

Talking About Personal Safety With Young Children

Montreal, March 22, 2018. In light of the recent disappearance of Ariel Jeffrey Kouakou, safety concerns have never been more on the minds of parents. During times of crisis we are often reminded of the importance of teaching children about personal safety. As adults, we often hesitate discussing the risks of abuse and abduction with our children, feeling that we may frighten them or destroy their sense of joy of the world. The Missing Children's Network urges parents to make safety education an ongoing dialogue in their homes.

Safety education helps build a child's confidence and critical thinking skills and prepares them for dangerous situations that they may encounter when home alone, surfing the Net, traveling to-and-from school or getting lost in public places. Adults need to empower children with age-appropriate information without inciting panic or fear. In times of crisis, it is important to re-establish a child's sense of security.

The Missing Children's Network recommends that parents take this time to have open and honest discussions with their child and review the following safety strategies:

- **Always Check First**
 - You must always know where your child is, as well as keep him informed of your whereabouts. Establish an information/communication centre in the house where every member of the family can leave messages.
- **Buddy System - There is safety in numbers.**
 - A child that is accompanied by a friend is less likely to be accosted by an individual with questionable intentions.
- **Say No!**
 - Teach your child that he has the right to say **NO!** to anyone and in any situation that leaves him feeling confused, scared or threatened.
- **Keeping a Safe Distance.**
 - Make sure your child understands that he does not have to engage in conversations with adults that approach him and to always keep a safe distance of at least three giant steps between himself and someone he doesn't know or who makes him feel uncomfortable.
 - If someone physically grabs your child or tries to force him into a vehicle, instruct your child to scream, "***This is not my father/mother! I need help!***"
- **Where to go for help if needed.**
 - Teach your child to always stay on the designated route when walking to and from school and identify safe places along the route where he can seek refuge if he needs help: (Stores, offices, fast food outlets, telephones where he can call 911).
- **Use a Secret Family Password to be Used in an Emergency Situation.**
 - Choose a password that is known only to you and your child to be used in any unexpected situations that may arise. Your child must always ask for this password before leaving with someone who claims to have been sent in your place.

- **Labelling Your Child’s Personal Belongings.**
 - Avoid identifying items with your child’s name clearly visible on them (lunch box, t-shirt, school bag, etc.) A child will respond more readily to a stranger if he is addressed by name.
- **Play “What if” Scenarios With Your Children.**

This technique is a valuable, educational tool because it fosters your child’s ability to develop problem-solving skills that will enable him to adopt sound safety habits for life. Your child’s autonomy and self-confidence will be enhanced and he will be able to make safe decisions when there is no adult present to guide him. Concepts practiced and rehearsed over a period of time increase personal safety in real-life situations.

Following are suggestions of *what-if* scenarios to discuss with your child:

- You are walking back from school and someone in a car stops to ask you for directions. What do you do?
- It is raining and you are waiting for your school bus. The mother of a student in your class offers to drive you home. What do you do?
- You are walking back from school and a neighbour invites you to his home in order to see his new puppy. What do you do?
- You are at the mall and an elderly person asks for your help to choose a gift for her grandson. What do you do?
- Your best friend asks you if you would accompany her as she wants to meet with a very cool friend she met on-line. What do you do?

For more information about our personal safety workshops that teach students from how to recognize and avoid potentially dangerous situations, please contact our offices at 514.843.4333 or visit our website at www.missingchildrensnetwork.ngo

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