

Protection vs. paranoia

Child safety a dilemma for parents

By Dennis P. Sugrue
special writer

A father becomes very upset with his 5-year-old when, standing by his side at the zoo, the child converses pleasantly with a stranger.

As an 8-year-old prepares to go to a high school basketball game with her father, the mother makes an impassioned plea for the child to kick and scream if anyone tries to grab her.

These are signs of the times! The recent tragedy that struck the family of Shawn Moore serves as one more frightening reminder of just how vulnerable our children are to the psychopathology existing in modern society.

Police authorities offer us numerous suggestions on how to help insure our children's safety. We are advised to fingerprint them and keep recent photos handy. We are to instruct our children to never converse with or accept a ride or gifts from a stranger.

We are to make sure that our children know not only their telephone number but also their area code. We should also establish procedures for the children to follow should they become separated from us at



psychology

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shopping malls or amusement parks.

MANY PARENTS, however, feel that they face a difficult dilemma. How do they perform the balancing act of promoting a healthy caution in their child without at the same time instilling terror? How do they insure that their child will rebuff a potential child molester without retarding the child's development of social skills? How do they protect their child without fostering a lifetime pattern of timidity and insecurity?

As a parent, I am very aware of just how difficult this dilemma is. As a psychologist, I do not have any easy solutions. Allow me to share how two parents are doing their best to struggle with this dilemma.

My wife and I attempt to not create for our preschooler the sense that a child-molester is lurking at every corner. Our discussions go something like this:

"There are both good and bad strangers in the world. Even though there are not very many bad strangers, you have to be very careful because bad strangers can fool you and pretend to be good strangers."

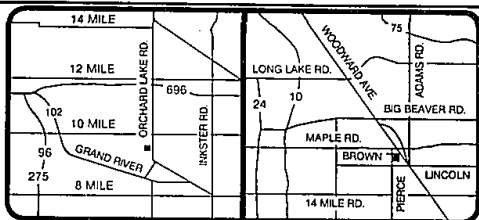
"When you are with mommy or daddy, it's OK to talk nicely to strangers because mommy or daddy will make sure that they are not bad strangers. But never talk to a stranger when you're not with an adult."

WE PERIODICALLY review with him many of the safety procedures recommended by the police authorities. However, we try very hard to disguise the magnitude of our fears by concentrating on being very calm and matter-of-fact during our discussions of safety.

We don't use the gory details of what has happened to other children to motivate him to comply with our instructions. Rather, we rely on the fact that the mere suggestion of being separated from the parents is more than enough motivation for a young child.

Most important, we keep reminding ourselves that although we want our child to be safe, we do not want our fears to grow into a paranoia that deprives him the chance of developing independence, self-confidence and a sense of security.


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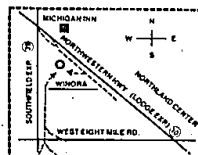
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