

Help!



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child personal safety

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What comes to mind when you think about the personal safety skills you acquired as a child? To be wary of strangers perhaps? It is possible this was all you were taught and now, as an adult, you've faithfully passed the message on. Unfortunately this falls far short of what children need to grasp in order to stay safe. Children are most likely to be abused by someone they know well. The most important lesson a child can learn is how to protect themselves from anyone who might hurt them. If we did this fewer children would be abused and those that are would be more likely to tell.

We take it as 'given' that children will be taught road safety. If it didn't happen a national emergency would be declared! Issues of personal safety are just as important and simple to teach.

In this booklet we present positive and practical skills that, when taught appropriately, can provide a child with a balanced and healthy perspective of right and wrong. A child can learn to recognise what is good and wholesome but also what isn't, and be given the confidence to speak out and seek help without fear of recrimination.

Let's start by looking at some of the facts:

- Both men and women abuse children. Children and young people also abuse and bully.
- Most children who are abused are not hurt by strangers, but more often by a family member, friend or acquaintance like a neighbour, babysitter, someone in a position of trust etc.
- 'Stranger danger', the term that seems to have become the byword for keeping children safe, can be misleading. A child is far more likely to be involved in a serious road accident than be abducted by or coerced to go off with someone they don't know.

- Some children are at greater risk of being abused. These include disabled children who have a greater dependence on adults and may not be able to communicate easily. Also, those who have been abused in the past are more vulnerable to being abused again.

What can be done?

Just as children are taught safety in the home and on the roads, children can be helped to avoid potentially dangerous situations, resist inappropriate touching, refuse to keep secrets and seek adult help when needed. Giving a child confidence in these areas will not be any more daunting for them than any of the other things they need to learn.

When and how to start

As shocking as it seems, even babies and young children can be sexually abused. It is never too early for children to learn to start taking care of themselves, just as they are taught how to wash or clean their teeth.

We need to be balanced when talking with children about personal safety, making them aware of the dangers without destroying their underlying trust in adults. Scare tactics don't work and may make children unduly anxious.

As adults our behaviour towards a child must be limited to what the child feels comfortable with. This may mean asking someone not to tickle the child, or to insist on a goodnight kiss if the child doesn't want it. Supporting children in being able to say 'no' where non-abusive behaviour is involved will help them resist abusive advances.

Parents and workers may be apprehensive about empowering a child to say 'no', fearing it could encourage disobedience. However, children who are overly compliant to adults can be more at risk of abuse and so children need to learn to be assertive in the right way.

When helping a child to develop personal safety skills, the use of language appropriate to the child's age, understanding and background is all important.

Self esteem

Parents who have a positive relationship with their child(ren), by making them feel loved, wanted and appreciated, help them to build a healthy self-esteem. This is done not only by what is said but also by what is done through physical contact such as cuddles and hugs.

Children who feel good about themselves are more confident than those with a poor self-image and are far more able to resist inappropriate advances.

It is therefore important to affirm children in all areas of their lives, involving them, wherever possible, in everyday decisions and giving positive feedback.

Children can also be helped to appreciate the rights they enjoy as well as the responsibilities they have towards others, i.e. a right not to be hurt but a responsibility not to hurt others.

Babysitting

When you entrust someone else with the care of your child/ren, especially in your own home, you need to make sure that they are suitable. Take care in choosing a babysitter and ensure that you establish the ground rules. You can repeat the rules in front of the child, along the lines of 'Samuel is ready for bed and has had his bath. He needs to be in bed by 7.00 o'clock'. This minimises the possibility of abuse or manipulation of the babysitter. If your child is unhappy about a particular person then don't hesitate to change the babysitter.

Don't forget to also teach children the more practical things like safe practice in using the telephone, answering the door and playing outside etc. Think safe and act safe.

Children and their bodies

Parents can make a point of emphasising to children that they are valued and accepted just as they

are and that their bodies belong to them, not anyone else. Some parts of their bodies are private and no-one is allowed to look at or touch them just for fun. The private areas are those covered by swimwear or underclothes (breasts, buttocks, anus and genitals). The NSPCC has produced some useful resources as part of its 'PANTS campaign' which encourages parents to talk to children about keeping safe.

Of course parents need to explain to young children they may need help with things like washing or applying ointment to sore places but anyone else touching them on the private parts should never be kept secret. Again, it will need to be explained that a doctor or nurse might need to have a look at these places but a parent will normally be present if this happens.

It is important children don't develop hang-ups about their bodies, so they should be told it is perfectly acceptable and normal for them to touch their own private parts in places like the bathroom, toilet or bedroom.

Disabled children may have particular needs that require establishing different boundaries of personal care, but their rights over their own bodies remain the same.

