

Kids, strangers: Experts have tips

Editor's note: The recent series of abductions and deaths of children has opened a Pandora's box of fear and suspicion in suburban communities. An Observer & Eccentric reporter met Friday with a group of Oakland University psychologists brainstorming on the question of parent-child community cooperation during this period of crisis. The statements below are the result of discussion with professors Lawrence Lilliston, David Kahana, David Schantz, Richard Traitel and Irving Torgoff.

By KATHY PARKER

Never go anywhere alone. Think of your neighborhood as the one block where you are known and recognized. Do not trust a person simply because he appears friendly and intelligent. If a stranger approaches you in any manner, run from that person quickly. These preventive measures, among others, form the nucleus of advice parents should give their children in a calm, persuasive manner, while the perpetrator or murderers of at least four Oakland County children remains at large. Traitel suggests parents and children view the crisis as a tornado—protect yourself, take shelter. Hope the tornado will lift but realize it could strike again. Know the signals and shelters so well that your reaction becomes reflexive.

THE CRITICAL MESSAGE the professors have for parents is that they are not helpless in this situation. There are ways of ensuring their child's safety and of alleviating the fear and anxiety they feel whenever their child is out of sight. Be certain your child does not go anywhere alone. Use your parental discretion in enforcing and rewarding this behavior. The first step should be a question: Ask your child if they came home from school with a buddy, did they go with a buddy? the professors say. Make certain they are rewarded if they do, and punished if they don't. With reinforcement, the correct behavior becomes a natural response. Instructions should be kept simple.

they say, because if a child is overwhelmed with advice, he will become confused. Give the child one set of instructions, and be certain he knows them well. Schools can assist in this procedure by having teachers list names of buddies, and reminding the children as the school day ends that they should team up on the walk home. Parents should never permit children to walk alone in a neighborhood where they are not known. Teach your children how to avoid strangers the same way you teach traffic safety, the professors say. Teach them to handle strangers the way they handle empty iceboxes, or vacant lots—with care.

WHEN PARENTS realize they are not at a child's mercy, the aura of panic will dissipate, they say. Setting strict rules and constantly monitoring them will remove the panic quality from the situation and help the child become "streetwise."

"It's more likely that a child will be killed by a car, yet we don't worry about that like we do about abduction," Schantz says. "We feel that a child can handle the traffic situation because he has been exposed to it enough to instinctively know what to do. There is no feeling of experience, no feeling of coping with this type of dangerous situation. Perhaps making the average middle-class child aware of the realistic dangers, aware that there are no safe or dangerous neighborhoods, will help him learn how to cope."

The proverbial candy-offering "dirty old man" image has been shattered and now, for children, every stranger is a potential killer. Parents should not feel guilty if they instill a sense of fear in their children, the professors say.

"We can handle a frightened child, we can do nothing for the dead child. If a stranger approaches you, run like hell," they say. "Go to the nearest place of safety and report it. Do not ever speak or listen to a stranger."

If the recent abductions were not forced, it was probably because the killer has "a good story," the professors say. The best preventive measure is not to permit the stranger to tell the story. Realize that if your

child is alone in a busy shopping center or in an unfamiliar neighborhood, his chances of being noticed are diminished.

"ANONYMITY is what makes urban environments dangerous," the professors say. "Everyone is busy in a shopping center; they don't know the child, and they don't know the stranger. On the surface, nothing is amiss."

Increased surveillance in neighborhoods, creating an atmosphere of cooperation and friendliness among neighbors not limited to one city block, can decrease the anonymity and relieve some anxiety. In this current situation, where every unknown neighbor becomes suspect, possible allies have become separated through fear. Sources of support are limited to the immediate family.

It's unfortunate, but should be stressed to the child, that he should only be accompanied by his immediate family unless parents give explicit instructions as to what persons may accompany the child. Parents should know, at all times, where their children are. They should not fear to call and check on a child's destination.

The schools and parent-teacher organizations are crucial vehicles in this crisis situation, the professors say. School staff and parents must work on the same strategy so there will be no conflict in the child's instructions. Clarity and simplicity are most important.

"DON'T FEAR redundancy," Kahana says. "Train teachers to cope with the crisis. Stress role-playing situations, and constantly tell the children what their instructions are. One month is not enough. It must be instilled in them that this is tornado-waiting behavior, and certain precautions must be taken for their own safety."

The larger question of society's responsibilities and man's responsibility to his fellow man looms as a critical point in the overall picture of deviance.

"The immediate question is what parents can do," the professors say. "But we all must use this situation to mobilize on a larger social problem. Most child-abusers were abused themselves as children, so child-abuse should be mopped in the bud. A health-

ier society as a whole would result from preventive mental health for children."

Rather than expending their energies on wondering why some "others" don't deal with social problems, parents should first concern themselves with their children's safety, then work on breaking down the barriers of apathy and individualism that ultimately result in fear and panic in a crisis.

"What makes a city safe has nothing to do with policing," the professors say. "It's people, a lot of adults around to intervene in case of danger, 50 pair of eyes watching out for everyone."

OTHER SOCIAL questions arise from this particular situation. "Where were we when children were being killed in Detroit? Is this the time to realize that everybody should be helped? Are police taking advantage of every skill available, not only in this country, but on an international level?"

Are local budgetary considerations being transcended? Are our legislators really concerned about society's safety, about the drunk driver, about the mentally ill people who are destructive to society?"

Parents have the lead role, the professors say, in ensuring their child's safety. Precautions should be given in a straightforward manner, portrayed on the psychological and cognitive level of the child.

Youngsters should be instructed to report all unusual incidents, informed that a dangerous and vicious criminal does not necessarily look dangerous, but may have "hidden fangs."

"It is better to frighten the child now, and be concerned with debriefing later," the professors stress. "Many children will have an absolute need of debriefing when this situation is over, but the lessons they have learned should be retained as thoroughly as everyday safety and health lessons."

Nor should parents forget the situation when the killer is apprehended, the professors say. The deeper social problems will still be there.

"Parents should remember the fear and certainty, and take steps to change the situation that caused them," they say. "If this won't mobilize us, what will?"

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You may still register at the first class session at 9:30 a.m. Saturday, April 30, in the Birmingham Center for Continuing Education, 746 Purdy. The center is two blocks south of the Pierce Street parking structure in downtown Birmingham. Signs in the

building will direct you to the classroom. Tuition and fees of \$71 are payable at the first session. Instructor will be Christopher R. Holliday of OU's philosophy department.

If enrollment is insufficient, OU will reserve the right to drop the course and this newspaper may discontinue the series.

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