

Safe choices

Children don't always pick the best options when faced with difficult social situations. Márianna Csóti sets out some exercises to get them thinking about the choices they make.

Being over-protective with children can ill-equip them to look after themselves, as they may be daunted when something worrying does happen. Although we can never make all children completely safe, safety training may avert disaster. There are some general safety rules that we can teach, and a good way to start is to see if the children can come up with any themselves. For example:

1. Never go anywhere without permission.
2. Know my own address and telephone number.
3. Know, or carry on me, my parents' contact telephone numbers.
4. Always tell my parents where I am going and with whom.
5. Understand whether I am to walk home alone or wait to be picked up.
6. Understand what time I am to be home, and wear a watch.
7. If an arrangement is changed, I must let my parents know.
8. Don't talk to strangers or tell them my name or where I live.
9. If someone has upset me or made me feel uneasy, I must tell my parents.
10. If I have something important to tell my parents and they are too busy to listen, I must make them listen. I must explain it's important and not let myself be put off.

Picking the best options

Try some of the following exercises related to children and young people being outside their home. Use your knowledge of the children to select exercises most appropriate to their age and level of independence. Discuss each exercise fully so that all children understand why adults ask them to keep to the safety rules.

You can print the options for each exercise on separate pieces of paper. Decide whether you will display them altogether, so that the children choose which options are the better or best, or one at a time to discuss its merits as a group.

If there are too many options for the group, reduce them to three – the best choice, a second best choice and the worst choice. If children have a limited understanding of social situations, such as children with Asperger Syndrome, present them with the exercise and tell them what they should do, and why, without confusing them by mentioning the risky options.

Always recap at the end of each exercise. (The terms Mum and Dad refer to any main carer.)

Exercise 1

You are in a very large supermarket. You are distracted by a toy on a shelf and don't notice that Dad moves on ahead.

When you look up, you are all alone. What would you do?

- a. Stay where you are.
- b. Go to the Customer Service desk or checkout and tell them you are lost.
- c. Leave the shop and wait for Dad by the car.
- d. Walk around the shop looking for Dad.
- e. Ask another shopper to help you.
- f. Ask a uniformed shop assistant to help you.

Option c: is the worst choice. You could get run over or someone might try to take you away. Dad will be looking for you inside the shop.

Option d: is not safe. You won't be where Dad expects you to be and a bad person might pretend to have seen Dad outside to get you away from Dad and into danger.

Option a: is OK. Dad will go back to the place he saw you last. If anything happens to worry you, shout out, 'Dad!' or go to a shop assistant.

Option e: might not be safe; you can't trust a stranger.

Options b and f: are the best choices. Supermarket employees will be able to contact Dad over the public address system.

Exercise 2

You are in a large toyshop. Dad wants to look in a different part of the shop and leaves you in the board games section. He tells you to stay there and he will come back in a few minutes. While he is away, an adult shopper comes up to you and starts asking you questions and then suggests you leave the shop with her to buy some sweets. What would you do?

- a. Say, 'No thank you.'
- b. Shout to a shop assistant, 'I don't know this person and she's bothering me.'
- c. Tell her to leave you alone.
- d. Get away from her and walk around the shop hoping to find Dad.

Option d: is not a safe choice unless you can see Dad and shout to make him turn your way - this would scare off the other person. Stay in the area Dad expects you to be in and keep away from any exit doors so that no one can pull you out of the shop.

Options a and c: are OK if she does leave you alone but you must tell Dad about her, and the police – safe adults do

not offer to buy children sweets or ask them to go away with them. If she grabs hold of you scream, kick and scratch so that people look to see what the noise is about. They will come and help.

Option b: is the best choice and makes someone else witness what's happening. They can tell the police and describe the person with your help.

Exercise 3

You are in a crowded changing room at a public swimming pool. Mum went to the toilets while you got changed. You have just finished changing and feel uncomfortable about being on your own with so many people about. Mum's been gone awhile and you're not sure if she's still there. You go to the toilet area but there are loads of cubicles and many children and mums around. You feel frightened and desperate for Mum. What would you do?

- Say, 'Mum.'
- Shout, 'Mum!'
- Shout, 'Mum, it's Amy Clark!'
- Shout, 'Jane Clark where are you?'
- Go into the pool area and look for her.

Option e is dangerous. Stay where Mum expects to find you. Mum would not have left the changing room area without telling you. With option a you probably won't be heard and, even if you were, with so many other children with mums, how would Mum know it was you? A single word is not much to go on with so much background noise - she may not recognise your voice. She might think it's some other child asking for her mum.

Option b is better, but there is still some room for doubt - you may get someone else's mum answering you and that's not what you want. Mum might think you're still in the changing area. Options c and d are equally good. Mum will know straight away that it's you and will be able to give a reassuring shout back.

Exercise 4

You are in the park with a friend. A group of older children approach and ask if the two of you want to join them at the other end of the park (or somewhere else). You only know them by sight and have never played with them before. What would you do?

- Refuse to go.
- Say, 'We can't. It's time to go. Our parents are expecting us back.' You then turn to leave.
- Say, 'OK' and go with them.
- Find out more about why they want you to go to the other end of the park.

