or grooming by a pedophile.

Parents and caregivers whose children have been victimized or hurt in some way struggle to understand how such grievous wrongs occurred. Was there something they could have done to prevent it? Did they miss warning signs? Are they responsible for their child's struggles? It is distressing to evaluate such events in hindsight.

These questions are then followed up with: What can we do now? How can we prevent this in the future? The alarming statistics related to child sexual abuse, online predation, severe bullying by peers, and other behaviors lead thoughtful parents to ask: How do we protect children and young people from such things? How do we proactively put safeguards in place to protect our children from the dangers of this world?

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The Bible teaches us that wise people see the potential for danger and take measures to protect themselves. Wise people are cautious and discerning and turn from evil. Those who do not act with such wisdom are called naive, simple, and foolish, and they suffer for it. Clearly, nothing good comes from being unaware of the danger that exists in our world. Yet, all too often, parents are unwilling to face these realities and conceal them from their children. But if we only shelter our children and do not equip them to act in wisdom, we inadvertently raise naive, simple children who do not know how to make sense of evil or wisely navigate it.

We do not want our kids to be afraid of strangers; we want them to be equipped to interact with any adult, when necessary.

God calls parents to protect and equip their children, who are born weak and vulnerable. In this article, I seek to help you in that task by applying biblical principles that result in common sense and practical strategies that will help safeguard your children so they can thrive. We will first consider how to teach kids to accurately evaluate the behavior of others, and then we will turn to the value of using role-play to reinforce that skill.

Teaching Kids to Evaluate Behavior

“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:43–45)

In this passage, Jesus teaches that what is true about people’s intentions—good or bad—can be seen in what they do. Their behavior, he says, is the “fruit” of their lives. Yet, it is easy, even for adults, to overlook suspect behaviors and be misled by appearances or familiarity. This is even more true for children, and it is our task as parents to teach them how to be discerning.

Not long ago, I took my two boys to the pediatrician for their yearly checkups. The doctor was going through his normal routine of safety questions: Do you wear a helmet when you ride your bike? Do you wear a seat belt in the car? Do you know about stranger danger? At this question, my boys turned to look at me. I interjected, “Actually we don’t teach our kids stranger danger, because it is a myth.” “What do you mean?” he asked.

I explained that I was a counselor and that research showed children were more likely to be abused by people they know, not strangers. Instead, we teach our kids *how* to talk to strangers. Should they ever be lost or need help, they will need to be able to approach someone they don’t know to get help. We do not want our kids to be afraid of strangers; we want them to be equipped to interact with any adult, when necessary. There may be situations where they need to approach someone and ask for help, and they need to know what is appropriate to share or not share.

The statistics do not lie. Over 90% of the time, when children are molested, it’s by someone they know personally.¹ Yes, abductions do take place, however, time and time again, it is not a stranger approaching our children with the wrong intentions, it is someone they trust, such as an uncle, stepparent, grandparent, cousin, nephew, pastor, neighbor, or coach.

It is also difficult for young children to identify a stranger. Is the waitress in the restaurant a stranger? The bank teller or the store clerk? What about the mail carrier or neighbor down the street? Eventually, kids learn that either no one is a stranger, or everyone is untrustworthy. Neither option is helpful.

Author Gavin de Becker says this about the rule of never talking to strangers:

The rule is intended to provide protection in the event the child is alone somewhere, but because a parent is present, then what difference does it make if a young child speaks with a stranger? The irony is that if your

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Violence Prevention, *Fast Facts: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/fastfact.html>.

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