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Three Things That Simply Must Be Done

As school gets back underway, I bet that many of you parents out there have been doing a lot of the same things I have been doing. For example, I wanted my two elementary school-age boys to start the year healthy, so we implemented an earlier bedtime routine and focused on less sugar and more protein. I wanted them to remember at least some of what they had learned last year, so we reviewed a few of their spring workbooks, and I enrolled my younger son in a four-day “back-to-school” refresher. Of course, I wanted them to feel good about themselves, too, so we came home with armloads of new knit shirts and two tidy haircuts. (Okay, okay, so the fresh haircuts were really to make me happy...)

As so many of us spend the late summer and early fall getting our kids back into a school routine, we should be mindful of health, academics, and hygiene, of course. Too often, however, even conscientious parents and guardians sometimes overlook preparing their children to go back to school safe from abuse by any person who might seek to harm them. Like most of you, I shudder even considering the possibility. But after years of consulting on the *Protecting God's Children*[®] program, I probably take this responsibility more seriously than most. Rarely do I feel like a role model of good mothering, but perhaps three ways in which I have tried to help my kids be safe as they start school this year can serve as an outline for your own efforts.

Meet ALL of the teachers. Most of us do a decent job of meeting our child's classroom teacher. Indeed, schools usually make meeting that teacher pretty easy by hosting events for this very purpose: “back-to-school” or “parents' night.” Likely, though, your child spends a portion of his or her day under the care of other adults at the school. At our local school, we call these *specials*—the part of the day that children go to art or library or music or P.E. If we are serious about making sure that our kids are safe with the adults who care for them, there is simply no substitute for a face-to-face meeting with each of these teachers, as well.

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Meeting each of these individuals may take more initiative. You may have to track down names and phone numbers from the classroom teacher or the main office. Make a point of meeting each of these people—who will all turn out to be great, I am sure—where they work with the kids. You will want to see their physical settings because, after all, keeping kids safe from abuse involves both safe adults and safe environments: be wary of trailers or other remote meeting sites or small areas where someone can not see what is happening to your child. Ask the teacher to explain how he or she keeps kids safe in such places, or speak with an administrator about what kind of monitoring is in place for remote areas.

Talk about bathrooms and cafeterias. I am repeatedly struck by how much intrigue both the school bathroom and the cafeteria hold for my two boys! As parents, we may forget that school-age children are not yet too long removed from days dedicated entirely to their most basic physical needs, but these places can also be the setting for abuse and bullying. Make sure that your children know not only the drill for the lunch line, but also the informal social rules about sharing or trading lunches and choosing seats. Rehearse with your child how he or she will respond if, for example, a classmate says “You can’t sit by us!” Plain-old bullying is a form of trauma that can be very painful.

Spend even more time discussing the school bathroom. Your child should be reminded that only a few special people should ever see his or her private parts—parents, doctors, etc. The school bathroom may present questions, then, as your child may not be afforded complete privacy. Consider some of these basic rules: no one should go in a toilet stall with your child for any reason; your child should be discrete if he uses a urinal; your child should not play in the bathroom—especially with pants down or while otherwise exposed. Make sure that your children understand that these rules apply not just to adults who might also be in the bathroom but with other children, too.

Reconsider the carpool line. Many children’s activities nowadays are facilitated by a carpool line—a system by which parents simply pull up to the school or other location and children climb into or out of the car. Parents love carpool line because it saves them finding a parking spot as well as hoisting siblings in and out of the car; schools love it because it is a (relatively) organized way to manage dismissal. But, at the risk of inciting widespread mommy outrage, I’d like to tentatively suggest that the carpool line may compromise your ability to keep your child safe from abuse.

Of course, the biggest reason to walk you children to their class—or at least into the school—is that you will have a far greater sense of the people and places in your child’s life. Moreover, predators prey on children with whom they believe they will not be caught. The fact that a potential perpetrator sees you regularly with your child may be all it takes to deter a bad act.

Certainly, it takes a village to raise a child—a village in which your children will catch a ride to school with a buddy, use a public bathroom, and be taught by more than one adult. And surely, most children will do all of these things safely. Moreover, you will never, ever be able to perfectly manage-away all possible ways in which your child might be harmed. But, as the family heads back to school this year, consider that keeping kids safe from abuse deserves at least as much thought as that trip to the barber.

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