

## ***Teaching Kids How to Stay Safe***

“The door to safety swings on the hinges of common sense.”—Anonymous

It’s tempting to teach kids safety with one phrase: Watch out for stranger danger. Yet, according to the Mayo Clinic, strangers commit only 15 percent of kidnappings. Plus, you want your kid to protect themselves in many ways, not just from kidnappers. Although the world can sometimes seem scary, you can teach your kids how to protect themselves. Here’s how.

### ***Try it...***

#### ***For all parents***

- When teaching kids how to protect themselves, don’t frighten them. Don’t tell them about terrifying news, frightening stories, and scary statistics. Instead, build their confidence by building their skills.
- Build the [40 Developmental Assets](#) in your kids. According to the Jacob Wetterling Foundation, “Adults can protect their children from victimization by giving them positive identities and values, appropriate boundaries and expectations, and the support they need to flourish.” These are all categories of Developmental Assets.
- Teach kids to pay attention to what scares them. Gavin de Becker, the author of [The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us from Violence](#) suggests that we pay attention to when our hearts race, when we get nagging feelings, and when we hesitate. These all could signal that something is wrong and we need to pay attention.
- If you’re divorced and have a contentious relationship with your ex, your ex could be the biggest threat to your child. Keep tabs on your ex. Be clear at school, child care, and other places where your child goes if your ex is not supposed to pick up or visit your child.
- Monitor your children regularly. While you teach kids skills on how to protect themselves, they still need caring adults who know where they are going, who they are with, and what they are doing. This includes when kids are at home and surfing the Internet or they’re quiet behind closed doors. Yes, kids need their privacy, but as a parent, you should have a good idea of what they’re up to.

#### ***For parents with children ages birth to 5***

- Monitor young children at all times. They need constant supervision. Young children can easily wander off (or disappear) within moments.
- If you need a break from parenting, find a caring, responsible adult (or teenager) who can play with and supervise your young child well. The early-childhood years

can be hard on parents because of the constant supervision and care, so give yourself breaks to be at your best when you are with your kids.

- Create a warm, loving, safe home so that your child is relaxed most of the time. The kids who have a hard time discerning between threatening people and nonthreatening people tend to be the kids who grow up in chaos and stress.

### ***For parents with children ages 6 - 9***

- Be clear who your child should and should not talk to during times away from home. For example, if your child rides the bus, teach your child to take the right bus and to walk straight to school (or straight home) afterward. For young children, it helps if you (or another adult) can wait with your child at the bus stop before school (and meet your child after school).
- Encourage your child to play with or near other children when they're outside or away from home. Explain that kids are safer in groups than when they're alone.
- With your child, locate the McGruff safe houses in your neighborhood. (They have a sign in the front window or door with a picture of the McGruff dog.) Say that if your child ever feels uncomfortable and cannot find you, it's best to go to a McGruff house. If you haven't met this neighbor, do so *before* you need it. Visit the McGruff Web site for more [tips about McGruff houses](#).

### ***For parents with children ages 10 - 15***

- Be clear that your child is not to make arrangements or meet anyone in person that they discovered through the Internet. This is the area that concerns experts the most since kids at this age often don't talk as much with their parents and become curious about people online.
- Continue getting to know the friends of your child—and also the parents of your child's friends. Some kids find new friends at this age, and since they're more independent, it's easy not to know most of their friends.
- As your child becomes older, be more frank about your safety concerns (but don't overdo it, or your child may dismiss you). Be factual and non-emotional when you state your concerns, such as saying, "I hear that some kids are drinking alcohol at parties and then having sex because they get caught up in the moment. I'm worried that this could happen to you."
- Give your child an easy way to say no to uncomfortable situations. If they have a hard time being honest or standing up for themselves (which can happen during the self-conscious teen years), give them options, such as "I have to go home now" or "I feel sick" or "My mother would kill me." Then make sure you can pick your child up right away (or know another trusted adult who can) if your child calls, asking for help.

### ***For parents with children ages 16 - 18***

- Continue talking about the safety issues that affect older teenagers and adults. For example, once kids get their driver's license, many don't realize how many accidents occur after dark and with a lot of teenagers in the car. Visit [TeenDriving.com](#) for [driving safety tips](#).
- If one of your teenager's classmates is in an accident or dies, attend school events or visit the hospital of the injured teen. Even though these are difficult situations, don't insulate your teenager from them. They shape everyone's attitudes and

actions.

- Kids at this age often feel invincible and dismiss their “old foggy” parents’ safety concerns. Notice when your teenager takes precautions and say how much you appreciate your teen making smart choices. Try to give more positive feedback than negative feedback—it is the best way to get through to kids this age.