



Child Safety

By Ash Gard

As a personal safety provider it goes without saying that I try my hardest to practice what I preach. I also do my best to educate my family, specifically my children, in behaviours and habits that are going to create safer environments.

It's clear, of course, that no one is ever going to take the subject of personal safety as seriously as I do. And that understanding has made me acutely aware that no matter how hard I try, people will be reluctant to take the measures that create a 100% safe environment.

Trying to be the best Dad that I can be, I do my best to instil, especially in my children, this culture of safety. But I know that I cannot expect my kids of only six and eight years old to comprehend the complexities of the threats that they face at the hands of humans throughout their childhood.

I think it's important to understand that as a Dad my job is to prepare my children for life when they leave my supervision.

My kids surprise me on a daily basis, sometimes I even find myself getting angry because I expect, due to their previous demonstration of ability, to act and perform tasks like adults. Of course seconds later I have to pull myself up and say hang on, he's only six years old.

I don't think I'm alone in this overestimation of children's abilities. Perhaps one of the most confronting things that I have faced over the past few years as my children start their journey in school, is the number of 4 1/2 -year-old children left 30 to 60 minutes unsupervised prior to school starting or expected to walk miles alone to and from school.

I have empathy for the parents that drop their kids at school and have to rush to work, but as a Dad I struggle to understand how a parent thinks that a 4 and a half year old child has the ability to identify changes and hazards in the environment in such a dynamic space and significantly public area as a school.

I constantly reiterate to my children the universally accepted concepts of stranger danger but my experience tells me that all this reinforcement starts now but will only become effective just prior to them leaving home. Until that time the safety of my children is not in their hands but in mine.

Recently I've had two personal experiences that have demonstrated to me the importance of creating a family culture with safety as its core concept.

The first is not so dramatic, my little man playing in a playground full of kids in the Northern suburbs of Brisbane having an absolute blast running around the playground (which was built like a fort).

A little bit of background. When my boy started school I was concerned that he would find it hard to make friends because he was a relatively quiet kid with a beautiful soul but easily embarrassed.

I watched on at the playground at school and felt sad because it appeared he was a little bit of a loner. You can understand my joy, when 12 months later he happily approaches other kids on the playground and asked to join in the games or if they wanted to play tiggly. School was good for my little man because it took him from a loner to bit of a social butterfly.

So back to the playground in Brisbane. Due to the nature of the structure it was near impossible to sit back and maintain eyes on my son, so I found myself sneaking around the structure so that he could play with others without the feeling of me being overtly worried.

In a short while I heard my son talking to someone in the playground but the returning voice was a lot deeper than the voice of a child. When I peeked around the corner here's my son having a full blown conversation with a complete stranger, a male stranger. Now I'd like to clarify that the male stranger was not being malicious, deceitful or in any way did he appear to pose a threat to my boy, but my point is that my son engaged a stranger regardless of our safety culture in the home, and it didn't surprise me one little bit.

There have been many studies done related to stranger danger and specifically children approached in public spaces. All the studies demonstrated that a child will still choose to see the good in people and trust them rather than become suspicious of their intent.

Of course the misguided truth about stranger danger has us all believe that the greatest risk to a children is abduction.

Although this risk does exist and it is demonstrated weekly in the news the vast majority of children who fall casualty at the hands of violent humans are violated not by complete strangers but by people they've met before in safe environments.

Without understanding the totality of violence against children how can we possibly expect children to act in a way that we deem necessary for their protection, especially when in the tragic time of need it may well be a stranger that they have to turn to for help. A safer stranger.

If I may use this safer stranger concept as a Segway to my second experience,

I would like to tell a story that was passed onto me by a respected friend, someone who has also been in the personal safety business for over 15 years and has a very similar outlook on safety to me.

A trusted family friend of his was recently arrested for child pornography offences.

What a bombshell, and one that even he as an expert on personal safety just didn't see coming (and I respect his radar on these types of things). I think because he does this for a living, meaning he asks people to develop strategies behaviours and habits that protect them from harm, it hit him pretty hard when he found out that a close friend had been charged with such horrific offences.

This person had been in his home, around his kids and not just for a couple of weeks but for years and years.

Despite all his knowledge and research, being told that someone close to him was involved in child sex offences, shook him to the core.

Subsequent research has shown to me that these people, humans, are the only known species to conduct violence against their own species for pleasure. Although sexual exploitation may not seem like it should fit into the category of violence the reality is that these actions affect the victim or casualty in exactly the same way if not a worse way than that of physical violence itself.

The aftermath can cause serious depression, suicide, significant self-esteem issues and a lifetime of psychological damage.

He told me that he really didn't see it coming. Further research indicated that these people are professionals at the trade and they have perfected the art of grooming not just children but parents and communities in order to operate under the radar without suspicion.

Although my mate was surprised, he was not concerned. That may seem like a bizarre statement but because of the safety culture within his family (like myself and Anna), him and his wife had made a decision early on to never leave their children unsupervised with not just their best friends but anybody except immediate family. And I can tell you now that that was a huge sigh of relief to him when this dreadful news came his way. Did you know that perpetrators of sexual violence against children are likely to have effected between 30 and 150 children before they are caught for the very first time. Shocking.

I know that for myself, by far the hardest obstacle that I've experienced after making that decision not to leave my kids with people I don't know (or who aren't immediate family) is leaving my kids at school for six or so hours a day. You must understand that in order to live a healthy, balanced life we must put our trust in people because the majority intend to do the right thing. Schools during school hours or when supervision of children starts have a very good statistical history in relation to child safety but even so I still make sure that I physically hand my children over to the person supervising my child when the bell goes.

Outside of abduction or child abuse the number of physical injuries sustained by unsupervised children that I have witnessed in the playground before school starts is significant. A safety culture is not always about protecting children from humans but protecting children from tragedy whatever form that tragedy takes.

Young children are not equipped to deal with the realities of human violence. Until they are able, and you are prepared to have adult conversations with your kids about the realities of the violence created by humans, a child's responsibility is to have fun and learn and our responsibility is to keep them safe.