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## CHILD SAFETY

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One of our most vulnerable populations are those under age 18. Children are reliant upon the adults in their lives to provide for almost every need. This makes them by nature very trusting and very willing to please. It is impossible to protect a child from every conceivable unpleasantness, but there are many things that can be done to educate your children and yourself to avoid many dangers.

Almost all crimes committed against children are committed by people who are known to the child. It is important for you and your child to recognize that and know how to talk about it.

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### GENERAL SAFETY CONCEPTS

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Proper supervision and education is the best way to teach your child about safety. It is important to know all you can about the people your child will spend time with.

**1. Caregivers.** Anyone who takes care of your child in your absence is a caregiver; however, for purposes of this discussion, we are talking about more formal settings like schools and large or registered daycares. Employees at these caregivers generally must go through a criminal history and child abuse registry check.

You should know that a criminal history check will only find criminal convictions for which a person was fingerprinted. Criminal history data is compiled by a central State agency and is based on fingerprint information. So, even if a person commits a crime, it will not be found during a criminal history check unless a person reported the crime, it was investigated by law enforcement, a criminal charge was filed and the person pled guilty or was found guilty by a jury *and* fingerprinted. In some states, conviction information is removed after a period of time or upon application by the defendant.

The child abuse registries are generally state-specific, and like criminal convictions, depend largely upon whether a report was made, investigated or confirmed. Some abuse cases are confirmed, but because they were viewed not to be “serious” or likely to reoccur, they are not placed on the registry. Also, there are appeal processes for child abuse reports, which may have been resolved by an agreement between the abuser and the Department of Human Services to not place the report on the registry.

Just because a check has been run, does not mean the person isn’t dangerous or that they haven’t done anything to hurt a child. While you may rely somewhat on that information, it cannot be the end of your inquiry. An internet search could turn up some information, as could a check of state judicial records. (Iowa’s is [www.iowacourts.org](http://www.iowacourts.org)) Meet all of the people who will be providing care to your child in this setting and make your own assessments. Trust your instincts. If you feel uneasy with someone, do not try to talk yourself out of that uneasiness. This is your mind telling you not to leave your child with this person.

**2. Informal caregivers.** Smaller daycares, neighbors who watch your child while you run an errand or parents of your children’s friends, obviously do not even have criminal history or child abuse reports run. You are working with much less information. Do as much background checking as you can, through the internet and through asking questions of current and former associates. Make sure you know the person’s full name, address and at least one phone number. Observe your child with the person several times before you leave them alone. Ask questions of your child and closely examine their bodies when they return from the person’s care. Drop in unexpectedly or before the agreed upon time to see what is going on in your absence. Talk to your child to let them know that even though this person takes care of them, if they are being hurt or are scared, they have the right to say “no,” and they should tell you immediately.

**3. Relatives/Friends.** One of the most difficult discussions with your child may be about relatives and friends. These are people your child may see routinely, and who, through various actions and words, the child believes to be worthy of trust and love. Most of your relatives and friends are likely well-intentioned and perfectly safe.

Others, however, may not be. Talk to your child to let them know that even though this person takes care of them, if they are being hurt or are scared, they have the right to say “no,” and they should tell you immediately. You should also be very aware if someone wants to spend time alone with your child. Observe their interactions to make sure they are appropriate. Believe your child if they tell you something inappropriate happened and make sure the person has no opportunity to be with your child. If there are stories, rumors or talk of someone in the family being abusive or inappropriate, you *must* assume it is true. Your child’s safety is more important than any relationship, and for your child’s well-being you cannot ignore the possibility that the person is unsafe to be around your child.

**4. Other Parent/Paramours.** While all of the same information about the other classifications of people apply, this can often be a difficult situation. However, it is important to have the same discussions with your child. It is not okay for *anyone* to hurt them, and your child must know that. If you suspect that your spouse or partner is harming your child, you *must* act to protect your child. If you are also in danger, please refer to the information about Domestic Violence.

Even older children need to understand the importance of someone knowing where they are at all times. The National Center for Missing and Exploited is an excellent resource for tips for parents, and even includes safety quizzes for children.

[http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PageServlet?LanguageCountry=en\\_US&PageId=200](http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PageServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=200)

Many parents aren’t sure what to tell their children. These are the main things that parents should tell children about safety. The concepts should be the same regardless of the child’s age.

1. A child should **always check** with a parent before going anywhere, accepting anything, or getting into a car with anyone.
2. Every child should be told to **not go out alone** and to **always take a friend** when going places or playing outside.
3. Make sure your child knows it is okay to **say “no”** if someone tries to touch them, or treats them in a way that makes them feel sad, scared, or confused. They should get out of the situation as quickly as possible and find a trusted person.
4. **Identify trusted adults that it is safe** for your child to talk to. Let your child know that **they can always talk to you**, but that it is okay to talk to the other trusted adults if they are sad, scared, or confused.
5. Assure your child that there will **always be someone to help**.