Option c: is dangerous. Don't go anywhere with people you and your parents don't know. Just because the strangers are children themselves, it does not mean they are safe. It is very unusual for older children to want to play nice games with younger children.

Option d: is not safe. Showing interest tells them they can probably force you to go.

Option a: is OK but they will probably want to know why and will try to persuade you to change your mind. You might feel forced to go with them if you can't think up a reasonable excuse.

Option b: is the safest. Mentioning adults who might come to look for you if you are late might make them give up. By leaving the park, you are making it clear that you are not going to be persuaded to change your minds. When you get home, tell your parents what happened to hear what they think about it.

What would happen if your friend wants to go? Don't go with her. You cannot help her, if she does need help, by going too. Go straight home and tell an adult what has happened and then the adult can look for your friend. Don't put yourself at risk. Walking away from her might make her think twice about going alone with them so she might follow you back. In any case, tell an adult about what happened.

Exercise 5

You are on a crowded beach with Mum. She has fallen asleep and you are bored. You see an ice cream van not far away and want to buy one with the pocket money you have with you. You have never done this alone before. What would you do?

- Wait until Mum wakes up and hope that the van stays that long.
- Go by yourself to buy the ice cream.
- Wake Mum to ask permission to go alone to buy the ice cream.

Option b: is dangerous. A child alone is easily spotted and someone might try to take advantage of that and take you away. You might also not be in calling distance of Mum if things should go wrong. You might think that, as the beach is crowded, it would be safe, but this may not be so and if Mum woke up to find you gone, she'd be frantic with worry.

Options a and c: are equally good. The option you choose may depend on whether Mum needs her sleep. If you lose the chance to get an ice cream, explain to Mum you let her rest - she may get you one anyway.

Exercise 6

You are on your own waiting for a train. There is a very drunk man on your platform; he comes over to you. There is one other person waiting at the end of the platform. What would you do?

- Tell the man to go away.
- Leave the platform and tell the ticket collector or ticket seller that there is a drunk man on the platform and you don't feel safe.
- Go and stand next to the other waiting passenger (without making conversation with him).

d. Stay where you are, ignoring the drunk man and hoping he'll go away, making sure you don't make eye contact.

Option a: is dangerous. It could make the man angry.

Option d: might be OK for an adult. Better you don't take the risk.

Option c: is OK but the other passenger might not be safe.

Option b: is best.

Exercise 7

You are walking home through the park. There are others ahead of you. A man walks out from behind some bushes, deliberately showing you his penis. What would you do?

a. Shout to the people ahead of you: 'Hey, this man's showing me his willy!'

b. Run away and never tell anyone about it.

c. Say, 'That's a bit small isn't it?' or, 'You'd better put it away before it catches cold.'

d. Ignore the man and his penis. Go to the nearest police station to report that you've seen a 'flasher'.

Option b: is the worst choice. You must tell someone about it. They can help you tell the police. And talking about it helps stop you worrying it might happen again.

Option c: is dangerous as it might annoy the man.

Option a: is good for immediate help – it will scare the man away. Plus, if you don't behave in a shocked way, you take away the man's enjoyment.

Option d (after doing option a): is the best. The police will try to stop the man flashing at other children (try to remember what he looks like and what he was wearing).

Exercise 8

You are at a club with friends. You have a row with the person you are meant to be going home with; she leaves you to make your own way home. You've never been allowed to go home late at night on your own. You are scared about getting into trouble with your parents because of what happened with your friend. Also, you hardly have any money. What would you do?

a. Order a taxi and tell the driver that your parents will pay the fare when you get home.

b. Decide to risk going home by yourself, on foot or using public transport.

c. Phone your parents from the club and ask them to come and get you.

d. Ask people leaving the club if they are going your way home.

Option b: is very dangerous - far better to risk being told off.

Option d: is very dangerous. Don't put your trust in complete strangers. Also, if they have a car to drive you in, and have been drinking, they may crash.

Option a: is OK but it's better to call your parents first to warn them of your change of plan and to check that they are happy for you to do this. If you do get a taxi, and you're female, ask if there is a woman driver; otherwise, ask for the registration number of the car so that you don't approach every car that comes slowly by – drivers may think you are a soliciting prostitute. Check the driver knows your name (you have to give your name to the company operator when you book the taxi) to avoid getting into the wrong cab.

Option c: is safest. Wait inside the club until they arrive, rather than on the street.

Through discussing how to keep themselves safe, young children may ask – safe from what? There is no need to frighten them with stories of what could happen. Keep answers vague and general. Say, 'Someone might want to take you away because they want to hurt you. If they are being friendly, it's to try to get you to trust them so you will go with them. If you are ever unsure, always say, 'I want to ask Mum or Dad.' Or say, 'No.' You can shout no as loud as you want. People who want to hurt you get frightened of children making a lot of noise.' Point out that most people are safe.

Márianna Csóti is the author of *Social Awareness Skills for Children* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers £22.99) from which this article has been adapted. Her website is at: www.mariannacsoti.co.uk

Also see the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's website: www.nspcc.org.uk