

CHILD SAFETY TIPS

From a talk by Officer Garrett
In the March 2006 VRA Meeting

Officer Garrett talked with the adults about various ways they can keep their children safe. The two most emphasized topics were communication and having a plan:

Communication.

- Parents need to create the type of relationship with their children that fosters open communication. The child needs to feel comfortable talking with the parent about problems, no matter the situation or timing. Tell children that you love them very much and no matter what they tell you, you will still love them.
- A parent should have a discussion with the child before dropping him or her off at a new babysitter's house or new location to help the child to feel comfortable.
- Parents should not have the attitude that their way is the only right way and children have no say in anything. Discussing smaller events (like babysitting arrangements) prepares the child to talk about bigger issues if it ever becomes necessary.
- Parents need to talk with their children about what firefighters and police officers look like. Often, when there is a fire, children are frightened of firefighters (all the gear makes the firefighters look like Darth Vader). Then the scared kids will hide in closets or under beds, making it harder for firefighters to rescue them. Parents can take their kids to fire stations or special events to meet firefighters and get comfortable with their appearance.
- Likewise, a child should know that when they have a problem they can trust and talk to police officers. Parents can introduce their kids to police officers if they see them on the street. That happens to police officers all the time and they don't mind. (The Village police officer Brian Parsley is usually present at VRA meetings; you are welcome to bring your kids to meet him.)
- It would also be good for children to know what an ambulance looks like and what a paramedic looks like.
- If you ever have a serious situation where the child is telling you something horrible, KEEP CALM during the discussion, even if you are panicking on the inside. It is very important that the child feel comfortable enough to keep talking to you until it is all finished. If you become emotional during the discussion the child will have a harder time communicating later with the police officer. Most children mimic the adult's response, so if the adult fell apart emotionally, the child will too.

- After a child has discussed a major issue with an adult, it is the adult's responsibility to decide what to do next. Do NOT force the child to make decisions. The child has done his or her part by telling the adult; now it is the adult's responsibility to take action.
- Teaching a child how to communicate with confidence empowers the child when there is an emergency.
- Always tell your child when you leave the house, even if it is just for a few minutes, so that he or she doesn't panic when you aren't at home. Children need to always tell parents when they leave the house.

Have a Plan.

- You need to sit down with child and make a plan for what to do in an emergency. Tell them who they can go to if they have a problem (parent, teacher, friend of the family, school nurse, police officer, people in the school office, etc.)
- If a child gets lost in a store or a mall, the child should go talk to someone at a sales counter. The child should NOT just approach any adult. Teach children how to locate a sales counter and how to identify a sales clerk.
- When you go to a place where you might be separated from your kids, pick a location to meet in case someone gets lost.
- When you go to a store, DON'T let your kids run around, ESPECIALLY in the toy section. Toy sections are where pedophiles go to snatch kids who are playing alone. If your child begs to visit the toy section, do your shopping first, then accompany him or her to the toy section for a while.
- Have a code word for when someone other than you unexpectedly picks up the child. Tell the child to refuse to go with anyone who doesn't have the code word. (And if you do send someone else to pick up the child, make sure you tell him or her the code word!)
- Teach children when and how to call 911. Teach children how to call 911 from a cell phone (most kids don't realize you have to push the "talk" button before the call goes through). If possible, program the local police number into your cell phone (calling 911 from a cell phone sends the call to a central switchboard which then has to connect you to the local emergency services).
- Teach children their addresses. Many kids don't know this information, but it is essential if an ambulance or police officer has to come.
- Teach children their parents' full names in case they get lost.
- Teach children that abductors do not always look crazy or weird. Tell kids not to talk to strangers. Strangers will try to play games, tempt the child with something fun (puppy,

candy), or ask for a child's help. Tell the child especially not to talk to strangers in cars. If a stranger in a car wants to speak with a child, the child should not stop walking and should tell the stranger loudly to go away, and that he or she is going to tell Mom and Dad. For a potential abductor, this is an immediate red flag and is likely to make the abductor think twice.

- Children should not walk alone, even in the middle of the day. Make plans with your children to have them walk with friends.

After finishing her presentation to the adults, Officer Garrett answered some questions:

Q: At what age is it appropriate for kids to be able to play alone with their friends?

A: When the child is old enough to communicate when something is wrong, and when they are able to have a plan. (Some kids can't do this even at age 7 or 8.)

Q: Is it a good idea to give a child a whistle to blow when he or she is in danger?

A: Maybe. If the child blows the whistle and then yells at the adult, "Leave me alone!" it might work. But then again, other adults might think that the abductor is just trying to get the child to stop making noise. It would be better for the child to yell and scream.

Q: What identification records should you have for your kids?

A: A current school picture, finger prints (finger print kits are available at the Village Office), dental records, and a hair sample.

Q: What should you do if a potential abductor threatens you with a weapon?

A: That is your call, but you should know that 90% of people who go with an armed abductor are subsequently killed. Your best chance might be to fight at the beginning.

Q: My son thinks he can beat up anyone who wants to kidnap him. Is that okay?

A: Yes, actually, as long as he doesn't also feel like he can go to dangerous places and still be okay. It is good for kids to think about possibilities and plan to struggle and fight. Being very vocal, moving around, and hitting the perpetrator is the best way to get away.

Q: Is it okay for a parent to tell a child that if something happens they should knock on a nearby door?

A: That is probably okay. It would also be a good idea to have the child scream until someone comes outside.

Q: Are there resources if the Village wants to start a neighborhood watch program?

A: Yes. Anyone who is interested or has other questions can call Officer Garrett on her personal office line at: (510) 642-3722.