

Copyright © 1991 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). All rights reserved. Viewers may download a single copy of this information for individual, personal use only and are not authorized to make any photocopies or other reproductions therefrom. Reproduction, transmission, reposting, or any other use of this information without the express written permission of NCMEC is strictly prohibited. Anyone interested in reproducing, transmitting, or reposting this information in any form or by any means should forward the fully completed "Reprint Request Form."

## **HOW TO KEEP YOUR CHILD SAFE: A Message to Every Parent**

By Daniel D. Broughton, M.D., and Ernest E. Allen, J.D.

About the authors...

DANIEL D. BROUGHTON, M.D., is a Pediatrician at The Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. ERNEST E. ALLEN, J.D., is President and Chief Executive Officer of National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Arlington, Virginia.

"Don't take candy from strangers." As adults, we can all remember our parents and teachers passing on these words of wisdom, with the hope and expectation that we would stay safe and avoid individuals who could cause us harm. Wouldn't it be wonderful if life were as simple as that? Unfortunately we now know that children are at substantial risk and that most of the individuals who perpetrate these crimes are not strangers in the eye and mind of the child.

Are traditional child safety messages effective, accurate, and complete? Do they warn children about real threats to their safety? Do they unduly frighten children and families? Are parents giving their children information that makes them more vulnerable to victimization, not less?

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) has reviewed existing research and assessed its own database of long-term nonfamily abduction cases to test long-standing child protection messages, as well as to provide a foundation on which to build positive, nonfear inducing, effective messages and safety tips for the future.

### **"STRANGER DANGER"**

Dr. David Warden, Psychologist at the University of Strathclyde in the United Kingdom, has evaluated the efficacy of child-safety programs. He emphasizes that the responsibility to identify a potential assailant cannot be left to the child alone, and was quoted in a 1990 *Times* article stating, "No matter how intelligent the child, he or she does not see the world through skeptical adult eyes."

Dr. Warden adds, "Children live very much in the present. They can't foresee someone's actions or judge their intentions, certainly not at primary school age. They have a very weak understanding of motives, they simply take someone at face value. The concept of stranger danger is difficult, because it clashes with the social constraints on children to be polite to adults. Research suggests that children don't really know what a stranger is. They feel that once someone tells his name, he ceases to be a stranger."

Dr. Ray Wyre, a noted authority on the treatment of sex offenders, stated in a 1991 *Sunday Times* article that “The first step in advising ‘never talk to strangers’ is to make sure that the child understands what a stranger is. Children might believe it means a person who looks odd, rather than someone they do not know.”

Dr. Wyre further observed that “a child’s image of a stranger is different from an adult’s. The person trying to ensnare them could seem caring and persuasive and not at all threatening. After ten seconds chat, they are no longer a stranger to a child.”

In the HBO television special, “How to Raise a Street Smart Child,” host Daniel J. Travanti asked, “Does your child know what a stranger is? The fact is most children just do not know. They think a stranger is someone threatening and evil. The problem with telling your children, ‘don’t talk to strangers’ is that the bad guys don’t always look bad.”

In the same HBO special, children provided their definitions of a stranger.

*A stranger sometimes wears a hat...sometimes a black or brown jacket and is a guy with a beard...some hair and a moustache and some glasses.*

*I have lots of versions. Aliens, regular strangers, robbers.*

*I think a stranger is like...a punk rocker [who] drinks beer all day and sits around in a vacant lot.*

*A stranger looks mean and ugly...a creep.*

*Mean. Hairy.*

*Big...bigger than you, bigger than most people.*

It is clear that the concept “stranger” is difficult for children to grasp. A neighbor, a familiar face in a child’s daily routine, someone the child’s parents know well enough to speak to or whose name the child knows is probably not viewed as a “stranger” by the child.

