



COMMUNITY POLICING in Snohomish County

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Inside This Issue

**Child Personal Safety—
Keeping Your Child Safe**
page 1

**Child Personal Safety—
What to Teach Your Child**
page 2

Sexual Abuse page 2

**Child Personal Safety— The
Teen Years & Internet
Safety** page 3

If Your Child is Home Alone
page 3

**Child Personal Safety—
Resources** page 4

Child Personal Safety— *Keeping Your Child Safe*

Just about every week we see on the evening news about a local police agency warning neighborhoods of a male in a vehicle trying to lure young children (usually girls from 9 to 14 years old) from the sidewalk. The TV news shows a drawing of a suspect and might broadcast a description of a car or truck and a license number, urging anyone who sees the suspect or the vehicle to call police. Parents restrict their children to the back yard. They instruct their children that if a stranger approaches them they should run in the opposite direction screaming.

If we believe the media, strangers abducting children is a major problem. But, only 9 children per month are abducted by strangers, nationally, according to the FBI. We fear that a stranger is going to take away our child to sexually assault them. Statistically, 93% of child sexual assault victims know their attacker according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The attacker might be their single mother's boyfriend, a charismatic teacher at school, a counselor at camp, a coach, a clergyman. Someone who the victim knows, trusts, or has authority over the victim.

The threat to your child comes not from that stranger but from someone closer to your family. Strangers bent on sexually assaulting a child cannot take the time to "groom" the child to accept the assault.

As insidious and threatening as that sounds, you can teach your child to cope with this kind of threat without making them paranoid about life. In fact, they can enjoy life much better by understanding how to read behavior instead of putting up a wall to strangers. After all, we all encounter strangers. Strangers can add to our lives. They can help us and your child.

"DON'T TALK TO STRANGERS."
Our natural tendency is to tell our kids not to talk to strangers. We easily fear "stranger danger". We do not know how they will behave. Maybe they are nice, maybe they will do us harm. We do not question "stranger danger" because it makes sense on the surface.

Kids get confused who is a stranger. We adults violate the rule all of the time. So if it is not safe to talk to strangers, why are the adults talking to strangers. And if we make exceptions, it is just too confusing to remember the exceptions.

It is better to teach a child a few basic "rules" that are consistent and clear for your child to use as guidance on how to behave with other people- strangers, friends and acquaintances. Your child should be able to communicate and act around people so that they protect themselves from sexual assault when you are away from them.



Sexual Abuse— Defined

What is the sexual abuse of a minor? Most definitions include the following elements:

1. Sexual activity by an adult, adolescent or another child
2. Using a child for sexual purposes with or without consent
3. Acts of exposure
4. Sexual touching
5. Oral/anal/vaginal penetration
6. Exposing or involving in porn or prostitution

Sexual Abuse— Some Statistics

We have already mentioned that 93% of child sexual abuse victims know their attacker. Some other facts include:

- 1 in 3 females; 1 in 6 males will have unwanted sexual contact with an adult. And a family member is most likely the abuser!
- Children who are sexual abuse victims rarely lie. Only 1 to 4% of sexual abuse accusations are fabricated. So if your child says they have been abused, believe them.

Child Personal Safety— *What to Teach Your Child*

So, if you are not supposed to teach your child not to talk to strangers what do you teach? Your message becomes more sophisticated as your child gets older. Like teaching math, your child needs to learn how to add, subtract, then multiply, then divide before they can do equations or calculus.

At the youngest age. Simplest is best. Two messages to your child should be to “Check First” and to go with their gut feelings.

- **Check First.** Always have your child “Check First” with you or the adult who is taking care of them before going any place, before they accept anything, and before they get into a car with anyone.
- **Go with the Gut.** Let your child know that it is ok to say “No” to anyone who wants them to do anything that makes your child feel uncomfortable. That’s if someone wants to touch them, makes them feel creepy, or wants them to do something that your child thinks is wrong. Have your child get out of the situation as quickly as possible.

As your child gets older. Reinforce Check First and going with their gut. But as your child becomes more mobile and independent add the following:

- **Teach basic sex education.** Be sure your child knows how to identify their body parts. Also, don’t allow “body secrets” in you family. Within the privacy of your family, your

child should be able to tell you if someone has touched them in an inappropriate place. Sexual predators rely on secrecy to get away with their assaults. Also, don’t teach “good touch, bad touch”! Sexual predators start subtly. They frequently go to great lengths not to hurt your child. After all if they do, they risk your child complaining to you about being hurt. Also, when a sexual predator has sexually assaulted your child, your child might think the experience to have been pleasurable.

- **Go in a group.** If your child does go somewhere have them go with a friend or friends. There is always strength in numbers. Encourage them to take a whistle that they can blow if they are in trouble. If a stranger does try to harm them they should run in the opposite direction, yelling (“Your not my Dad!” is good.)

