



MEMORANDUM

To: Parents
From: S/HE staff
Re: Stranger Danger
Date: January 7, 2016

Most children who are molested are molested by people known to and trusted by the parent and the child. The sad truth is that the greatest threats to a child are those people who are supposed to love and care for them. Still, abductions by strangers do happen, and it is important to inform a child about the dangers strangers can impose. The problem is that these messages are not particularly effective. Click [here](#)¹ to see an experiment on the effectiveness of parental messaging on Stranger Danger.

Why do these messages fail? Foremost, lectures fail. Practice with positive reinforcement is needed. But how does a parent allow a child to “practice” stranger danger? Surprisingly, many opportunities exist but a parent must know how to use them.

Suppose Ms. Smith comes to the gate, a person who is known to the parent but not to the child. The child yells to mom “there’s a stranger at the gate!”

Here’s how most parents react: “Oh, honey, that’s just Ms. Smith. She’s not a stranger.” This is often said to placate Ms. Smith and in a way that shows the parent is embarrassed by the child’s reaction.

Ms. Smith then says something in a patronizing voice like “Honey, I’m not gonna bite ya”, while the parent nods sagely.

So what just happened? The parent just undermined what had been effective education about stranger danger, that’s what! The child also just learned that the stranger danger message wasn’t important, and that any alarm the child expresses about strangers will be met with parental embarrassment.

Even though no cause for alarm existed, the parent missed a golden opportunity to reinforce the stranger danger message by praising the child for his or her reaction.

Second, an appropriate and polite way for a child to respond to any person offering candy, the opportunity to find a lost puppy, or other rewards is to say “I have to ask my parents.” This message can be consistently reinforced,

¹ <http://www.littlethings.com/child-abduction/>.



MEMORANDUM

because people will, even in your presence, offer things to your child. And if your child fails to ask permission before taking what is offered, you can issue an appropriate sanction. If your child does ask permission, a habit is forming, which should receive positive reinforcement every time it happens.

Third, teach your child to play the odds if lost. A mommy with children is the safest bet for help, although no stereotype ensures complete safety. Your child should have your cell phone number memorized. A simple request of "I'm lost, can you call my mommy at [phone number] and let me talk to her" will save many people worry, especially you. You can also purchase dog tags or bracelets with your contact information on them. Your child should know that staying put and asking someone to make a call to your cell phone, rather than going someplace with a stranger, is the best way to find you.