When you are having this discussion, keep the following in mind:

1. **Older children need protection, too.** Children aged 11 to 17 are equally at risk for victimization. While their age makes them better able to verbalize and act to protect themselves physically, they generally have increasing freedoms, and a desire to be more independent of their parents. It is also a time when they have a deep need to be liked by others, to fit in and to feel special. Predators play into that vulnerability and lack of self-esteem. You need to find a way to balance the need for independence with reminders that following the safety rules will increase your trust and confidence in them.
2. **Speak to your children in a manner that is calm and reassuring.** Children do not need to be frightened to get the point across. In fact, fear can thwart the safety message, because fear can be paralyzing to a child.
3. **Speak openly.** Children will be less likely to come to you about issues enshrouded in secrecy. If they feel that you are comfortable discussing the subject at hand, they may be more forthcoming.
4. **Do not teach “stranger danger.”** Children do not have the same understanding of “strangers” as adults. The concept is difficult for them to grasp because they don’t always remember people they’ve met before, and they see you talking to people they – and possibly you – do not know. Greeting a fellow shopper or chatting with the checkout person is very pleasant, but is confusing to a child. Isn’t that person a stranger?

More importantly, based on what we know about those who harm children, “strangers” aren’t as likely to be dangerous to children as the people they already know.

**5. Practice what you preach.** You may think your children understand your message, but until they can incorporate it into their daily lives, it may not be clearly understood. Find opportunities to practice “what if” scenarios. Parents should choose opportunities or “teachable moments” to reinforce safety skills. If an incident occurs in your community and your child asks you about it, speak frankly but with reassurance. Explain to your children that you want to discuss the safety rules with them, so that they will know what to do if they are ever confronted with a potentially dangerous situation. Make sure you have “safety nets” in place, so that your children know there is **always** someone who can help them.

**6. Teach your children that safety is more important than manners.** In other words, it is more important for children to get themselves out of a dangerous situation than it is to be polite. They also need to know that it is okay to tell you what happened, and they won’t be tattletales.

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## INTERNET SAFETY CONCEPTS

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**General Considerations.** Technology has brought the world to Hancock County. In some ways it is easier to discuss with children the dangers that are present in your community. “Don’t go to that person’s house.” Or “Never be alone with so-and-so.” The internet opens up communication possibilities with anyone in the world, and it is difficult for many adults – let alone children – to navigate safely.

The most important thing that can be done – before a child ever uses a computer – is to educate them. Possibly the most essential point is for every child to know that whatever is sent out to onto the Internet can never really be deleted and can potentially be accessed, altered or used by any other internet user. Therefore, it is very important that they are instructed to:

- never give out their name, age, grade, address or town
- never give out information about parents, siblings, neighbors or friends – where they work, live
- do not share personal information – sports teams, chorus/band events
- do not share photos
- do not discuss sexual activities or romantic plans
- NEVER agree to meet in person
- explain WHY not to give this information so they appreciate the danger and can apply it to different situations
- explain that they must come to you immediately if someone has inappropriate Internet conversations with them

**Privacy and Monitoring.** While your child is entitled to a degree of privacy, there is nothing about the computer that is truly private. Deleted files can easily be recovered and anything sent via the internet is instantly non-private. You wouldn’t let an unknown 49 year old man from Connecticut spend time alone with your child in his room – do not let it happen over the Internet either.

It is recommended by all experts in this area that children not use computers in their bedrooms. This has become more difficult with wireless internet and with the expansion of devices that have internet access (phones, gaming systems, blu-ray players, etc.). It is important to make every effort to restrict access to those devices and to limit the amount of time spent on the internet

**Social Networking.** Social internet sites, like Facebook, are especially tricky. There are generally age limits to these sites. Do not permit your child to have a site unless they meet the minimum age requirement set by the site, and are mature enough to handle the responsibility (and burden) of instant contact with the world. Make sure that your child has adequate security settings (i.e. their information is only viewed by Friends Only), that

they do not “friend” anyone they do not personally know and that they do not “like” any pages or sites (the pages and everyone on them are then like “friends” and can access your child’s information).

You should be vigilant in checking their site to make sure the security setting has not been changed. The sites themselves often make changes to their access rules, so check security settings and updates regularly. When checking your child’s site, make sure you are logged in under your child’s account. The account holder can restrict individual pictures and information from specific “friends” (which means they could hide information from you if you are a “friend”), and you cannot check security settings unless you are logged in as your child.

Cyber bullying (harassing or taunting) is common on young people’s sites. Discuss with your child the importance of not being mean to others and that if they are concerned about what others are saying about or to them, that they should speak to you immediately. There have been many instances of children – some very young – committing suicide over transmissions through social networking sites, instant messaging or chat rooms. It is important not to “join in” by responding to the cyber bullying. Contact law enforcement and terminate your child’s access to the account. (Do not inactivate the account – law enforcement will need access in order to complete their investigation.) Also speak to your child’s school so they are aware of the situation.

**What to do if you find a problem.** If you discover inappropriate transmissions or are concerned about a person trying to contact your child, contact law enforcement immediately. If you have the capabilities, save transmissions or print them. Do NOT log off or shut off computer.