

Dateline's Focus on Stranger Safety Applies to Only 7% of Child Sex Offenders

On the heels of Sunday night's Dateline series 'My Kid Would Never Do That', parents across the US are busy discussing stranger safety with one another. How do we protect children from non-strangers?

new york city, Apr 16, 2012 -- On the heels of the episode that aired Sunday night as part of the Dateline series 'My Kid Would Never Do That', parents across the nation are busy discussing stranger safety with one another and hopefully with their children. It is commendable that Dateline has broached this serious subject in a meaningful way, but it is only the beginning of the conversation families should be having. We used to teach children about "stranger danger", but studies have shown that most sexual abuse occurs at the hands of someone known to the child. 93% of all child sexual abuse is committed by someone the child knows and the parents trust. Coaches, teachers and religious leaders, as the nation has recently discovered, fit well into this statistic. Unfortunately, this person, who is always showing an interest in your child and working to develop trust, can sometimes be a child predator. The way to prevent child sexual abuse is to educate children about their bodies and encourage them to inform a trusted adult if someone touches them inappropriately. Jill Starishevsky knows the horrors of child abuse better than most – she's a prosecutor of child abuse and sex crimes in New York City. The mother of three is also the author of *My Body Belongs To Me* (<http://www.MyBodyBelongstoMe.com>), a children's book intended to prevent child sexual abuse by teaching children that their bodies are their own.

She shares the following 10 tips for keeping children safe from predators:

1. No secrets. Period. Encourage your children to tell you about things that happen to them that make them feel scared, sad or uncomfortable. If children have an open line of communication, they will be more inclined to alert you to something suspicious before it becomes a problem. The way to effectuate this rule is as follows: If someone, even a grandparent, were to say something to your child such as "I'll get you an ice cream later, but it will be our secret", firmly, but politely say "We don't do secrets in our family." Then turn to your child and say "Right? We don't do secrets. We can tell each other everything." Secrecy is the most powerful weapon in a child abuser's arsenal.
2. Use a broad brush. While parents may have concerns about protecting their child from an adult, they should keep in mind that other children can be perpetrators of sexual abuse against a child as well. All lessons should apply to anyone who might touch the child inappropriately, whether adult or child.

3. Identify a "safety zone" person. Teach your children that they can come to you to discuss anything, even if they think they will get in trouble. Convey to them that you will listen with an open mind even if they were doing something they should not have been doing. A safety zone person can be a neighbor, family member, religious official or anyone who your child feels comfortable confiding in should something happen to them and they are reluctant to discuss it with parents. The safety zone person should be advised that they have been chosen and should be instructed to discuss the situation with the parents in a timely manner. Keep in mind that child predators often "entice" their prey with something inappropriate such as allowing a child to watch an adult movie or miss school, letting them smoke a cigarette or drink alcohol. Children will often be reluctant to tell about inappropriate touching for fear they will get in trouble for the drinking or missing school. Explain to children that they if someone touches them inappropriately, they should tell the parent or the safety zone person, even if they did something that they were not allowed to do.

4. Teach your child the correct terms for their body parts. This will make them more at ease if they need to tell you about a touch that made them feel uncomfortable. Teaching children only the nicknames for their private parts can delay a disclosure. An 11-year-old who only knows the term hoo hoo for her vagina may be embarrassed to tell someone if she is touched there. If a 5-year-old tells her busy kindergarten teacher that the janitor licked her cookie, the teacher might give the child another cookie, not realizing she just missed a disclosure.

5. Practice "what if" scenarios. Say to your child, "What would you do if someone offered you a treat, or a gift when I wasn't there?" Help your child arrive at the right answer, which is to say no, and ask you first. Many parents also encourage children to walk or run away in this situation if the person is a stranger. Parents should note that giving a child a gift and asking them to keep it a secret is a very common step in the process of grooming a child for sexual abuse.

6. Teach children to respect the privacy of others. Children should learn to knock on doors that are shut before opening them and close the door to the bathroom when they are using it. If they learn to respect the privacy of others, they may be more likely to recognize that an invasion of their privacy could be a red flag meaning danger.

7. Let children decide for themselves how they want to express affection. Children should not be forced to hug or kiss if they are uncomfortable. Even if they are your favorite aunt, uncle or cousin, your child should not be forced to be demonstrative in their affection. While this may displease you, by doing this, you will empower your child to say no to inappropriate touching.

8. Prepare a child with what to do if they get lost. Teach your child to find a safe person if they become lost. A safe person is a police officer, someone in the store with a store uniform or wearing a nametag, or a mother with children. It is quite helpful toward a speedy reunion, if your child knows his name, address and your cell phone number. Children should also learn to stay in the general area where they last

saw you so you can find them when you retrace your steps.

9. Teach your child that adults do not need to ask children for help. Predators use tricks to lure children, for example, asking them to help find a lost pet, give directions, or help carry something. When you are sitting down talking to your child, use these examples as part of your "what if" scenarios to reinforce the lessons about safety.

10. Teach children that No means No. Teach children that it is OK to say No to an adult. Without permission from you, many children may be reluctant to do so even if the adult is doing something that makes them feel uncomfortable. Teach children that all of these lessons apply to children as well. If another child is touching your child in a way that makes him or her uncomfortable, teach your child to say No, get away and tell someone. When someone tickles a child, if the child says No, all tickling should cease. Children need to know that their words have power and No means No.

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