



Key Children's Safety Messages

The four key children's safety messages outlined in this document form the foundation of the *Safe Start: Protective Behaviours for Children* program. For further information please contact Children's Safety Australia via tel: (07) 3379 4475 (International 61 7 3379 4475) or email: admin@chilsafety.org.au.

1. I am special, so are you!

Aim: To build a healthy self esteem and encourage respect and empathy for others.

The link between self esteem and mental, physical and emotional wellbeing has long been recognised. In relation to sexual abuse, children with a high self esteem are less likely to be targeted by offenders, are more likely to stop the abuse and are more likely to disclose abuse.

a) **Appreciating individuality:**

Children should be encouraged to appreciate and take pride in their individuality including their appearance, cultural and family background, gender, talents and abilities, likes and dislikes. It is also important for children to appreciate the individuality of others and to recognise that being different is what makes us special.

As concerned adults we can assist in boosting children's self esteem by appreciating their individuality, praising them for what they do well, constructively correcting them when needed and encouraging them when they lack confidence undertaking a particular task.

b) **Expect Respect:**

People treat us how we allow them to. Teaching children to expect respect from themselves and others is an important step to building a healthy self esteem. We can do this by assisting children to set boundaries of unacceptable behaviour from others. Discuss steps children could take if people "cross the line" of acceptable behaviour.

We must also teach children the importance of showing others respect and how they can do this. Consider setting rules of acceptable behaviour at home or in the classroom to ensure boundaries are readily identified and agreed consequences are consistently enforced when a rule is broken. For best results, develop rules and consequences in consultation with children.

c) **Expressing ourselves assertively:**

Encourage children to take ownership of their feelings and to express themselves in a way that demonstrates self respect as well as respect for others. Assertive communication is a skill that does not come naturally for most people and needs to be practised regularly. We can develop assertiveness skills by: understanding different communication styles (passive, aggressive, passive aggressive and assertive); acknowledging the benefits of assertive communication; and practising to communicate assertively.

d) **Building Resilience:**

We can help to build children's resilience by encouraging them to develop: a habit of positive thinking; an optimistic outlook on life; and a problem-solving response to challenging situations. Rather than rescuing children or telling them what to do, adults are encouraged to discuss options and to provide support.

Other Self Esteem Building Strategies:

- Say I Love You
- Develop and maintain special daily rituals
- Let your children help you
- Take an interest in their sports or hobbies
- Eat meals as a family
- Seek out one-on-one opportunities often
- Praise desirable behaviour (praise should be genuine and specific)
- Correct firmly but lovingly
- Respect their choices
- Make your child/children a priority in your life

2. **Safety is my right**

Aim: To identify and effectively respond to potential unsafe situations.

a) **Right to safety:**

We all have the right to be safe with people. It is important for children to be aware of this right and understand if they do not feel safe that they can do something about it.

b) **Corresponding responsibilities:**

Having the right to be safe with people means children have a responsibility to maintain their own safety and to take action if their safety is threatened, such as going to a safe place and telling an adult they trust*. They also have a responsibility to respect others' right to safety. Parents and teachers may discuss how children can respect others' right to safety, for example by treating others with respect and by assisting people in need of help. *Note: *This responsibility does not remove the responsibility of protective adults to keep children safe.*

c) **Preventative safety measures:**

The safety messages contained in this handout do not seek to impose unnecessary restrictions on children's lives or in any way diminish their spirit of fun and adventure. Children are instead encouraged to think about how they can maintain their safety while doing the things they enjoy, accepting that there will be a degree of risk involved.

In almost every situation we can reduce identified risks by putting in place simple safety measures. Safety measures can be specific to an activity, for example wearing a helmet and appropriate footwear when riding a bike. Other safety measures are more general, such as making sure a parent is aware of children's whereabouts, who they are with and when they are expected home. Parents and teachers are encouraged to assist children to identify risks in the activities they enjoy and to implement safety measures to reduce them. For example ask, "How could we keep ourselves safe...(doing a particular activity)?"

d) **Early warning signs**

Early warning signs are our body's way of telling us we don't feel safe. They include butterflies in the tummy, sweaty palms, a pounding heart, crying, wobbly knees, wanting to be sick, and so on. We can experience early warning signs in three situations:

1. When it is *fun* to feel scared, e.g. watching a scary movie or going on a fast ride.
2. When it is *not fun*, but our choice and we are in control, e.g. delivering a class presentation, going to the dentist, or getting a needle from the doctor.
3. When it is *not fun*, there is *no choice or control*. This is a *personal* emergency. Personal emergencies may include being bullied, lost or abused.

It is important for children to recognise when their body is telling them they do not feel safe through their early warning signs and to determine if they are experiencing a personal emergency.

