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**PARENTS: How You Can Win the Battle To Keep Your Child Safe From Strangers This
Holiday Season**

By Michelle Annese

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When we think of Holiday shopping, we think of all the glowing lights at our area malls and the various eye-catching decorations in shopping centers. Along with the distraction of our 'to do' list in our heads, we get preoccupied with carrying bags and scoping out gifts. But with the whirlwind of diversions, we cannot put our guard down on who is scoping out our own children.

To help with this here are the top 7 things parents can do to prevent their young from falling prey to strangers and child kidnappers in the busy hustle and bustle of the season.

1. Stay connected. Make sure you have your children with you whether in a stroller or holding your hand. Even if your child stays next to you other times of the year, all the distractions of toys, decorations, and Santa can make any kid get sidetracked. For older children invest in a family walkie-talkie set. Make sure they know how to use it and check in with them on regular time intervals to know where they are - even if they are right next to you.
2. If your child is lost go right to security. Most malls and shopping centers have security protocol when a child is missing. Don't try to look for your child alone. Let them help you the second you realize you cannot find your child - every moment counts.
3. Know what your child is wearing that day, and carry a recent picture with you in your wallet. Most moms and dads have lots of pictures of the kids, but baby pics are not helpful if your child is lost and security needs to search for them.
4. Teach your child what to do if a stranger approaches them. First - Run away! Second - Tell somebody!
5. Role play with your child ahead of time. Use tactics that some kidnappers have used in the past and teach your children not to 'fall for a stranger's sneaky tricks!' i.e. stranger favorite lures: candy, video games, comic books, toys, telling them "your mommy told me to bring you home etc.
6. Do not have your child wear anything with their name on it - i.e. back packs, purses, and jackets. Child offenders with pick up these clues and use the child's name when speaking with them to gain

trust.

7. Practice, Practice, Practice! Reviewing these strategies not only will help your child remember, but keep it on your mind as well. We all want our children safe and happy for more holidays to come.

Michelle Annese is a 3rd degree Black Belt with 15 years experience in the martial arts specializing in effective self-defense programs and seminars for women and children. She has extensive training with law enforcement and security experts. Ms. Annese is the author of "The Realtor Survival Guide" and has written many articles on safety awareness. Many of these articles can be seen at www.michelleannese.com.

Safe From Strangers

By Gary Drenfeld

There are few thoughts as terrifying as the abduction of your young child by a stranger. The fear causes parents to think long and hard about their children's safety. They tell them in a very clear voice, "Do not talk to strangers."

The problem is though, that a child's view of a stranger is very different from a parent's view. From the child's perspective, because a stranger is someone they are supposed to be afraid of, they expect a stranger to look ugly or scary. In fact, few, if any strangers actually look like the child's notion. Then to make matters more confusing for children, we teach them to respect and listen to their elders and be polite. Then as role models, children see us talk to people we have never met before, day in and day out.

So young children get it and will not talk to strangers. They will very willingly avoid scary looking people. However, when confronted by a friendly, kind looking older person, they will likely respond politely, which in most cases means "speaking when spoken to" and as they are taught in school, they will follow their directions.

Helping young children not to talk to strangers or not go with them, takes much more than the simple admonishment, "Don't talk to strangers."

Parents who want to increase the likelihood that their child will avoid or leave from persons unknown must spend a good amount of time talking about the issue and teaching their children on an ongoing basis. These tips may help:

When out in the community, in a matter of fact voice, point out the various people and ask your child if s/he knows them. Use this as an opportunity to explain that a stranger is any person we do not know, regardless of what they look like.

Next it becomes very important to differentiate the rules for grown-ups and the rules for children. Sometimes simply phrasing it as, "Are you old enough to talk to people you don't know by yourself?" and then explain that they must have your permission to do so.

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In the event a stranger approaches a child, they then must be equipped with strategies to manage the situation. Some parents provide a "code word." Explain to the child if someone doesn't know the code word, they do not have permission to go or talk with the person. In such situations, the child must be instructed to leave the person and immediately go to another adult they know, or older child if an adult is not available. It important to also teach the child that this is not rude. The child must understand that they have your full permission to leave the situation and to do so immediately.

Managing your child's safety, in your absence is truly a scary thought for most parents. We do not want to put undue fear in our children, but we do want to keep them from harm. It is important to understand how our own behaviour may contradict what we want children to do when approached by people they

do not know. We have to talk about the difference between what parents may do and what children may do. Only parents may touch the stove... only parents talk to strangers.

Finally, in addition to teaching who NOT to talk to, we must also teach, who they CAN talk to. If for instance, your child is lost in the store, who can they talk to? Develop a list of safe persons your child can talk to - even if they do not know them. The list may include police, fireman, teachers and even cashiers in stores. Remember keeping children safe is an ongoing discussion and not a simple one-time set of rules.

Keep talking with them to keep them safe.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker and expert on matters of family life. He is in private practice, writes and provides workshops and is the developer of the "I Promise Program" - teen safe driving initiative. Search his name on GOOGLE.COM to view his many articles. Feel free to call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Courts in Ontario consider Gary an expert on child development, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations and social work.

Buy the book: To order Direnfeld's book, Raising Kids Without Raising Cane, send a cheque or money order in the amount of \$12.00 to: Interaction Consultants, 20 Suter Crescent, Dundas, Ontario, Canada L9H 6R5

Parents of new teen drivers are encouraged to check out this teen safe driving program:

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