

Four Reasons to Avoid Teaching Stranger Danger to Children

Are you the parent of a young child? If so, I'm willing to bet that some well-intentioned person has sent you a YouTube video called [Child Abduction \(Social Experiment\)](#). I've been sent this video 5 times over the past several years, the most recent instance being last week.

The video goes thus: a guy named Joey approaches various parents at a public playground. He asks them if they tell their kids never to speak to strangers. They all solemnly assure him that they do. Joey then approaches their kid, accompanied by his dog. Each of the kids not only speaks to him but also ends up walking off with him, lured by the promise of seeing puppies.

In many ways, "Child Abduction (Social Experiment)" embodies the "stranger danger" hysteria that has permeated modern parenting. The video has been viewed 13 million times. And it's easy to see why. It's dramatic stuff. But once you move past the initial scare of seeing the kids walking off with Joey, it quickly becomes clear that the message is not only silly but possibly also harmful.

My children are ages 3 and 1. Scenes like the one in the video play out in our lives on a daily basis. We live in a neighborhood with many dog owners, and my children love animals. So we regularly stop on the street as my kids pet various dogs that pass by. One particularly indulgent lady even let my 3-year-old try to walk her dog on its leash. (That did not go well). Do I tell my kids not to speak to strangers? No. I don't. Here's why:

- 1. It's unenforceable and thus undermines the point**

It is impossible to teach young children not to speak to strangers. The complications are endless. For starters, how on earth will you even define who is a stranger and who isn't? Everyone is a stranger initially. When do they enter the "OK-to-speak-to" zone? And sometimes you interact regularly with someone for years (e.g., that neighbor you greet when you mow your lawn) but they're still a stranger. Also, there will be situations where your child has to speak to a stranger. That's unavoidable. Older children can understand that it's OK to interact with strangers in a limited way, in certain contexts. But young children are not yet able to grasp this distinction.

The Child Abduction (Social Experiment) video provides little context, but I think it's very likely the children observed their parents talking with Joey before he approached them and therefore assumed he was not a stranger. I tell my kids: "Don't go with anyone unless I tell you to." That's clear. If kids are only being told "Don't speak with strangers" then once they assume someone is not a stranger, they'll also be fine walking off with them.

2. Non-strangers are a much bigger danger

Joey concludes his video by telling viewers that over 700 children are abducted each day. That's a terrifying statistic, but it is deeply misleading. He appears to be referencing the total number of children who are [reported](#) missing in America. That number includes kids who run away or get lost. Moreover, 4 out of 5 [child abductions](#) involve custody issues between parents. Telling your kid not to speak to strangers won't make any difference there. Only around 100 children *per year* are [abducted](#) by a stranger in the manner depicted in the video.

The unsettling truth is that your child is far more likely to be harmed by a person they know than a complete stranger. In a way, it's easy to worry about evil strangers lurking in the bushes. It's a lot more uncomfortable for parents to turn the lens on the people close to them. But that's what we have to do to keep our children safe.

3. It hinders a child's upbringing

Teaching kids good manners is a critical part of parenting. This is one of the most important things parents can do to set their children up for success in their adult lives. In her wonderful book *Bringing Up Béb : One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting*, Pamela Druckerman describes how French parents teach their children to say first "bonjour" and later "au revoir" to everyone they meet. "Saying (such words) forces a child out of his self-centered bubble, and makes him realize that other people have needs and feelings too," she writes. Parents cannot teach their children how to interact with empathy and politeness in social contexts if they expect their kids to run away screaming whenever a new person says "hello" to them.

4. Kids will live a life of fear and loneliness

We live in a society that is deeply polarized. We assume people are evil based on their social media posts. And I believe telling children not to speak to strangers perpetuates this problem. These kids grow up believing the whole world is a potential threat to them. I'm not saying that strangers are never a danger. Sadly, there is a small group of people out there who might hurt your child. Parents need to find a good balance between teaching their children about legitimate dangers while also helping them see that the majority of humanity means us no harm. Even if someone has very different political views than us, they're probably a decent person and we may have a lot in common with them.

There are many excellent resources available for parents to help them keep their kids safe. If you're just starting out, you could visit the websites of the [Coalition for Children](#) or the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#). Whatever you do, please stop sharing that worthless YouTube video.

What other resources do you recommend to help parents identify

threats and educate their kids?

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[Image Credit: [Child Abduction \(Social Experiment\)](#)]