



Kidpower Back-to-School Safety Tips

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As small children start to become more independent and move on their own out in the world, parents often have many questions about how to support their children in being safe as they start to meet new people and interact with other children and adults.

Some parents worry because their children are “too shy” and will get anxious and withdrawn around people they don’t know well. Other parents worry because their children have no discretion and will treat everyone as their new best friend. Some parents worry that their children will be so eager to please that they might be dominated by others. Other parents worry that their children will push against the boundaries of both peers and adults.

Here are some Kidpower answers for some of the concerns that we hear from many parents and other caring adults with small children in their lives:

How can I best protect my children’s safety before having them be on their own with others for the first time at school or with another group?

There is no substitute for supervising the people who are caring for your children. No matter where your children are, it is important to make sure that the people responsible for their well-being are ensuring a safe, respectful, caring environment where the adults are paying close attention and fully in charge.

What you can do to prepare your children to learn to protect their own well-being is to give them a strong foundation of the “People Safety” skills that Kidpower teaches. Most problems can be prevented if children and their adults have practiced how to ask for help; set boundaries; protect their feelings; stay in charge of their bodies; know their safety plan if they get lost; and check first with their grownups before they change their plan about where they are going, what they are doing, and who they are with. It’s not enough just to tell children what to do; they also need to practice.

Resources such as Kidpower workshops and our Kidpower Safety Comics provide useful tools for introducing and practicing these basic People Safety skills and concepts with your children in a fun age-appropriate way.

How can I encourage my children when they are with groups of children their age at school or elsewhere to get along well with their peers and respect the adults in charge while still taking care of themselves?

Good boundary-setting tools prepare children (and people of any age) to speak up for themselves and others in respectful powerful ways. Getting along well means knowing how to ask for what you want and explain what you don’t want while understanding that some things are not a choice

(e.g. you have to be quiet at circle time or story hour and keep your hands to yourself). Getting along well also means understanding that you won't always get your way, so you have to listen and learn about other points of view in order to play in ways that are caring and fun for everyone. Having clear rules and understanding how they work help to prevent vulnerability.

No matter what, your children need to know that problems should not be secrets and, if they have a problem, their job is to keep asking until they get help.

What should we be teaching our children about interacting with adults they know?

Some children are very friendly right away and others are very shy or reserved at first. We believe that younger children should not have to engage socially with adults until they feel ready. Being polite by acknowledging people socially is an adult need, not a child's.

Children can learn to greet an adult they know by making eye contact, waving, sharing hands, and saying, "Hello" or "Good-bye." However, this should be suggested gently rather than forced. If a child finds greeting new people to be difficult, the best plan is to model the behavior yourself and to let the child decide to greet others in his or her own way at his or her own pace.

If an adult is a family member or close friend, you might need to explain to this person that the rule in your family is that children don't have to hug or kiss anyone or sit on anyone's lap unless they want to. Children get a very mixed message about their personal boundaries when they are pressured to be affectionate. Our Kidpower principle is that touch or games for play, teasing, and affection should be the choice of each person, safe, and allowed by the grownups in charge.

Finally, children are very literal and parents need to be explicit with their children in different settings about what the plan is about where they are going, who they are with and what they are doing. Except in emergencies where they cannot check first, a child's job is to check first with their parents before changing the plan, even if they are with adults they know.

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