



Increasing Home Safety

Since September 11, 2001, America and Americans will never be the same, though we must continue on with our daily lives. Experts agree that part of overcoming the fear of another similar occurrence is to take steps to feel as if you are participating in a solution. Basically, these actions fall into categories, such as:

- Securing the home
- Dealing with visitors
- Dealing with adults other than parents
- Emergencies

Begin by having a family meeting and discussing the safety issues your family may face. Organize your thoughts into sections and discuss possible solutions. You can even role play a situation, such as being approached for a ride by an adult your child doesn't know, or by pretending that the phone is ringing when only your children are home.

Once you have your categories, you might organize them like this:

Securing the Home

Answering the phone and taking messages: If your children are home alone, for instance, suggest that all calls get screened through an answering machine before a child picks up the phone. This will prevent him from having to remember, "My mom is in the shower," which may not be believed anyhow.

Locking up: Teach everyone how to lock doors and windows and set an alarm system. Discuss how much more protection a deadbolt will provide over a locked knob.

Keys: Who has them? Who can use them? Where are they hidden? Should you ever tell your friends where they are hidden? Should keys be hidden where others on the street can see you get them?

Mail: A new category for most parents, as the mail was never laced with anthrax in the past. If you have a post office box, then you can be the one to pick it up. Otherwise, should they bring it in? Where should they put it? Should they open it? What about parcels?

Dealing with Visitors in the House

No secrets from parents: Frightening as it may sound; the home is one of the most opportune places for children to be taken advantage of. Tell your children that no matter what someone else says, they must always tell you if something has happened to them that makes them uncomfortable. They will not be punished for telling what is occurring. This applies to everyone – family, friends, even an uncle you have always adored.

Strangers and smooth talkers: Kids should never open the door for strangers, whether they are salespeople, church members, etc. Only parents should make that decision. Even neighbors, especially other kids, should be off limits to children who are home alone, as trouble can easily start or lawsuits can occur when children are playing unattended in your home.

Visitors and bedrooms: Visitors, whatever age, should only be allowed into a child's bedroom, if invited. This gives your child some measure of defense if he feels uncomfortable for any reason.

Dealing With Adults Other Than Parents

Since most parents aren't with their kids full-time, discussions about how to deal with other adults should be frequent.

Teachers, coaches, youth leaders and other adults in positions of authority: Just because they are in one of these positions does not give them the right to act in any way that makes your child uncomfortable in the inappropriate sense (getting detention from a teacher and deserving it, for instance, doesn't fit into "inappropriate discomfort"). Talk about the differences and tell your children that, regardless of the adult's job title, they should always come and talk to you about things that they find strange or troubling.

Appropriate vs. inappropriate touching from adults: As soon as a child is coordinated enough he can begin to wash "the parts a bathing suit covers", or whatever other family names are given to his personal areas. Then, talk about bad touches and good touches, and tell him that if he is ever touched by someone in a way that makes him feel "icky" or "bad", or if that person wants him to keep a secret, that he is to tell you right away.

Emergencies

Do you have a fire plan? How fast can your family get out of the house, including out the windows, and to a predetermined meeting place? Have monthly drills and rewards for breaking the records. Discuss the behavior of fires, where the best air is (close to the ground), and how to get out if you cannot see. Check the batteries in your smoke alarms whenever there is a time change. Ask the family for fire safety suggestions around the house.

Family password: If you were in an accident and had to send a non-family member to pick up your child, how would the child know that the emergency was real? How could he tell the difference between someone trying to abduct him and someone really trying to get him to you? A family password is one way. This is a password known only by the family, and not passed around to friends or talked about when outsiders are within earshot. If non-family members came to pick your child up and they know the password, then the child can go with them. Change the password after each use.

When to call: What is an emergency and whom do you call in case of one? What are the penalties for calling 911 as a prank? Discuss the various issues surrounding finding and getting help in the event of an emergency.

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