### **THE MYTH OF THE STRANGER**

Research on victim/offender relationship in child abduction/molestation cases is not new. In 1978 “A Study of the Child Molester: Myths and Realities,” co-authored by A. Nicholas Groth, Ann W. Burgess, H. Jean Birnbaum, and Thomas S. Gary was published in the *Journal of the American Criminal Justice Association*. Based upon a sample of 148 offenders who sexually assaulted underage persons and were sent for observation to a Massachusetts treatment facility, the research of Groth, et al., noted that only 29 percent of the offenders studied were complete strangers to their child victims. In 71 percent of the cases, the offender and victim knew each other at least casually, and in 14 percent of the cases the offender was a member of the child’s immediate family.

Interestingly, this research also examined several other traditional views or myths. Among them were the myth of

- the “dirty old man,” 71 percent of the subjects were younger than 35 years of age.

- retardation, 80 percent of offenders fell within the normal intelligence range.

In 1985 research was undertaken by Dr. Gene Abel of Emory University with a group of sex offenders. Funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, the research concluded that the typical sexual offender against children is male, begins molesting by age 15, engages in a variety of deviant behavior, and “molests an average of 117 youngsters, most of whom do not report the offense.”

The research found that

- those who attack young boys molest an average of 281.
- with the promise of confidentiality, offenders admit an average of 75 sex crimes each.
- by the time he reaches adulthood, the average pedophile has attempted more than 25 child molestations.
- of rapists, 26 percent began as pedophiles, 9 percent as voyeurs.

Dr. Abel emphasized that these offenders seek legitimate access to children. He wrote, “everyone is so surprised that a priest is a child molester, or that a school teacher is a child molester. I am flabbergasted that anyone would be surprised. Child molesters seek out jobs to access kids. That’s why they become pediatricians, child psychiatrists, and work in boys’ camps.”

## **FEAR**

Tragic and highly publicized child victimization cases have heightened the awareness of families regarding child safety, and simultaneously increased fear. Over the past two decades, research has demonstrated high concern and disproportionate fear among children and parents.

- In 1987 a Roper poll reported in *The Washington Post* that 76 percent of children “feared being kidnapped,” their number one concern.
- In a 1988 *Washington Post* article it was reported that Peter Hart found the second greatest perceived risk of parents regarding their children was “being kidnapped,” 37 percent.
- In a 1997 survey conducted by the Princeton Survey Research Association Poll and reported in *Newsweek*, the top worry of parents was the fear that their child might be kidnapped or become the victim of violent crime. In the same survey, parents’ fear that their child might become a victim of sexual abuse ranked fourth, just behind serious accident or illness.

In 1991 the Mayo Clinic pediatricians Gunnar B. Stickler, M.D.; Daniel D. Broughton, M.D.; and Anthony Alario, M.D.; in conjunction with Margery Salter, Ph.D.; published an extensive examination of the issue in *Clinical Pediatrics*. “Parents’ Worries About Children Compared to Actual Risks” reported that 72 percent of parents feared “that their child will be kidnapped by a stranger.”

Doctors Stickler, Broughton, Alario, and Salter stated that “parents worry excessively about

potential child-rearing problems that are sensationalized in the public media. For example, it is not uncommon for mothers to report that fears about abduction inhibit their ability to foster independence and self-reliance in their children.”

The Mayo Clinic research noted, “As in other violent crimes such as rape, physical abuse, and sexual abuse, a child is more likely to be abducted by someone known to the victim than by a stranger. Anticipatory guidance in these areas needs to be aimed more at interpersonal relationships than at ‘stranger danger.’”

Current research, including the U.S. Department of Justice’s *National Incidence Studies on Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART)* study, has made it clear that children are at risk and are being victimized in many ways. Therefore, it is imperative that families receive the best, most accurate, usable information, which does not frighten or alarm, but rather prepares children for the very real challenges they are likely to encounter at some point in their childhoods.

A decade ago child psychologist Robert L. Geiser authored the book titled *Hidden Victims* with the premise that children were being victimized in many ways, and that somehow people in the United States had missed it. In his introduction Geiser noted, “Social problems have an uncanny ability to survive most attempts to remedy them. Their first line of defense is to hide from public awareness and then later to spring onto the scene as full-blown crises.”