Note: It is important to note there may be situations where children experience personal emergencies, but do not feel early warning signs. An example is children who have been sexually abused from an early age and who identify the abuse as normal behaviour. The grooming process used by offenders often involves building a trusting relationship with the child. Children may not experience early warning signs when they trust and feel safe with the offender, as they are often ignorant to the fact the offender's behaviour is inappropriate and abusive. While this issue is acknowledged, an awareness of other safety concepts included in this handout will assist children who may fall into this category, in particular educating them about body ownership and the rules about touching.

e) **Personal emergencies:**

If children experience a personal emergency they need to know what they can do to feel safe again, such as telling a trusted adult as soon as they can.

Children may need to break a rule in order to get to safety, such as:

- rules of good or accepted behaviour, such as "dobbing on someone";
- school rules, such as leaving the classroom without permission; or
- laws, in extreme circumstances, such as trespassing, driving unlicensed or breaking into someone's house.

The challenge for adults is to ensure children understand rules which may be justifiably broken in various situations and which rules which may not. A suggested strategy to determine appropriate responses in a personal emergency, as well as to develop problem solving skills, is exploring actions that may be taken in a range of personal emergency scenarios. For example, How would someone keep themselves safe if they were: being bullied at school/offered drugs/being sexually abused by a relative?

f) **Bullying:**

Students, teachers, parents and school communities all have a role to play in both responding to and preventing bullying. Developing an anti-bullying culture is necessary, where strategies are put in place to make it socially unacceptable to bully or to witness bullying, and acceptable to report incidents and support targets.

An effective school anti-bullying policy that is understood and followed by students, teachers and parents is a good start. The role of bystanders is also part of the solution, where witnesses to bullying behaviour accept responsibility to intervene, either directly or indirectly. This may be by standing up for the child being bullied or reporting the incident to a teacher or parent.

In order to tackle the significant issue of bullying, all parties (students, teachers and parents) need to understand what it is, how it can occur and why some children engage in bullying behaviour. An understanding of the impact of bullying and how children could respond to bullying behaviour is also recommended.

3. My body belongs to me

Aim: To identify, prevent and stop all forms of abuse.

a) **Body Ownership:**

One of the most powerful messages to convey to children to prevent them from becoming a victim of sexual abuse is that their body belongs to them and no one is allowed to touch their body without their permission. It is equally important for children to be educated about their private parts, using the correct terminology. Talking openly with children about their bodies, particularly from a young age, prevents feelings of embarrassment or shame when discussing private parts and encourages children to disclose uncomfortable or abusive situations.

As part of appreciating body ownership, children are encouraged to take care of their bodies. They can do this by eating healthy food, exercising, dressing appropriately and wearing sun protection.

b) **Defining abuse:**

Child sex offenders prey upon children who are naïve and are unaware of which behaviour constitutes inappropriate touching. Children need to know that it is *not okay* for anyone to:

- touch or look their private parts;
- make them touch or look at someone else's private parts; or
- show them rude pictures, such as in a book, on a computer or TV.

The very few exceptions to these rules, such as when being examined by a doctor in the presence of a trusted adult, should also be discussed.

c) **Responding to abuse:**

Family Planning Queensland's 'No! Go Tell' response is suggested for children to use when responding to sexual abuse:

- **NO!:** Tell the person "NO" or "Stop, I'll tell"
- **GO:** Leave immediately (break rules if necessary to get away); and
- **TELL:** a trusted adult exactly what happened as soon as possible. Don't stop telling until you are listened to, believed and action is taken to ensure you are safe and feel safe again.

Children must be taught to recognise the importance of reporting abuse to stop it from occurring and *how* to report, including who to tell and what to say. Practising disclosures is encouraged, including being persistent if children do not receive the help they need.

d) **Known abusers:**

As the vast majority of abuse is perpetrated by someone known to the child, it is imperative that children are aware of this possibility and have strategies in place (such as those listed above) should it occur. It is also important for children to be aware of tactics frequently engaged by offenders to groom children, such as spending time alone with them or giving them money or gifts. Any such incidents should be reported directly to a parent or another trusted adult.

e) **Strangers (Unknown abusers):**

The shortcomings of the Stranger Danger program have previously been discussed (dangerous practices and messages). In addition to alerting children to the possibility of harm from a known and often trusted person, which is the most likely scenario, children should also be aware that strangers may present a danger. The most common type of stranger a child is likely to interact with is via the internet.

Appearance and demeanour of strangers: Strangers are anyone we don't know. They may be male or female, can be very friendly and may even address us by name. Unless children have physically met and know the people they interact with over the internet in person, they should regard these people as strangers. It is not uncommon for child sex offenders to masquerade as children to meet, develop relationships and groom children for abuse.

Most strangers may provide assistance: Contrary to commonly views about strangers, the vast majority of people we don't know (strangers) are not dangerous and may be able to provide us with assistance, if needed. It is important to identify people we would encourage children to approach in these circumstances, e.g. police, security officers, shop assistants, parents or grandparents with children. In seeking assistance, children should be advised to be aware of their early warning signs and to use the safety checklist. (The Safety Checklist is: Do I feel safe with this person? Will a trusted adult know where I am? Can I get help if I need it? One no, don't go!)

