

Partners

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PREVENTING CHILD ABDUCTION Safety Tips for Parents and Children

The statistics are staggering. Every 40 seconds in the United States, a child is reported missing or abducted. This translates into approximately 800,000 per year, or 2,000 children per day. In New York State alone, there were 21,000 reported child abductions in 2005. In the face of these statistics, and in light of recent tragedies, parents have become increasingly aware of the challenge they are faced with - teaching their children to recognize dangerous situations and protect themselves, while reminding them that the world is not a scary place.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

The most important key to child safety is to establish and maintain effective communication with your child. While most children are capable of recognizing a dangerous situation, they still require guidance about what is safe and what is not.

"The most important thing a parent can do is to have an open, honest, and frequent dialogue with their children," stated Associate Director of SCOPE Educational Services Cindy Pierce Lee. "Children know abductions happen and when you don't allow them to express their feelings and work out hypothetical solutions, the fears escalate."

Children should be taught the essential skills necessary to make responsible decisions regarding their own personal safety. Parents are encouraged to role play different scenarios with their children, establish an agreement about who will pick them up in an emergency, and identify safe places their children can go to if they are ever approached by a stranger. While the emphasis is typically on younger children, it is important to note that children aged 11 to 17 are equally at risk of being victimized. At the same time, older children are allowed more freedom, make sure they understand the important safety rules as well.

Additionally, in this technologically advanced world in which we live, abduction does not only stem from outside contact, it can begin in surroundings as close as your living room or wherever your home computer is stored. Internet crimes have become increasingly common, and subsequently it has become vitally important to teach children about Internet safety. Help your children learn ways to protect themselves when surfing the net by visiting the website www.childfind.com. Under the button "Online Safety Challenge" there is a 15-question survey that tests Internet safety knowledge. Take the time to go through the results together and discuss your answers.

STRANGER DANGER?

The biggest myth surrounding child abduction is that the dangers to children come from strangers. On the contrary, according to the experts, in the majority of cases the perpetrator is someone the child knows and trusts. Approximately 300,000 children are abducted by a family member, not a stranger. *(continued on back)*

Parents Should:

- Avoid clothing and toys with your child's name on them. A child is less likely to fear someone that knows his/her name.
- Check references of all potential babysitters.
- Contact the parents of your child's friends to be certain that while they are spending time away from your home they still remain in a safe and supervised setting.
- Always supervise your child in a public place, and never leave him/her alone in a stroller or car, not even for a minute.
- Always accompany your child on door-to-door activities.
- Be sure your child knows that resistance - yelling, kicking, scratching, and biting - is acceptable in preventing abduction. The phrase "Help! I don't know this person! I'm being kidnapped!" has been noted to save numerous children during an abduction.
- Create an environment in which your child feels free to talk to you.
- Teach your child how to dial 911 for emergencies. Also, teach them their home phone number.
- Keep an up-to-date color photograph of your child (taken within the last 6 months), a medical and dental history, and have your child fingerprinted.

Three Village Central School District
North Country Administrative Center
100 Suffolk Avenue
Stony Brook, NY 11790

Catherine Taldone
Director of School & Community Partnerships
730-4595

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"Teaching 'stranger danger' is confusing to a child and can mislead them into believing that only people they do not know or who appear different or unusual can cause them harm," said Laura Ahearn, Executive Director of Parents For Megan's Law and Crime Victims Hotline. Young children may envision strangers as evil looking and might not identify a well-dressed, soft-spoken man looking for help finding his dog as a danger. Children should be taught that strangers should not be asking them for help, they should be asking other adults.

EVERY MINUTE COUNTS

Parents are reminded that the most important thing they can do in the case of an abduction is to call 911. Law enforcement agencies are required to immediately accept and "strenuously" investigate every missing child case - there is no waiting period required to report a missing child. Parents should be prepared to answer a number of specific questions regarding the incident and the missing child. A recent picture of your child, with vital information such as date of birth, height, and eye color written on the back is recommended. In recent missing children cases, in which such portraits were publicized, accurate photos helped recover 1 in 6 missing children.

AMBER ALERT

The AMBER Alert (America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response) was created in 1996 after nine-year-old Amber Hagerman of Arlington, Texas was kidnapped while riding her bicycle. Tragically, Amber was later found murdered. In the event of a reported child abduction, an AMBER alert is activated and a powerful chain of communication unfolds, from the state police, to radio and television stations that will spread information, on to the highways, over the airwaves and through the Internet. New York is now the 17th state that has implemented a statewide alert system.

Sources: *Child Find website, www.childfind.com; Childs ID for Safety website, www.childsid.com; Long Island Parenting News, November 2002; ParentGuide Magazine, April 2003; National Center for Missing & Exploited Children website, www.missingkids.com; New York State Criminal Justice website, www.criminaljustice.state.ny.us; Cindy Pierce Lee, Associate Director of SCOPE Educational Services; and Laura A. Ahearn, C.S.W., Executive Director, Parents for Megan's Law and Crime Victims Hotline.*

Teens Should:

- Tell you where they are at all times or leave a written or recorded message at home.
- Avoid shortcuts through empty parks, fields, or alleys, and never hitchhike.
- Run home or go to the nearest public place and yell for help if being followed.
- Learn to recognize suspicious behavior and remember a description of the person or vehicle.
- If attacked for money, jewelry or clothing, give it up rather than risk injury.
- Feel that they can talk to you and call you to pick them up at any time, any place.
- Kick, scream, and run if someone tries to grab them.

Children Should:

- Know their full telephone number and address.
- Never say they are alone if they answer the phone.
- Never answer the door if they are alone.
- Not invite anyone in the house without permission of a parent or babysitter.
- Never go into someone's house or get into someone's car without a parent's permission.
- Scream or scatter books and belongings if they are forced into a building or a car.
- Be taught that it is all right to say 'no' to an adult if the person wants them to do something they think is wrong.
- Be taught that an adult should never ask them for help or directions.
- Know that no one has the right to touch any part of their bodies that a bathing suit would cover.
- Go to the nearest cashier if separated from a parent in a store or mall.
- Know the buddy system, which means travelling in a group of at least three or four children (not just two).

NUMBERS TO NOTE

In an Emergency
Dial 911
Suffolk County Police Department
852.6000
4th Precinct
854.8400
6th Precinct
854.8600
State Police
756.3300
Missing & Exploited Children
Clearinghouse
1.800.FINDKID
Vanished Children's Alliance
1.800.VANISHED
National Runaway Hotline
1.800.231.6946

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