Today, the United States has awakened to the problem. In HBO’s “How to Raise a Street Smart Child,” Daniel J. Travanti observed, “Ignorance scares a child more than knowledge does.” The new challenge is to create awareness of the true nature of risk faced by children and to correct inaccurate or incomplete messages. The *NISMAART* data provide an important beginning in understanding the full range of the problem. Armed with data and a more accurate picture of those individuals who victimize children, we can provide positive, nonfearful, more effective information to families and children throughout the nation.

## **TRADITIONAL MESSAGES ARE EITHER WRONG OR INCOMPLETE**

For generations our fundamental messages to children have contained the three basic premises of

- “Don’t take candy from strangers.”

As has been demonstrated, in at least two thirds of the cases, the offender is not a stranger in the eye and mind of the child. The victim and offender know each other, at least casually. Most offenders seek legitimate access to children and then victimize them through a process similar to seduction.

This reality does not make the message wrong, only grossly inadequate and incomplete.

NCMEC urges that we eradicate the word “stranger” from the language, and prepare children more fully and completely to deal with the more frequent and likely situations they will face.

- “Don’t be a tattletale.”

One of the worst, most stigmatizing accusations that can be made against a child is that he or she is a “tattletale.” From their earliest moments, we consciously and subconsciously encourage children not to communicate. Thousands of children are hidden victims, and the key to prevention and detection is communication. Children must be taught that if something is happening in their lives that they do not feel right about, or makes them feel uncomfortable, they must tell somebody they trust.

It is essential that parents communicate to their children a basic message of love, power, and support. “I love you, I trust you, I believe you. If there is something that you do not feel right about, you can always come to me, and I will help.” Children must be empowered. They must always feel that they can talk to someone they trust, that they are not isolated and alone.

- “You’re just a kid, you don’t know much. When you are an adult, you will have all the answers. Be respectful to adults, they know what they’re doing.”

Translation: “Do what the man says.”

With this final message, we face a delicate, but vital challenge as a society. All parents want their children to be polite and respectful to adults. Our message is not that we want children to be disrespectful, but rather that we must empower them. We must teach children that they have power and the right to say NO.

Educational consultant Stephanie Meeghan aptly expresses during many of her training sessions for teachers that she has held since 1998, “We must make children aware that their safety is more important than good manners.”

## **CONCLUSION**

NCMEC’s central message to families is that they do not have to live in fear, but they do need to be alert, cautious, and prepared. The key to child safety is communication. The child’s best weapon against victimization is his or her own head, ability to think, and preparation to respond to certain situations.

We are striving to reach children and families throughout the country with the best, most complete messages to ensure child safety. “Stranger danger” is far too narrow a foundation for protecting and defending our children.

## **References**

Abel, Gene G. *The Evaluation of Child Molesters: Final Report to the Center on Antisocial and Violent Behavior*. Rockville, Maryland: National Institute of Mental Health, 1985.

Colburn, D. “Child Safety Emphasis of National Campaign.” *The Washington Post*, January 12, 1988, p. A12.

Feinberg, L. "Poll of Schoolchildren Reflects Satisfaction, Positive Attitudes." *The Washington Post*, March 11, 1987, p. A12.

Geiser, R.L. *Hidden Victims: The Sexual Abuse of Children*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1979.

Groth, Nicholas A., Ann W. Burgess, H. Jean Birnbaum, and Thomas S. Gary. "A Study of the Child Molester Myths and Realities." *Journal of the American Criminal Justice Association*, Vol. 41 (1978), pp. 17-22.

"How To Raise A Street Smart Child." Home Box Office Video, New York: 1987.

Kantrowitz, B. "Off To A Good Start: Why the First Three Years Are So Crucial To A Child's Development." *Newsweek*, Spring/Summer Special Issue, p. 8.

Kent, Anne. "The Reality of the Nightmare." *The Times*. Great Britain: August 15, 1990.

Rayment, Tim. "Stranger Danger." *The Sunday Times*. Great Britain: August 18, 1991.

Stickler, Gunnar B., Margery Salter, Daniel D. Broughton, and Anthony Alario. "Parents' Worry About Children Compared to Actual Risks." *Clinical Pediatrics*, Vol. 30, No. 9 (1991), pp. 522-528.