Practical strategies for stranger scenarios: While the following scenarios don't regularly occur, it is still a good idea to ensure children are aware of how to respond to them. Children should avoid: approaching a car with a stranger inside; accepting a gift from a stranger; or going anywhere with a stranger. Some tricks thought to be used by strangers to abduct children include: seeking help to find a lost puppy, asking children for street directions, advising 'mum has had an accident and asked me to pick you up to take you to the hospital to meet her there' or similar.

Children should use the safety checklist with strangers and listen to their early warning signs. If they sense danger, they should move away immediately. The use of code words, known only to family members, can enable 'safe' people to collect children when needed.

Suspicious people: Children should be made aware of what to do if they see someone acting suspiciously (that may cause them to feel unsafe) including observations they should make (and record), who to report to, and when.

As previously noted, the greatest likelihood of a stranger approaching a child is via the internet. General internet safety guidelines for children from the Queensland Police 'Who's chatting to your kids' publication include:

- Avoid sending a picture of themselves to someone they don't know, and never place a full profile and picture of themselves anywhere on the internet.
- Never give out personal information including their name, home address, phone number or school.
- Never arrange a face to face meeting with someone they have chatted with on the internet.
- Limit 'buddy lists' on social networking pages to people who they know including their real name. They should also be able to tell a parent how they know the person.

f) Safe and unsafe secrets:

Offenders use secrecy to keep their victims silent. Subsequently children need to know the difference between a safe and an unsafe secret, and that unsafe secrets should never be kept. We generally feel happy and excited about safe secrets. Unsafe secrets, by contrast, often evoke anxiety and feeling scared, unsafe, confused and/or uncomfortable. Children need to be able to identify unsafe secrets and what to do if someone tells them to keep an unsafe secret, i.e. to tell a trusted adult immediately.

4. I can get help

Aim: To access help from trusted adults and relevant organisations.

a) **Benefits of talking with someone:**

Discussing the benefits of talking with someone when they feel scared, confused, sad or upset will encourage children to approach you and/or other trusted adults at these times. Such benefits include gaining help, advice and support to put the problem into perspective and to determine the best response option. Sharing a problem can also provide a sense of relief and increase the child's confidence in solving the problem.

b) **Developing a safety network:**

A Safety Network is a group of at least five trusted adults, chosen by the child, who can be approached for assistance if they experience a personal emergency or have a problem they wish to discuss. A minimum of five network members increases the likelihood of at least one network member being available at any one time. Safety Networks can be represented on a hand to assist with remembering network members.

Children are encouraged to select network members they trust, who are available, and who will listen to them, believe them and assist them when needed. Network members may include relatives (including immediate family and extended family members), a neighbour, a friend's parent, a teacher or school principal, a sports coach, Adopt-a-Cop and/or a youth leader, priest or minister. Agencies such as Kids Helpline may also be used as a network member. It is suggested only one network member they reside with be selected, in addition to four network members outside of the home.

A Safety Network is more likely to be effective if network members are aware of the expectations of their role. Children should be encouraged to approach potential network members to clarify their role and to gain their acceptance before they become part of their Safety Network.

c) **Using a safety network:**

Children will be more inclined to use their Safety Network if they are aware of how to approach network members and what to say to clearly communicate their personal emergency or problem. It is a good idea to communicate that they are approaching the person as a network member to indicate the importance of the conversation.

Should a network member be unavailable, not listen, not believe the person or fail to take the necessary action, children need to *persist* in seeking help from other network members. The only time they should stop seeking assistance from their Safety Network is when they feel safe again or the problem has been solved.

d) **Assisting others:**

Children should be encouraged to consider how to be a good friend or classmate for others. Examples include approaching children who appear sad, withdrawn or in need of help, listening to them and/or approaching an adult for assistance on their behalf.

Cautionary notes:

- Parents, teachers and other protective adults are encouraged to adapt the key safety messages to ensure the information provided, and delivery method/s used, are age-appropriate and suitable for the cognitive capacity of the children.
- The manner in which concerned adults convey safety messages is also crucial and should aim to *prepare* rather than scare. Fear-evoking messages are likely to increase fear and diminish confidence, thereby putting the child at greater risk. Safety messages conveyed in a supportive and empowering manner will equip children with an awareness of safety threats, together with practical strategies, skills and confidence to effectively respond to them.
- Children need regular opportunities to transfer safety knowledge into behaviour. It is only when this transition takes place that they have the ability and confidence to apply the safety strategies in response to 'real life' safety threats. Behaviour rehearsal is most effectively achieved through role plays. Other rehearsal opportunities include discussing 'what if' situations and encouraging problem-solving to identify appropriate responses
- While teaching the four key safety messages of the Safe Start program will assist to promote children's safety and wellbeing, no program or information in the world can *guarantee* their safety. It would be very remiss of parents or teachers to believe that as a result of children being exposed to these messages that they no longer are required to actively protect the children in their care.