Secrets and surprises

Children can be taught to differentiate between surprises and unsafe secrets. Surprises on birthdays, for example,

which everyone eventually finds out about, are fun. But secrets that involve someone being hurt or being told to keep silent about something they are frightened of or don't understand is never OK. Children should be educated (whether at home, school, church etc) that there are adults who can help when they feel unsafe.

If the child is unwilling to talk to their parents, the person educating them should either suggest 'If you are comfortable, you can talk to me' and also identify for them specific people within school or church that children can talk to (such as Safeguarding Co-ordinator/Teacher/School Nurse). Children should be taught to tell a parent or another grown-up if this happens; It is also important for children to know that if the first safe grown-up they talk to doesn't take any notice, they should go to the next until they find someone who listens and acts!

Being assertive

All children should be empowered to say 'no' if someone is touching them in a way that frightens or confuses them. Children can practise saying 'no' in the everyday scenarios such as when asked to do something they know is wrong like lying, in which case they can also be encouraged to tell one of the identified adults what has happened.

In a serious situation, children need to realise they can say 'no' repeatedly, run away, and go to a safe adult. They could be taught the phrase 'No! Go! Yell! Tell!' to help them remember what to do.

Real Life

Children can understand the difference between good and bad secrets. Six year old Luke, when asked about a birthday present, told grandpa 'it's a secret but it's not one I have to tell mummy about'

Real Life

Liz told her five year old 'If there's anything you're not sure is OK, you can always whisper it in my ear. I'll never be cross with you for asking about that kind of thing.'

Feelings

It is important that children are encouraged to appropriately express all their feelings – good and bad. Even if the child can't say what they are feeling, it is important to create an environment they feel safe to talk about their feelings. Ensure the child knows what the appropriate action is when they are feeling a certain way. For example, if a child feels scared, angry, upset or confused they need to know they can talk to a grown up.

Touching

Touching is an essential part of everyday life, but it's also a way of communicating affection, warmth and reassurance. Children can be taught the difference between good and bad touches. Bad touches are ones that hurt, are rude or make the child feel uncomfortable or scared. Assertiveness can be encouraged when it comes to touch – a child is entitled to say 'no' to any that aren't good or they don't like. As we have said already, this includes touches that aren't necessarily abusive but some children really don't enjoy, like tickling.

Touching boundaries can also be discussed with the child. A child's private parts are 'no-go' areas for anyone, (other than the circumstances already mentioned), but also touches such as stroking or tickling under a child's clothes. Hugs can be great, but what should a child do if someone wants to give them a tight bear-hug and they don't like it? The answer is simple – they can say a confident 'no' (preferably followed by a thank-you!), 'I don't like that'.

Conclusion

We have shown in this booklet that teaching a child personal safety skills really isn't an optional extra. Rather, it is an essential part of the healthy and safe development of any child. Acquiring these skills from an early age will not only instill confidence and maturity, but also equip a child to respond appropriately in situations and circumstances they find themselves in, wherever they are and whatever they are doing. They are skills that are not difficult to impart as they grow and mature into adulthood, and they will last a lifetime.

The Christian perspective

There are passages in the Bible that encourage children to do what their parents tell them but this does not mean in every circumstance adults must be obeyed. Clearly it would be wrong for a child to be coerced into anything immoral, illegal or abusive and there is a very strong rebuke in Matthew 18 v 6 for those who involve children in any of these activities. There are also several accounts of Jesus' encounters with children. Without exception Jesus welcomed them and treated them with acceptance, respect and dignity, even when his disciples wanted them pushed to one side.

Children can be taught to respect adults and do what they are told, unless they sense what they are being asked to do is wrong or makes them feel uncomfortable (we're not talking legitimate bed-time here!). Jesus placed great importance on their wellbeing and as adults we have an obligation to do the same.

NB - There are biblical examples that can be used to help children understand personal safety skills and they can be found in an article 'Keeping Children Safe' on the CCPAS website.

CCPAS

Provides training and advice on all areas of child protection and good working practice to churches, organisations and individuals across the UK as well as a 24 hour helpline service. Please also look on our website: www.ccpas.co.uk



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NSPCC

National Child Protection Charity



Helpline: 0808 800 5000
Info or Publication Tel: 0207 825 2775
Web: www.nspcc.org.uk
Email: help@nspcc.org

Childline

Childline is a 24 hour helpline for children



Tel: 0800 1111
Web: www.childline.org.uk

Kidscape

National charity publishing booklets and information on self- protection skills for children and how to keep children safe.



Helpline: 0845 120 5204
Tel: 0207 730 3300
Web: www.kidscape.org.uk

This is one of an expanding series of **Help!** Guides published by CCPAS, many of which are particularly relevant to workers.

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