

## Jay Howell & Associates

A PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

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### PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

The increasing attention to crimes against children has left parents and families in a confusing dilemma - What do I tell my child to keep him or her safe. Unfortunately, our efforts to prevent crimes against the children have not kept pace with the increasing vulnerability of our young citizens. Most parents and families are surprised to learn that many crimes against children can be prevented. Parents and families have always been the first line of defense against child abuse and exploitation. Tragically, we have not armed our families with the best information and advice so that they can more effectively protect their children.

While serving as the Executive Director of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, I reviewed every existing publication I could find which contained information for families on the issue of child protection. I was alarmed at what I read. Most of the advice ignored the realities of what we know about crimes committed against children. "Stay away from strangers" was and remains a popular warning designed to prevent crimes against children. However, the harsh reality is that many children are exploited by people who have some type of familiarity with the child. Additionally, the term "stranger" suggests a concept that children do not understand and is one that ignores what we do know about the people who commit crimes against children. What follows in this article is information which should be shared with every child on the First Coast.

The most important key to child safety is effective communication with your child. The first step you should take is to establish an atmosphere in the home in which your child feel truly comfortable in discussing sensitive matters and in relating experiences in which someone may have approached the child in an inappropriate manner or made the child feel uncomfortable. The simple truth is that children are too afraid or confused to report their experiences and fears. In some ways, children should be treated like your

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adult friends - allow them to talk freely about their likes and dislikes, their friends, and their true feelings. You and your child need to be careful, but you do not need to be afraid. Talk to your child in a calm and reasonable manner, being careful not to discuss the frightening details of what might happen to a child who does not follow the safety guidelines.

Children can be raised to be polite and friendly, but is it okay for them to be suspicious of any adult asking for assistance. Children help other children, but there is no need for them to be assisting adults.

Children should not be asked to keep special secrets from their parents and, of course, children should not be asked to touch anyone in the bathing suit areas of their body or allow anyone to touch them in those areas.

Children should use the "buddy system" whenever possible. There is additional safety in groups.

Always be alert to a teenager or an adult who is paying an unusual amount of attention to your children or giving them inappropriate or expensive gifts.

Teach your children to trust their own feelings and assure that they have the right to say no to what they sense is wrong.

If someone wants to take their picture, they should tell their parents or teacher or other trusted adult.

Remember, clear, calm, and reasonable messages about situations and actions to look out for is easier for a child to understand than a particular profile or image of a "stranger." Teach your children that no one should approach them or touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. If someone does, they should tell their parents or another trusted adult immediately.

Be sensitive to changes in your child's behavior; they are a signal that you should sit down and talk to your child about what caused the changes.

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Unfortunately, many crimes committed against children are repeated on several occasions. We could make a significant dent in the number of crimes committed against kids if we could simply convince them to relate these experiences to us as soon as they occur. One of the best methods for convincing children that it is okay to relate these difficult experiences is to sit down with your child, in the comfort of your own home, on regular occasions, and explain to the child that if they have any uncomfortable experiences, they should feel free to relate them to you. You must promise the child that you will believe them, you will stop the bad experiences from happening, and you will seek help for the child. You should also assure your child that if they alert you to an uncomfortable experience that you will take the matter very seriously and meet with them privately to discuss what happened. Any report of an uncomfortable experience is a serious matter for the family and one that should be handled carefully.

If we were truly effective in convincing children to report these incidents, we could dramatically reduce the number of crimes committed against children. A complete brochure concerning child protection, rules of safety for children, and signs that will help you detect injuries to your children is available in the Child Protection brochure from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Their telephone number is 703/235-3900. This information is also available from the Justice Coalition at 904/783-6312.