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Communication Tip No. 5: Stranger Danger

While at first it may seem like a good idea to tell your kids about “stranger danger”, this advice may be too general to be effective.

Naturally, we want our children to be cautious, but children do not need to be afraid of every person that they don't know...in fact, there may be times they need to talk to a stranger. For example, if they are lost and cannot find you, they need to learn the safest way of reconnecting with you. This may involve finding a person who works at the store to call for you over the intercom, etc.



Instead of blanket warnings about strangers, I've found these tips to be helpful in beginning to educate children about the proper way to communicate with people they don't know:

1. If an adult they don't know approaches them, have them check with a parent or caregiver before engaging in conversation. They can ask you verbally or just look to you for a quick nod of the head that it's okay to respond.
2. Teach kids who to go to in a situation where they can't find you. As the opportunities arise, point out adults who can help them if they need assistance. When at the library, for example, point out librarians with nametags who they could ask for help if you were to be separated.
3. Tell children “don't go where you can't see me” rather than “don't go out of my sight”. Kids don't always know what your line of vision is—make rules concrete and simple to follow. In this way you are minimizing the chances of being separating or not witnessing encounters with strangers.
4. Establish a family rule that they are to check with you before accepting gifts. We know that gifts—such as a free cookie at the grocery store—can be innocent enough, but there are other times when gifts are inappropriate. Instruct children to say, “thank you, but I have to check with mom or dad first.”
5. If someone makes them uncomfortable, let them know that they can and should always tell you. Back up your words by never forcing them to give hugs or affection to people (even family

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- members) that they feel hesitant about. Solid boundaries will help foster a strong sense of self in your children.
6. Set a good example in new situations by addressing parents first instead of their kids. If they see that the proper way for adults to communicate with kids is in the presence of their parents, they'll be more cautious around adults who don't follow this protocol.

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