

# Teaching Stranger Safety Skills to Children and Adults With Disabilities

## TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

### Why Do Children and Adults With Disabilities Need To Learn Safety Skills?

Compared to people without disabilities, individuals with disabilities are at increased risk of experiencing abuse, being taken advantage of or bullied, and being kidnapped. It is important for individuals with disabilities to be aware of potential dangers and to learn skills that protect themselves against people who might take advantage of them. One safety skill is learning how to respond appropriately to strangers. This safety skill will help keep individuals with disabilities from being lured to an unknown location with a stranger.

### What Should I Teach My Child\*?

It is important to teach your child to be aware of and to be safe around strangers. Approach the topic from a safety perspective. Teach your child that you need to know where he or she is at all times, so that you know he or she is safe. If your child wants to walk to another area of a store, for example, or if someone asks your child for help, your child needs to know to tell you first.

Stranger safety is best taught through a technique called Behavior Skills Training. Behavior Skills Training consists of three (3) parts: Instruction, Modeling, and Role Play.

#### Instruction

When first teaching your child about stranger safety, you begin by talking about who a stranger is. Remember, not all strangers are completely unknown. Practice with your child, giving different examples. Is the manager at the grocery store a stranger? While you may see the manager often, remind your child that you still do not know that person. What about the jogger at the park? What about your best friend's mom? Give examples of strangers and people your child knows, so that you can be sure your child can differentiate between strangers and friends.

Next, teach your child what a stranger might say to get him or her to walk away. Strangers typically use 4 types of lures. A *general lure* is a simple request, such as "Come with me." An *assistance lure* is a request for help, such as "Can you help me carry these bags to my car?" or "Can you help me find my puppy? She just ran that way." An *incentive lure* is a promise to give the child something, such as "Hi, I have some extra money. Come with me and I'll buy you an ice cream cone." An



*authority lure* is when the stranger says someone the child knows said to go with them, such as "Your mom is running late and she asked me to pick you up. Let's go." Review the four types of lures with your child.

Finally, you should teach your child what to do if a stranger presents him or her with a lure. Your child should:

- Say "No" in a loud voice.
- Quickly walk or run away from the stranger, toward you or another trusted adult.
- Tell you and/or another trusted adult about the stranger.

#### Modeling

In the second step of Behavior Skills Training, your child should have an opportunity to watch how the skills are used in different contexts. Get a partner and act out what it would look like for a stranger to approach you, and how you would respond to the stranger. Use each of the four types of lures in your examples. Act out the right and the wrong way to respond to strangers. See if your child identifies what you did wrong and, if so, can tell you what you should have done instead. If your child does not catch the mistake, you should point it out. Then re-model the example with correct responding.

*\*The term "child" will be used for the remainder of this tip sheet.*

*However, adults with disabilities may be just as vulnerable to strangers.*

*The proposed techniques apply to all ages.*

#### Role Play

Once you have modeled the behaviors, your child should have repeated opportunities to practice responding through role

*Please see reverse.*



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play. Set up the scene for your child. For example, say “We are at the park and you are sitting on a picnic blanket alone. I am over there, by the lake. Okay let’s practice” and then move away. Then have another helper approach your child as the stranger and present the lure. Your child should practice saying “no,” moving away from the “stranger,” and telling you what happened. If your child needs help with any of these three steps, you should prompt your child with either a verbal prompt (e.g., “What do you do next?”) or a physical prompt (e.g., guide your child to walk away from the stranger).

It might take a lot of practice for your child to complete all three of the steps independently. It is best to do this entire sequence of Behavior Skills Training across consecutive days. Your child should see at least 4 models of correct examples and 2 models of incorrect examples during each training session. Then your child should rehearse the skills in at least 5 role plays. You should continue with training daily until your child is able to complete at least 4 role plays independently (with no prompting) for three days in a row. After that, you should continue to remind your child of the safety skills and to complete Behavior Skills Training every once in a while (slowly fade the training). It also is very important to practice these skills in community settings. Rehearse the role plays at your local grocery store, shopping mall, bowling alley, or anywhere you and your child go together.

### Testing

If you think your child knows what to do and will use the skills appropriately, it is important to “test” him or her. To set up a “test” situation, ask a work colleague or someone you know and trust but your child **does not know** to pose as a stranger. Take your child to a community setting where you usually go together (e.g., the grocery store) and then give an excuse to leave your child alone (e.g., say “I forgot to grab the milk, I’ll be right back” and then walk away). Once your child is alone, the “stranger” should approach your child and deliver a lure (e.g., “I need help carrying all of these bags to my car. Can you help me take them outside?”). If your child says “no” and walks away, your stranger should walk away in the opposite direction and leave the location. If your child agrees to help, your stranger should come up with an excuse to terminate the interaction (e.g., “Oh, I see a store employee over there. I’ll ask him instead”) and walk away. If your child tells you about the stranger, you should praise your child for telling you. You **should not** tell your child it was a test.

### Other Tips:

Individualize training to meet your child’s needs.

- Once your child learns the 3 safety skills, add different situations. What will your child do if he or she is alone and you are not nearby? They should find an employee, another person, or they should call you.
- What if your child is approached by someone he or she knows, but doesn’t feel right about the situation? Teach your child that it is okay to say “no” to people he or she knows and to ask you first.
- Practice with your child sitting versus standing. For example, if your child is sitting on a bench waiting to be picked up from work, it is important that your child actually stands up and walks away from that bench.

Even after mastery of the skills, it is important to continue to remind your child about safety skills and to have him or her occasionally practice. You should also test your child every once in a while. Remember, strangers can be male or female, young or old. Teach your child many examples. Ask different friends to help with modeling and role play so that your child can see examples with all types of “strangers.”

*The content of this Tips and Resources fact sheet was provided by Marisa Fisher, Ph.D., Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Research Fellow.*

### Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)** works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, service providers and advocates, researchers and policy makers. It is among only a few centers nationwide to be a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, a *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center, and a Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities Training Program. The following are some of the ways the Center’s programs and staff can assist families, educators, and other service providers.

**Contact the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center**  
**Nashville (615) 322-8240**  
**Toll-Free (866) 936-VUKC [8852]**  
**[www.kc.vanderbilt.edu](http://www.kc.vanderbilt.edu)**  
**[kc@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:kc@vanderbilt.edu)**