

Keeping Your Children Safe

Each year the Lawrence Township Police Department receives calls from parents and guardians regarding suspicious occurrences involving their children. The majority of the calls involve the child being alone and being approached by a stranger in a vehicle. The stranger asks the child if they are alright or if they need a ride. Normally the child refuses any assistance and immediately informs their parent or guardian of what occurred and the police are then notified. In the given set of circumstances, by the time the police are notified it is too late if it had been an actual abduction.

To keep your children safe, you must have rules for your children to follow and discuss safety measures with them. The following safety information has been obtained from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.:

You should not expect your children to rely solely on their judgment about people, even if the person is someone known to you or your family. It is also important not to confuse children with the concept of "strangers." The "stranger-danger" message is not effective, as danger to children is often much greater from someone they or you know. No matter whom the person is the important message to teach children is to get out of potentially dangerous situations as quickly as possible.

The thought of your children being abducted may leave you feeling frightened and unsure about how to best protect them. In an analysis of more than 8,000 attempted abductions, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children found 40% involved children between the ages of 10 and 14; 72% involved the suspect driving a vehicle; and 83% involved a child who did something proactive to escape the would-be abductor including walking, running or pulling away; yelling; kicking; attracting attention; and/or otherwise resisting.

The analysis also revealed the five most common tricks used by individuals attempting to abduct a child included offering a child a ride, offering the child candy or sweets, asking the child questions, offering the child money or using an animal.

KNOW THE RULES...

Instruct your children to always take a friend when going places, and stay with a group while attending school outings and/or standing at the bus stop. If your child walks to school, you should practice walking the route with them. Have your children become familiar with your neighborhood by pointing out landmarks and safe places to go if they are being followed or need help. Always supervise younger children or make sure there is another trusted adult present to supervise them if you cannot. Teach your children to always stay in well-lit areas, never take shortcuts and never go into isolated areas.

Teach your children the appropriate steps to take if approached or followed. If anyone tries to grab your children, tell them to draw attention to themselves and loudly yell "This person is trying to take me," or "This person is not my father/mother." Instruct your child to make every effort to escape by walking, running or pulling away; yelling; kicking; attracting attention; and/or otherwise resisting.

Tell your children if they are ever followed by someone to get away from that person as quickly as possible. They should go in the opposite direction than the one in which the person is traveling and

quickly try to get to a spot where a trusted adult can help them. Advise your children to tell you or another trusted adult what happened.

Teach your children it is more important to get out of a threatening situation than it is to be polite. Children should be taught just because someone tries to engage them in conversation doesn't mean they should talk to that person or forget their safety rules. Tell them, if anyone bothers them or makes them feel sad, scared or confused, to trust their feelings and immediately get away from that person.

Talk openly to your children about safety and encourage them to tell you or another trusted adult if anyone or anything makes them feel sad, scared or confused. Teach them it is OK to tell you what happened and they will not be "tattletales" for telling. Discuss safety issues with your children so they will understand the need to take precautions. Advise older children about steps they can take to help safeguard themselves. Pay attention to your children and listen to them. If you don't, someone else may. And others may have ulterior motives for befriending your children.

Practice basic-safety skills with your children by creating "teachable moments" to make sure they understand the safety messages and are able to use them in real-life situations. Help your children identify trusted adults who may be able to help them if they need assistance. If an incident occurs in your community and your children ask you about it, speak frankly but with reassurance. Explain to your children you want to discuss the safety rules with them so they will know what to do if they are ever confronted with a difficult situation. Make sure you have "safety nets," the plans and people you've put in place to contact so your children know there is always someone available to help them.

Be involved in your children's activities. As an active participant you'll have a better opportunity to observe how the adults in charge interact with your children. If you are concerned about anyone's behavior, discuss your concerns with the sponsoring organization. Notice when anyone shows one or all of your children a great deal of attention or tries to give them gifts. Take the time to talk to your children about the person and find out why that person is acting in this way. Tell your children to never accept money or gifts from anyone unless you have told them it is OK.

Remember to never leave children unattended in a vehicle, whether it is running or not. A child should never be left alone or with an adult the child does not know in a vehicle. The potential dangers to their safety from being left alone in a vehicle outweigh any perceived convenience. Remind children to never approach a vehicle or engage in a conversation with anyone in a vehicle who they do not know and trust and without first getting your permission.

Know where your children are and whom they are with at all times. Tell your children they should never go anywhere with anyone without first getting your permission. Remind your children not to accept a ride from anyone unless you have said it is OK. Know your children's friends and their families. Be clear with your children about the places and homes they may visit. Make it a rule for your children to check-in with you when they arrive at or depart from a particular location or if there is a change in plans. You should also let them know when you're running late or if your plans have changed to show them the rule is for safety purposes and is not being used to "check up" on them. Teach your children to never leave school with anyone unless they check first with you or another trusted adult, even if someone tells them it is an emergency.

Know your childcare providers, friends, neighbors, coworkers and employees. Do background screening and reference checks on everyone who works in your home, particularly those people who

care for your children. Check references with other families who have used the childcare providers. Make sure you know as much about them as they do about you and your family. Also be cautious about the type of information you share and level of access you give to friends, neighbors and coworkers. For access to sex-offender registries, visit the Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Website at www.nsopw.gov. Links to each state's sex offender website are available on this site, or visit NJSP.org or New Jersey's Sex Offender Registry.

Remember you are your best resource for better safeguarding your family. Stay alert, informed and focused about personal-security issues. Being available and taking time to really know and listen to our children helps build feelings of safety and security.

This article is presented to you by the Lawrence Township Public Safety Advisory Committee in conjunction with the Lawrence Township Police Department. Meetings of the Public Safety Advisory Committee are held on the 2nd Tuesday of each month at 6:30 PM. These meetings are open to the public in the Manager's Conference Room located at Town Hall.

Sources: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children