Parent *pages*

Dealing with stranger danger

In June 2005, the media was full of stories about an 11-year-old boy lost on Utah's Uinta Mountain. Efforts of rescuers to find him were hampered by the boy's efforts to hide from them. He considered them to be strangers.

In this story, we are reminded that children do not think like adults. Even an 11-year-old still thinks concretely enough to misjudge those who intend to help him. As parents, this puts us in a difficult situation. Following "stranger danger" rules put this child at risk. Should we assume, from this, that we should not warn our children about strangers?

The numbers don't lie

In 1999, about 800,000 children were reported missing. Slightly more than 200,000 of them were abducted by family members. Since then, the Internet has become a larger factor in victimizations, showing a significant increase in the number of teenage girls abducted. We pray this will not happen to our children, but we know it is wise to do what we can to assure our children are safe and secure.

A typical "stranger danger" program teaches children not to talk with strangers, to run from them, and to refuse gifts from them. On the surface this seems simple enough, but the problem is in the understanding. Here are some pitfalls:

- More children are abducted by someone they know than by strangers.
- Children think "stranger" means someone who is ugly, mean, or scary. A friendly person they do not know would not count as a stranger.
- Children see adults talking to friendly strangers.

- A child who understands a stranger to be someone he or she does not know might hide from a safe stranger like police or firefighters.

The Bible is full of stories of our heavenly Father extending His hand of safety to His children—Daniel, Jonah, Esther, and Paul are examples that come to mind. The Bible is not, however, full of stories of the people of God being totally spared from danger. We live in a sinful world; we live in a dangerous world. We also live in a world where our God, who loves us perfectly, is in control.

When we turn to Scripture to remind us that God is our safety, we turn to the verses that remind us of His steadfast love. When praying on behalf of our children, Ps. 91:11-12 is a source of comfort:

"For he will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

No safety lesson is full proof. There are no simple rules, nor are there enough rules to memorize that will prepare our children for any and every situation. However, if we remember both law and gospel in our teaching, we will be using God's model to prepare our children and to help them learn the wisdom and discernment necessary to make safe decisions.

If you visit the Web site for the National Center for Missing and Exploited

Children (www.ncmec.org), you will find that its first advice to parents comes from the essence of Gospel. It recommends that parents spend time building confident children who know that they have unconditional love and support.

God loves, no matter what

Children do not get their confidence from knowing all the rules. They do not get their confidence from knowing who is good and who is bad. They get their confidence from knowing that their parents, and especially their God, love them no matter what happens. When children know unconditional love, they will turn to parents anytime they are worried, con-

fused, or scared. In these times you will be able to, with God's help, guide them to wisdom and discernment regarding safety.

God knows we fear Him in that we rightfully fear the immensity of His power. However, He does not want us to be afraid of Him. He wants us to feel safe in the protection of His power. In the same way, we do our children no favors to simply teach them to fear strangers. We should instead, train them to watch for dangerous situations and to know about safety nets.

Some safety ideas

Safety nets are trusted adults and trusted actions that can help keep a child safe. The next time you go to the mall, introduce your child to people in uniforms, like mall security; point out store clerks with nametags; alert them to people at information booths; and look for parents with children. This lets your child develop a list of trusted adults that he or she can turn to if lost.

This is not unlike the fire drills your child performs at school. Practice makes following the drill almost automatic if a fire occurs. When we are afraid, we are poor decision-makers; practicing good decisions will make them more likely to occur.

When going to a busy public place, it is a good idea to review travel guidelines:

- Stay close to parents.
- Do not go somewhere alone.
- If you are lost, stay where you are and ask a trusted adult for help.

If your child is old enough and mature enough to be left at home alone, practicing safety guidelines is a good idea.

- Answer the phone without giving information about parents being gone.
- Know emergency numbers.
- Know which neighbors can serve as trusted adults.
- Know and follow safety rules. regarding equipment and vehicles.

- Be ready to answer the phone when parents make check-in calls.

If an older child is left responsible for younger children, the following apply:

- The child responsible should be certified through a babysitter program. Check with your local hospital or health department.
- This child should be familiar with basic first aid and CPR.

Internet safety is a whole new area of child safety that our own parents did not have to worry about. The internet can be fun, fascinating, and educational but it has dangerous traps about which our children should be warned. Here are some "safety nets" for net safety:

- Keep the computer in the family room and supervise its use. Parents should control passwords and filtering devices. Be aware of other computers your child may have access to.
- Set family rules for internet use and post them by the computer.
- Use a child friendly search engine and check into safeguarding programs from your online service provider.

- Teach your children what "personal information" means and to never give it out over the internet. Check on chatroom names to be sure they do not give hints as to your child's name, age, gender or location.
- Surf the net with your children. Ask them to show you what they can do so you are always aware of what they are capable of a accomplishing online.
- Report dangerous or offensive e-mail to the authorities.

God is always there!

Every generation of children has had its dangers to avoid. This generation is no exception. God has been the protector of each generation and He will not change His policy for our children. Our strength is from God and is seen in Ps. 27: 1:

"The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?"

With God's help you will give your children the confidence of God's strength and the assurance of His love.

Questions for discussion

1. What things did you fear as a child? What do your children fear?
2. What is the biggest danger for children in each age group? Infant and toddler?
3. How did God provide protection to the Children of Israel?
4. How does God provide spiritual protection for you and your children?

Recommended reading:

- The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children: www.ncmec.org
- Internet safety for children: www.netsmartz.org
- "Safe at Play: Outdoor Safety" Candy Cane Press
  This interactive game book allows children to answer safety questions by pushing buttons on each page.