

# Protecting Our Children: Beyond 'Stranger Danger'

*“Safety and security don’t just happen, they are the result of collective consensus and public investment. We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society, a life free of violence and fear.”*  
-- Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa

In her autobiography, Marilyn Van Derbur, the 1958 Miss America and a survivor of incest, reflects on the people who had harmed her in her life. She writes, ““I am amazed that, after more than forty years of travel, I was never accosted or attacked by a stranger—only by friends, acquaintances, and people I worked with (*Miss America by Day: Lessons Learned from Ultimate Betrayals and Unconditional Love*).

With rare exception, it is not the peculiar looking stranger in the trench-coat on the periphery of the park that we need to warn our children about. 90% of all child sexual abuse is committed by people who are known and trusted by the children abused. And yet, so much of our child-protection efforts revolve around “Stranger Danger.” If we are serious about wanting to protect our children, we need to retool our child abuse prevention efforts.

Here are a few things I recommend you to do to better protect your child:

- 1. Teach your child to respect his or her instincts.** Allow him or her to choose whether or not they are hugged, kissed, or touched. Don’t force him/her to give or receive affection. It’s tempting, especially during the upcoming holiday season when you may be seeing relatives that you have not seen in a while—to make your child give a hug or a kiss to a grandparent, Uncle, or Aunt. If the child doesn’t want to, don’t make him or her. It’s not that your family member is a scary or dangerous person, it’s just that your child does not know the relative well enough to feel comfortable expressing that kind of affection with the relative. Forcing a child to disregard his or her feelings of discomfort, breaks down the child’s natural defenses and makes him or her more susceptible to a predator.
- 2. Allow your child to say stop.** Allow your child to set limits on touching. If you are playing a tickling, touching, or wrestling game and a child says “stop it,” stop it. Demand that other people in your family respect your child’s limits as well. This teaches your child that he or she has the right to set limits and have those limits respected.
- 3. Teach your child proper names for body parts.** Research shows that children who know the proper words for their body parts are less likely to be sexually abused than children who are not taught the proper names for their body parts. Teaching a child that body parts are so embarrassing and shameful to talk about that they need silly nicknames makes it much more likely that a child will not tell you if someone touches their private parts. When a child knows the proper names for their body parts, it puts a predator on notice that there is an atmosphere of openness and dialogue in a home and that if they harm your child, it is more likely to be discovered and disclosed.
- 4. Listen to your child.** Children rarely come right out and tell a parent what is happening. They’ll often test the waters and tell part of the story or talk about what happened as if it happened to a friend to gauge a parent’s reaction. Alternately, a child may say something vague like “I hate the school bus.” It could be that the school bus is loud and hot or it may be that something inappropriate is going on in the school bus. Before dismissing your child’s comments about the school bus, stop and really listen. Ask questions. Why doesn’t your child want to ride the school bus? What is the school bus like? What happens on the school bus?
- 5. Teach your child not to keep secrets.** Teach your child that no one should ask your child to keep a secret from you. At the [Children’s Center for Hope and Healing](#), we teach children that there are happy surprises which we are going

to tell people about soon (like birthday presents or the ending to a story your brother is reading), but that we don't have secrets that we're not allowed to tell and we don't keep secrets that make us feel sad or worried.

6. **Avoid one child-one adult situations.** 90% of all child sexual abuse occurs in situations where there is only one adult and one child present. Don't allow your own child to be present in these situations and demand that no children be placed in these situations. When a child is going to have one on one time with an adult, attempt to schedule that time in observable places (like parks and restaurants). Ask your child about how things went when your child was alone with a relative. Listen for specific details and watch your child's mood.
7. **Respect yourself.** Your child learns by watching you. If you accept abusive behavior in your home from someone in your home, your child will be at greater risk of doing so also. For better or worse, our children follow our examples.

If you would like to learn more about how to reduce the likelihood that your child will be the victim of sexual abuse, you can contact the [Children's Center for Hope and Healing](#) at 770-532-6530 or [email me](#).