# Personal safety

Open the newspapers on any particular day and you are met with at least one news article of some heinous crime committed against a child. Reading or watching about these incidents on social media may make us feel worried and concerned about the safety of our own children. It's scary to think that we are not always going to be around to hold our child's hand and that we may need to prepare them to navigate through all the challenges of this world. Children and teenagers are the most vulnerable members of our society and in today's world, child safety is a very important issue. Children of BOTH genders are susceptible to abuse. A positive thought here is that children are intuitive by nature and quick to grasp new information, so the earlier you teach them how to keep themselves safe, the more protected they will be!

Here are some of the common queries that parents might have related to this topic: -

Q. When should I start talking about it?

A.   There is no 'right time' to talk about it, the earlier you start, the stronger the concept of safety gets reinforced. The depth and level of the content shared with the child should be age appropriate and based on the child's understanding level. Younger children might need simpler explanations, while older children can handle more detailed information.
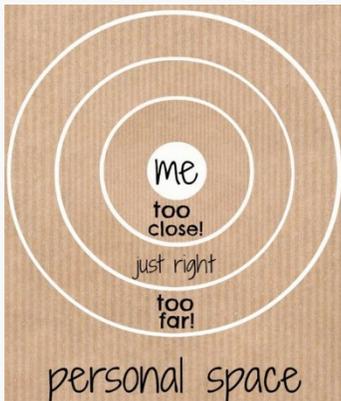
Q.   How do I talk about it? Can I finish the topic in one sit down conversation?

A. Instead of making it a onetime conversation, initiate simple age-appropriate conversations during playtime, bath time, through reading books or over dinner. Use playful activities and games to teach children the anatomically correct names for their body parts. Talk to them about safe touches (like hugs from family), unsafe touches (any touch that makes them feel uncomfortable) and teach them boundaries. Make your child aware of what basic scenarios/ actions they should report to you immediately. Eg: -What will you do if someone plays 'a touching game' and asks you to keep it a secret. Whom will you tell? etc. Reinforce the guidelines from time to time and reassure them that you are there to keep them safe.

Q. I feel uncomfortable and embarrassed to use the names of the private parts with my children?

A. It is vital to teach children the real names of the body parts, including their private parts. Normalize these body parts as the other parts of the human body- no different than a shoulder or a leg. If private parts are referred to as 'dirty' or 'bad' or 'shameful', children can feel ashamed or insecure about them, this can prevent them from speaking up or sharing confidently when their body parts are the target of jokes, bullying or abuse. When children know the proper terms, they can ask questions without confusion or shame, and communicate clearly if anyone tries to touch them there. If you find it uncomfortable to talk to your child, take help from a trusted family member, physician, counselor or the child's teacher.

Q. I feel anxious reading about all the cases in the media. Should I share the details with my child?

Avoid showing anxiety about this topic in front of the children, even though we may be feeling nervous about it. Share your thoughts and have healthy discussions with other adults whom you trust or seek help from a mental practitioner. To children however, share only as much information as required based on their age and understanding to help them understand the concept of safety.

Q. I have taught stranger-danger to my child to ensure his/her safety. Is it enough?

A. Research has shown disturbing facts about the various perpetrators of such acts, and they may not always be strangers. This is the reason why it is important to talk to children about trusting their instincts and feelings. If something doesn't feel right (even if it is from someone known to them), they should feel empowered to remove themselves from the situation and seek help. Listen and reflect on their feelings. Keep the communication channel open between you and your child.

Q. "Strangers have patted my child's head or ruffled his hair without warning. It happened so fast! How can I address this without escalating the situation?"

This can be very frustrating, especially since it happens quickly. If the person has already left, check in with your child to ask how they felt and remind them that no one should touch them without permission. Help them to regulate their feelings. Empower Them: Let them know they have the right to say no to any touch that makes them uncomfortable, even if it's from a trusted person. Allow this freedom to your children. Guide them on how they can politely tell others about the touches that make them feel safe. E.g.: - Telling a relative- "I am not very fond of hugs. But can we do a high-five instead?"

Q. "I take my child along with me to watch Bollywood movies. She/he sits quietly through it, doesn't understand most of it and falls asleep if bored. It's not a big deal!"

Children are quiet receptors. They may be listening to a lot of the abusive language and vulgar actions that are often portrayed in the movies nowadays. They may not understand some things and may turn to search engines to research more information if they are curious or confused. The information they get may not be age appropriate at all times. Added to it, the urge to share and discuss this new information with their peers. Let children grow at their own speed and make pro child choices (even if they are practically difficult at times), especially for the younger ones.

Q. How do I keep my child safe on social media platforms?

Today's Gen Z children may be much more Internet savvy than us, yet he or she may not be aware of the dangers of online networking and what precautions to take to stay safe. Keep track of their screen time and the websites they visit and who they interact with online. Explain the importance of not sharing personal information (like address, phone number, or school) online. Sit down with your children and go through the privacy settings of each app. Posting inappropriate photos can end up where one least expects it. Teach them to be cautious of suspicious messages or online interactions and to report them to an adult. As an adult, share the consequences of any inappropriate digital activity which can be difficult to handle at a later stage.

Personal safety is not just about avoiding danger, it's also about feeling safe and secure. This feeling of safety is influenced by our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Teaching our children about child safety is a crucial part of their development and growth.

"Don't turn your back on safety, if it's unsafe, report it!"

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