

Articles from School Union Press

Keeping Kids Safe from Predators Online and Offline

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Technology & Kids

In today's world, technology is unavoidable. It's everywhere. Our children depend on it for their education, social interactions, and entertainment. As parents, we're constantly trying to find that balance of allowing kids to stay socially connected and current with technology, while also making sure they're not overusing it or engaging in risky behaviour.

Since most parents didn't grow up with this technology, it can be hard to see all risks.

In the following article you'll find some tips on how to keep kids safe online.

Jerry Sandusky, Michael Jackson, Mary Kay Letourneau. All of these individuals were accused and/or convicted of committing unspeakable crimes against children. While certainly upsetting, these high profile cases are a good opportunity to spark a conversation with your kids about staying safe, as *parents are the first and most powerful line of defense against predators*. When parents educate their children, and make home a safe place for kids to ask questions and talk about their experiences, children are less likely to become victims. Having a discussion with your child about online and offline safety isn't always easy or comfortable, but it is important.

Please note that the information contained in this article is an overview and does not account for every type of predator, every prevention method, or every possible warning sign of abuse. If you suspect that your child may be a victim, or that someone is attempting to victimize them, contact your local law enforcement or child protection agency immediately.

Children need facts and skills to protect themselves. They also need to know that you will calmly listen and understand what is going on, before reacting.

But I Don't Want to Scare Them

Talking about predators can be scary, especially for younger kids. So before you talk to your child, think about what you want to say, and how you want to say it. What do you want your child to learn? How will you help them learn that? How might your child react?

Let your child know that while most people wouldn't hurt them, there are some people who do the wrong thing. Tell them that you will always do your best to protect them. Remind them that one of the reasons you have rules and limits is to help keep them safe. Reassurance is key.

Encourage your child not to keep secrets, especially if the secret makes them feel weird, uncomfortable, nervous, or unsafe. Your child needs to know that they can tell you about these things, and that you can handle it calmly. Stress that you will love them, no matter what. The bottom line is that children need facts and skills to protect themselves. But, they also need to know that you will calmly listen and understand what is going on, before reacting.

Be mindful when sharing specific real-world examples. I remember being about 5-years-old and my mother telling me there was a kidnapper going around in a gray van taking children. This was absolutely terrifying! I don't remember much discussion about what I should do if approached, but I do remember being frightened for years. My point? Giving specific examples and no personal safety skills or reassurance can be very scary. Instead, if your child brings up a question, or if you see something on TV or in a movie, use these examples to talk about how your child can protect himself, how he should react if that happened in real life, and so on.

Teach Age-Appropriate Skills

Teaching your child specific, age-appropriate skills can help them stay safe. As children age, the knowledge and skills they need changes based on the risks they are likely to encounter. Teaching safety

is an ongoing process that can start as early as the pre-school years.

For example, young children need to know not to talk to strangers (and really understand what a stranger is). They should be taught not to get in a car with strangers and the tricks strangers might use to lure them, like candy, puppies, or “your mom asked me to come get you.” You can also show them what to do if a stranger approaches them in this manner, like yelling “No!” and trying to run.

Meanwhile, older children need to understand that online, not everyone is who they say they are. Talk with them about how to spot a possible predator (for instance, if someone online is asking for their picture). Explain what they should do if someone is making them uncomfortable (for example, they should always tell you, even if they know how to “block” that person).

Teens need to understand how using alcohol and drugs leave them vulnerable to sexual assault. Talk about how they might prevent someone from putting drugs in their beverages in order to later take advantage of them, like always keeping an eye on their drink.

Addressing the “It Won’t Happen to Me” Syndrome

Some younger children may be so innocent and naïve they have a hard time believing that someone could want to hurt them. Teens, on the other hand, can often feel invincible. While teens know that kids can and do get hurt, they think, “That will never happen to *me*.” You can’t change your child’s thinking, but you can use your actions to let them know that this is a serious issue.

