



Protecting your Tween: Red flags and other early warning signs to watch for.

By Kim Estes

As our children enter their tweens, they are spending more time away from us. This is a normal and healthy part of growing up. So how does a parent protect their child but still encourage normal growth and independence during these tween years? The thought of someone potentially abusing our children is horrible. Especially when the statistics show that most abuse (over 90%) against children occurs by someone known and trusted by the family. As parents, we want our children to be safe. It is a struggle to balance safety while nurturing and adapting to their growing independence.

Practice your elevator speech: Talking to your tween about personal safety

When discussing safety with your tween, short, simple conversations on a consistent basis are extremely effective. Some simple pointers for parents

- Don't use scare tactics
- Keep it positive
- Stay on topic
- Be a good listener
- Practice "What -if's"
- Talk about healthy boundaries
- Define what "job roles" are (eg. Coaches job is teaching game rules not help you change clothes)
- Share your own experiences about how you handled a personal safety issue
- Initiate safety conversations. Don't expect your child to.

Grooming the parents:

Predators can be anyone... a man, a woman, **another child**. It is important for parents to understand that **predators gain access to your child through you**. As parents you are the eyes and ears for your children. Pay attention to your "gut" and look for consistent patterns in red flag behaviors such as someone who

- Consistently insists upon arranging to spend alone one on one time with a particular child
- Shares inappropriate information with the child (that normally would be shared with adults)
- Seems preoccupied with a particular child
- Seems “too good to be true”
- Insists on physical contact even when the child does not want the physical contact
- Refuses to allow the child to set his/her own limits
- Frequently walks in on tweens while using the restroom or changing
- Makes inappropriate comments about the Tweens changing body

It is important for parents to not dismiss their gut feelings or dismiss red flags because of a person’s age, their relationship with your family or that person’s social status. Boys and girls are nearly at identical risk for abuse. If your gut is telling you something does not seem “right” that is your instinct talking to you and letting you know you need to take a closer look at what is going on. As adults with more worldly experience, you will have a better chance of smelling a bad situation a mile away. Your child will not.

When to be concerned: Warning signs in your tween

Predators go to great lengths to “fly under the radar” and remain undetected. Predators are masters of communication. A predator will use attention and flattery to engage the child’s interest or may use threats against the child to keep their actions secret. Tweens, by nature, can be moody and secretive at this age... but if things seem out of the “normal” range of tween behavior, or the onset behavior is sudden, you may need to take a closer look at what is happening. Some signs that may indicate that something is amiss if your child

- Is being secretive about e mails, phone calls, or where they are going
- Suddenly has advanced sexual knowledge
- Displays regressive behaviors such as bedwetting or begins to have nightmares
- Suddenly seems depressed
- No longer wants to attend school or activities that they normally enjoy
- Suddenly refuses to spend time with a particular person
- Suddenly wants to spend **all** their time with a particular person
- Has items (iPod, games, jewelry, etc) that you do not know where they came from

Reducing your tweens risk for abuse and abduction

Nobody is crime proof. However, by talking openly about safety, creating some basic safety rules for your entire family and keeping it engaging, you greatly reduce your child’s risk for abuse and abduction. By educating and empowering your family, you are helping your tween build a foundation of personal safety that they will carry with them throughout their entire life.

About the Author: Kim Estes is the owner of Savvy Parents Safe Kids and has worked with parents for over 15 years, educating them on various parenting topics. Kim is a certified prevention educator through the National Security Alliance, the Kid Safe Network and is a Darkness 2 Light facilitator. As a Child Safety Expert, Kim has appeared on local and national TV and Radio shows, helping to raise awareness on the importance of prevention education. For more information about her work or to schedule a workshop go to: www.savvyparentsafekids.com