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Stranger Danger: A Mother's Perspective

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As a mother of two children, a 6-year-old and 18-month-old, I am constantly concerned about stranger danger and the people that engage in their lives. "Stranger Danger" was something that came about years back as a result of public misperception regarding crime. When I was a child, stranger danger was constantly taught and reiterated to younger children; maybe that is why I have this mentality on the importance of teaching my children about stranger danger now. Or maybe it is because I know a person who has experienced crime at the hands of a stranger. Not "stranger danger" in the sense of being lured to harm's way with candy, or opening a home door to a stranger, but in this case, a friend was walking home from school when she was hit on the head with an object and thrown inside a van. Fortunately, she was able to get away. In this incident, the people who abducted her were not people she knew, therefore, situational awareness is something we *must* teach our children.

However, through my journey of college, I have learned statistics show children are much more likely to be harmed by a person that is close to them, for instance a family member or a close friend; basically a known face. Research further states that the majority of reported rape offences are committed by people known to the victims (Waterhouse, Reynolds, & Egan, 2016). A statistic seen across crime types ranging from assault to abductions to murder. Considering this, I understand the reasons why people might be wary of the slogan "stranger danger". However, I still have my personal perception that stranger danger should still be taught to our children, just in a different fashion.

Statistics will always be frank; we cannot cheat the numbers, as math by its nature is precise. But considering the spread of the stranger danger myth, I come to the question, have statistics changed over time? Have people? Was our criminal justice system tough on these perpetrators at some time? I figure, just like decades ago, there are people that have unseemly desires of raping, stealing, and harming the helpless. Of harming people that are more vulnerable, like woman and children. From my understanding, the "stranger danger" slogan first appeared in the 1960's, seemingly as a result of various legal campaigns that fed on this moral panic fear of crime. Eventually, it spread from generation to generation, making its way to mine. I believe that we need to teach our children about stranger danger because of the potential risk of victimization. But we also need to teach them not to be fearful, just because someone is a stranger does not mean they are necessarily going to harm you.

One issue that I personally teach my children and sisters is about being aware of sex trafficking, especially here in Houston, TX. Sex

trafficking is a truly problematic and wide-spread crime which is receiving a lot of recent and warranted attention, both publicly and legally. In a meeting with a Houston Police Officer of Precinct One, rates, trends and policy responses of the local police agencies were discussed. Most of the victims are young girls born in America and hidden in plain view. Both internationally and in the United States, girls are abducted or lured by traffickers, often kidnapped with the use of drugs or force, and then routinely raped, beaten into submission, and sometimes branded (Rockinson, Spaulding, Justice, & Owens, 2017). These girls are often being abducted by somebody they do not know. We should not just teach our younger children about the harm of leaving with or trusting a stranger, but the older ones too. Stranger abductions are extremely rare, but when they occur, they have the risk of being extremely dangerous.

When I was younger, my mother would explain to me that most strangers are nice, but bad strangers and good strangers look and act the same, so avoid all strangers. This, I do not fully agree with; as I do believe that strangers can be dangerous, I do not feel that I should teach my children that *all* strangers are out to hurt them. As my children get older, I will teach them about behaviors that may be dangerous. I will teach them to trust their inner feelings. I am sure children can tell if somebody is “creepy” and “not right,” just as adults can. If a stranger is doing something that makes them uncomfortable that is when it may become dangerous. When someone is exhibiting behaviors of trying to lure your child away or to get your child to do something wrong or that they are not comfortable with, these are the behaviors we need to teach our children to be aware of and to feel comfortable enough to resist.

So, the fact that someone is a stranger does not make them dangerous. It is what they are doing, and the feelings (what they might *want* to do) we get from them, that can make them dangerous. These are some objectives I reflect on when teaching my children about stranger danger. Everywhere we go, whether a baseball game, the store, or a park, there will always be a stranger around. We just have to teach our children that there are bad people in this world, but there are also people that can help you in a potentially dangerous situation. As parents, it is our duty to protect our children, but it is also our duty to teach our children to protect themselves. By teaching them about certain strange behaviors and what to look for, that is one step in the puzzle of keeping our children safe.

So, I do not feel that we should eliminate providing knowledge about stranger danger. I just feel we should give the appropriate education when teaching our children about the dangers of anyone, not just strangers. Sadly, being wary of strangers only covers part of the problem. The

saying “stranger danger” has been around for many years now, and I feel that many children have at least heard or know of it. Nowadays, we need to be more aware of the dangerous people on the internet; we live in a cyber-world where everybody has social media or a web presence at least. As a mother, when my kids get older, especially my daughter, I will try my best to keep social media away from her as long as possible. Many things that *can* hurt our children or *will* hurt our children, are in the confines of our homes.

We must give our children the security to speak to us about all situations, including strangers, family members, or any person in general. We should teach our children to the best of our abilities the right tactics to keep them safe in any situation that can possibly encounter through their life. Our children having the correct knowledge can make a positive difference in what takes place in their lives.

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