When talking about serious subjects like safety, remove all distractions—the tone of the conversation should reflect the magnitude of its importance. Have the conversation at a time and place that will allow you to talk face-to-face, rather than in the car or by text. Turn off all electronics during the discussion.

Have clear rules and consequences. Let’s say the kids aren’t following your rules about using the internet; then perhaps they lose their computer privileges until they can show you they can make safe choices in other areas for a couple of days. Or, imagine your child takes off after school and doesn’t tell you where she is going. Maybe she loses her phone until she follows the rules for two days. If you’re uncomfortable about taking the phone away for safety reasons, contact your service provider to find out if “always allowed numbers” or other parental controls are available. *Actions speak louder than words; if your words and actions do not match, your child is likely to brush you off.*

Online Safety Precautions

Since kids of all ages go online (whether on the computer, through their gaming systems or even your smartphone), education about online safety is as important as safety in the community. Even very young kids need safety rules, such as what sites and apps are okay for them to use. Establish very clear expectations about the use of technology, backed by consistent consequences. Some rules to consider implementing with your kids:

- Do not talk online to someone they don’t know. Discuss with your kids what it means to “know” someone; give clear examples about who they can and can’t interact with online.
- Ignore “friend” requests from people they don’t know well. Be specific. Is someone who follows a friend-of-a-friend considered by you to be a person they “know well?”
- Do not share personal details, like where they live, go to school or play sports. Remember, online accounts are vulnerable to hacking—a complete stranger can literally hijack an account and chat, pretending to be your child’s friend. Even small bits of information shared in a public profile or postings can be put together to locate your child. Pictures and information you share can also be used to gain access to your child.

Other pro-active steps parents can take include:

- Educate yourself about the types of social media and other technology your kids are using. Learn how to use Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.
- Understand how privacy settings work—and check to make sure your child is using the strictest settings.
- Join the social networks your child is using and “follow” or “friend” them so you can monitor their activity.
- Limit internet access during late-night hours—or make it unavailable altogether. This may decrease

the possibility of encountering someone who is up to no good.

Keeping Kids Safe Offline

It's a sad reality that *most predators know their victim prior to committing an act of abuse*. They "groom" the victim and the victim's family over time. Grooming is a process by which a predator tests out likely victims, makes them feel special, and gains trust from the family and the child. It might start out with the predator initiating a hug. He then waits to see what the reaction is and slowly escalates his behavior over time to increase the intimacy of physical contact.

Talk with your kids about healthy boundaries: who is allowed to touch them, when, where and for what reasons. Who is it appropriate to wrestle with, horseplay with, shower with, share a bed with? Kids need to know that if a touch is unwanted or doesn't feel right, it's okay for them to tell that person to stop. Stress that *if it feels wrong, it probably is wrong*.

Signs that someone may be trying to initiate an inappropriate relationship with your child:

- Giving expensive gifts or special privileges
- Inviting the child to events while excluding others
- Offering to transport the child alone
- Inviting the child to their home
- Threats and explicit bribes
- Inviting the child to sleep in bed with them
- Inviting the child on one-on-one day or overnight trips.

If something or someone sends up a "red flag" for you, *think about who the person is and what their responsibility is to your child*. A coach or teacher has no responsibility to give your child a ride, and it crosses professional boundaries for them to single out a child for a gift.

Whenever possible, it's also a good idea to spend time with your child and their caretakers together, including babysitters, scout leaders, and so on. Pay attention to how the caretaker acts toward your child, and evaluate your child's response to see if he or she seems comfortable around that individual.

Talking about the fact that there are predators out there can be scary, but the cost of silence is too high. So talk with your child in a calm, age-appropriate way about healthy boundaries and how they can stay safe. A strong relationship, paired with coaching and training from you, will help ensure that your child knows what to do and feels secure coming to you with their questions and concerns.

Written by Sara Bean

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