Be aware of groomers. Sexual predators begin slowly, casually watching for signs of resistance or acceptance. They may give your child gifts or make promises. They may also threaten your child with harm or demand secrecy. This is where your child’s use of “check first” and using their gut feelings will come in handy. They need to understand that they can say no politely but firmly, even to an adult. This is where your child can learn that people can be tricky – sometimes nice people do bad things.



Child Personal Safety– *The Teen Years & Internet Safety*

The teen years. As teenagers, kids become more independent. They may not need to “Check First” for every situation now, but if there is doubt it still can be an important guideline for new situations that arise in their lives.

Communications continues to be important. Talk to your child. Know what they are doing in their lives. Many parents give their teens cell phones. They are a good “leash” and a good security tool if your child gets into trouble (an example in Snohomish County- teen girl who called teen girlfriend with her cell phone warning about stalker). Communications goes beyond modern devices like cell phones. As you work with your child, remember:

- Honor you child’s feelings - Don’t dismiss or minimize them; kids rarely lie.
- Develop strong communication skills with your children.
- Meet your teen’s defiance with discussion vs. discipline; this teaches them courage to resist. Act: don’t react to disclosures.

Internet Safety. Your teenager probably can run circles around you in using a computer and the internet. The internet has become a powerful tool for your child to do research for school and to communicate with friends and strangers.

The internet has also proven to be a fertile playground for sexual predators. In chat rooms especially, strangers can become “friends”.

Your teen can talk to anyone in the world. A sexual predator can groom your child from a distance. Not only that, a sexual predator will lie. He (a 50 year old, with a pot belly) will tell your child he is a 14 year old boy who likes playing football, as the quarterback of course. Your child has no way to verify who this person really is. Even if he sends a picture, you cannot be sure that it is really him.

Keep in mind these following hints:

- The number one sign that your child might be in trouble in the internet is if he or she spends a lot of time alone, especially at night, on the computer.
- The number two sign of trouble is of your teen spends an inordinate amount of time in “chat room”.
- Get your kid to teach you the computer and how they use it
- Locate the computer in a central place, like the family room where people often pass by it.
- Agree to a contract with your teen (by discussion)- be clear on the family rules on where and where not to go to on the internet.

Tough subject for everyone. You may think that your child would tell you if they were sexually assaulted. They may not. They may want to protect the abuser, feel guilty for feeling pleasure, be scared, want to protect their family. You need to learn all you can about sexual predators, use your gut feelings, and be sensitive to your children.

If Your Child is Home Alone

- **Use the buddy system.** *Let one of your child’s trusted friends stay with your child until you return.*
- **Your child should know-** *their full name and their parents’ full names along with their telephone number and address.*
- **Adults can get help from adults.** *Your child should understand that adults can get help from adults. One of the classic luring ploys is to convince a child to help find a kitten, puppy, or some lost item.*



COMMUNITY POLICING in Snohomish County

Snohomish County Sheriff
M/S 606 - 3000 Rockefeller Ave.
Everett, WA 98201

Inside This Issue

Child Personal Safety– <i>Keeping Your Child Safe</i>	page 1
Child Personal Safety– <i>What to Teach Your Child</i>	page 2
Sexual Abuse	page 2
Child Personal Safety– <i>The Teen Years & Internet Safety</i>	page 3
If Your Child is Home Alone	page 3
Child Personal Safety– <i>Resources</i>	page 4

Rick Bart, Sheriff
Snohomish County
3000 Rockefeller Ave.
M/S 606
Fourth Floor County
Courthouse
Everett, WA 98201
(425) 388-3393
www.co.snohomish.wa.us/sheriff/

Steve Moller– Editor



1-800-
CRIME-13

Providence Sexual
Assault Center
24-Hour Crisis Line:

425-252-4800

Child Personal Safety– Resources

Here are some places where you can learn more:

Books:

- “Parents Who Think Too Much” by Anne Cassidy
- “Raising Sage Kids in an Unsafe World” by Jim Wagner
- “Protecting the Gift” by Gavin de-Becker
- “The Right Touch” by Sandy Kleven
- Books by Carla Van Dam

Web Sites:

- Providence Sexual Assault Center-
http://www.providence.org/everett/Women_Health/e45Sexual.htm

- National Center for Missing & Exploited Children-
www.missingkids.com/
- Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs-
<http://www.wcsap.org/>
- Darkness to Light-
<http://darkness2light.org/>
- Netsmartz..org-
<http://www.netsmartz.org/>
- Get Net Wise-
<http://www.getnetwise.org/>
- Parent’s Guide to the Internet-
<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/internet/index.html>