



Keeping You Safe

by Dr. Jenn Berman

With the recent media attention on Shasta Groene, the 8-year-old who was kidnapped by her deceased brother, parents are worried they can keep their children safe. News reports for cases like Elizabeth Smart and Rylee Rynn send chills up and down parents everywhere. We all want our children safe, but we don't want to stay close by.

The Truth about Child Abductions
While one missing child is the focus, nationally speaking, non-family child abductions are decreasing. In the 1980's there were averaging 200-300 cases a year, but there were less than 100 in 2000. Tina Schwartz, a spokeswoman for the Center for Missing and Exploited Children, says "There aren't more cases - just more media coverage." Even though abductions are actually decreasing, sexual exploitation of children is on the rise.

Teens are the most vulnerable to sexual exploitation, according to the United Kingdom's Hampshire's Crimes Against Children.

Perhaps that is because they have just enough autonomy to make them most vulnerable. A study by the U.S. Department of Justice found that one in five children ages 10 to 17 years old have received unwanted solicitations online. If that doesn't give you shivers, statistics show that 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 10 boys are sexually exploited before they reach adulthood. Less than 35% of those child sexual assault victims report to the police.

Most non-family-member abductions are done by an acquaintance, a neighbor, or a stranger. While "stranger danger" has become popular, there is controversy around the effectiveness of such campaigns. The flaw in these programs is that children are afraid of people who look strange or are totally unfamiliar to them. Kidnappers are not necessarily drooling hunchbacks lurking in the shadows. In addition, children tend to think someone who they see regularly like the ice cream man or the gardener is not a stranger. Breaking the myths of what constitutes a stranger is one of the biggest obstacles for teaching children about these dangers.

Parenting Tips

- Speak openly about safety with your children. Children are more likely to talk to you if something makes them uncomfortable. Have regular open communication and they sense you are comfortable talking to them.
- Role-play with your child. When I was a child, we played "The Stranger Game" in my house, where we role-played different scenarios and I had the opportunity to practice different responses until they became second nature.
- Get your kids thinking with "What If" games. When you are out with your child, ask them questions like "what would you do if you couldn't find me at the market?" or "what would you do if that man asked you for directions?" These are good opportunities to discuss safety plans and get your child thinking about their safety.
- Teach your children who strangers really are. Explain about strangers and help children to understand they are not always dark allies.
- Explain to your children that grownups don't need help from kids. Children should know that adults don't need assistance from children they don't know.
- Teach your children they have the right to say "no." This gives children the self-esteem to be willing to put their needs before those around them. Be very conscious about the messages you send your children about listening to their instincts. When you bring your daughter to Aunt Jane and Uncle Bob's, and tell her to kiss them goodbye and she doesn't want to, it's okay. By telling her to do so, you teach her that it is more important that she be polite and please others than listen to what feels right.

For more tips to keep your family safe check out The Center for Missing and Exploited Children, (www.missingkids.com) or the Polly Klaas Foundation <http://www.pollyklaas.org/>.