

“Don’t Talk to Strangers and Other Parenting Myths”

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Being a parent is truly tough. Everyone has a strong opinion on what’s right, but in the end, there aren’t any right answers. There are different philosophies and different cultural influences that affect how we are taught to be parents and, subsequently, how we make parenting decisions.

What really makes it tough is that information changes all the time: One day, we are told to put babies to sleep on their tummies, then the “rule” changes and the new wisdom is to put them on their backs; or we memorize the food pyramid, religiously govern our family’s meals, then ‘they’ go and change the rules about this, too. Yeesh! No wonder we’re confused!

Below are four parenting myths that are just not true. Some of these decisions can make a life or death difference in what you do and what you teach your children.

MYTH #1

I am a careful, watchful parent and my kids are well behaved, so they will never get lost.

7 out of 10 children will experience being lost at least once in their lives. 90% of families will be impacted by a lost child experience and the traumatic memories of these incidents will forever remain in the minds of both the parent and child.¹ A child can get lost in public places, such as malls, beaches, amusement parks and airports, because they are curious, quick, and independent. We teach our children to be that way and when they do get lost, it is not a measure of bad parenting, it just happens. It could be an innocent game of hide and seek under a clothing rack or an interest in the cartoon character painted on a cereal box that the child sees down the next aisle.

As parents, we use preventative measure to try to protect our children. We diligently use car seats, baby monitors, fire detectors, outlet covers, etc. because we know that it is always better to be prepared than to deny something bad could happen and do nothing until it is too late. Therefore, it is actually the *good* parent that realizes this, and prepares the family with information on what to do if a child does get lost.

MYTH #2:

Teach your children, “Don’t talk to strangers.”

With today's overwhelming media coverage, many people are overly sensitive to stories about child abductions and predators. Not to say that you shouldn't be concerned, you definitely should. But, unfortunately, this paranoia has created a world in which we do not trust anyone, and perhaps do so at our own peril. For example, when a young child gets lost, they may be too young or too scared to ask for help. Some parents unknowingly instill an extreme fear in their children that "all strangers are bad and going to steal you" so the child is simply unable or unwilling to ask any adult for help if lost.

One of the best safety practices is to teach your child to find another mommy, a woman with young children, if they get lost and ask that mommy for help. There is a subtle but important difference in empowering your child to ask a stranger for help vs. having a stranger approach your child unsolicited. Another mommy can be instrumental in helping reunite your child safely. Therefore, not every stranger is bad. Some can actually help and should be sought out when a child is lost.

MYTH #3:

Don't put identification on the outside of your child's clothing.

Identification can include your child's name, their address, a phone number or other information. While it is not typically harmful to put your child's name on the outside of their clothing, it isn't helpful either. It can allow a predator to utilize the child's name as part of their effort to win the child's trust. However, most young children will willingly give a stranger their name – after all, we teach them to say their names proudly when someone asks them in our presence. Even without the child's name, there are dozens of ways that a predator can lure your child away. *Putting the child's address on their clothing is actually very dangerous and should not be done.* If your address falls into the wrong hands, your home becomes a place where a predator can go after your child at anytime.

A cell phone number is the best type of identification to give your child. Rather than having your child simply memorize their home phone number, if you and your child are separated in a public place, another adult (the mommy your child asks for help) can call you and reunite you with your child quickly. Having your cell phone number on your child is a much more efficient way to get your child back to you, rather than having to repeatedly check your home and then call back the adult who found your lost child.

Most importantly, put the cell number in a visible place on your child. You don't want to have a stranger looking inside of your child's clothing, shoes, or other personal places that require the stranger to "handle" the child to reveal contact information. Put the safe contact information - cell phone number – outside of your child's clothing using a sticker or one of the I.D. tags sold in stores, so that it is easily identifiable and accessible.

MYTH #4

Having my entire family dress in the same color when going to a crowded place helps us stay together.

It may be cute but it is ineffective to put your family in the same colors unless those colors are very bright. A small child can be much more easily spotted if they are in bright green or bright yellow. Wearing such colors (hats, shirts, jackets, etc.) can make it easier for you to see them and if you need to get other people's help in spotting your lost child, the bright colors make it easier for them, too.

It is more helpful to describe a child's physical attributes (hair color, eye color, height, weight, etc.) when you can also note that they are wearing a unique color. Keeping that clothing as a special outfit for when you do venture away from home, you will also be able to more easily remember that clothing if your child gets lost when you are understandably stressed. It doesn't really matter what you are wearing – the child is who you and the others are looking for. Dress your children in very bright clothing that you can easily spot and remember.

These four parenting myths are just some of the unfortunate bad advice that has been passed down to us generations of parents. It is time to recognize that these myths are false and potentially harmful. You can be a smart parent by preparing yourself and your family in case your child does wander off in a public place – helping your child and you to know how get reunited faster and safer.

About the Author:

Alyssa Dver is a Family Safety Expert and CEO of Wander Wear® Inc., (www.wanderwear.com), a parent-run company that advocates child safety in public places. She is a frequent speaker and quoted resource for lost child prevention. Wander Wear® develops practical information and affordable products that can quickly and easily reunite lost children with their parents or caregivers. She is the mother of two boys ages 7 and 3.

Reference:

1, Wander Wear parent survey, 2003.