

KEEPING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES SAFE IN THE REAL WORLD

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Perhaps one of the most vital skills parents want to impart in their children is the ability to keep safe in all life situations. Whether crossing a street, shopping in a busy store, working around knives or hot surfaces, or going to the movies with a friend, we might imagine a variety of risky scenarios. We worry that children may not pay attention to their surroundings or engage in behavior that could make them vulnerable like talking to strangers. If we are not careful, these fears can drive us to overprotect and isolate our children, thereby limiting the places they go and the things they do. In doing this, we can further reduce their opportunity to learn the vital skills they need to live in an integrated world. By facing these concerns head-on, identifying skills children need, and using systematic strategies to teach those skills, we can help children stay safe.

There are two broad categories of important safety skills: environmental and social. Environmental safety skills include how to deal with animals (e.g., when and how to approach a dog), fire precautions and stove use, public and pedestrian transportation, and water safety. Skills such as learning to “stop, look and listen” fall within this category. Social safety skills include staying close to supervising adults, knowing when and how to interact with strangers, and maintaining boundaries in physical relationships. To determine what safety skills our children currently have, and those they need, we must consider all of the environments in which our children currently have, and those they need, we must consider all of the environments in which our children currently participate, as well as those in which we would like them to participate. Below is a brief tool for identifying the places a child goes, the people who tend to be present, potential physical and social risks, skills that may be needed, and a child’s current ability in using those skills.

Assessing Your Child’s Safety					
Where My Child Goes		Potential Risks		Safety Skills needed	
Places	People	Physical	Social	Skills Needed	Child Ability
Example: Grocery Store	Employees, shoppers	Prickly pears, knives High shelves Moving carts	Wandering off Cashiers with questions	Ask permission Stay near cart	Grabs items and climbs, fails to attend to his surroundings

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Once we have determined the circumstances that could pose safety risks and skills our children need, we parents, and/or others supporting the children, must actively teach those skills. Specifically, a child may need to learn to discriminate between safe and unsafe situations, avoid or leave unsafe situations, and report threats to adults. The following components work well for teaching safety skills.

1. Point out potentially unsafe aspects of settings in which children participate.

For example, we might say “see those prickly pears? They are pointy and could hurt.” We might develop safety rules for different places we go. Videos or pictures may help the children understand.

2. Practice skills for staying safe at home or in other controlled situations.

For example, we might have children ask permission before touching items that do not belong to the child. This could include role playing or acting out situations.

3. Deliver reminders before going into the settings.

For example, before entering a store, we might say, “Remember, I need you to walk right next to the cart and ask before touching.” If a child has trouble remembering the rules, visual cues can be helpful.

4. Reward children for following the safety rules.

We want to provide positive feedback and/or other rewards whenever children abide by the rules and make good decisions. For example, we might give our children special treats at the register if they stay close and ask permission before touching things.



5. Coach in different environments in which the risky situations tend to occur.

For example, we would want to teach the skills in all of the places we tend to shop and generalize them to other situations in which they could be important (e.g., other people’s houses). It may be best to start with easier or more familiar places first.

6. Gradually reduce the reminders and level of supervision as your child learns skills.

As children become more consistent in following safety rules, we can loosen the reins. This might involve, for example, allowing children to wander a bit as long as they stay within the aisle or in eyesight.

Some safety skills are more complicated than others. For example “not talking to strangers” may seem straightforward, but it requires that a child learn to discriminate between people he does and does not know. Learning to cross the street safely involves looking both directions and deciding how fast a car may be going. Skills like these will in all probability require much more practice. Parents want children to be safe, but also live as independent and fulfilled lives as possible. By following these steps, we may be able to achieve both of these goals.

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