

Safety: It Takes Planning and Educating, Too

For Children and Young Adults with Disabilities

They are the things that happen every day. Maybe a stranger knocks at the door, or perhaps the bus doesn't come on time. Maybe a telephone solicitor requests personal information.

Would your young adult with a disability know how to handle such situations? It's more than an academic question. Knowing how to respond when things go wrong, feel scary, or may be dangerous is important to being safe.

As children with disabilities become youth and adults in the community, it is vital that they have the skills and resources to stay safe. You can help your child prepare for this aspect of independence in many ways.

"Think about your young adult being in the community," says Sue Fager, a PACER transition specialist. "Now imagine something upsetting happening. What skills or resources would you wish were in place for your child before it happens?"

Those are the kinds of questions that you might want to start discussing with your child. "The answers will be unique to each family," Fager says. Your child's disability, skills, and living situation will all be factors to consider as you have this conversation. If your child is receiving transition planning services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP), you may want talk with the IEP team about including safety goals.

Fager recommends looking at six areas when thinking about safety for your transition-age young adult.

Self-advocacy skills

Help your child develop healthy boundaries and effective communication skills. You may want to encourage your child to practice communicating messages such as:

"No." "Leave me alone." "I need..." "I want..."

Disability-appropriate supports

People with a communication or behavior disability may find it helpful to carry a card that could be used to communicate with others, including the police. The card might contain information such as your:

- child's name
- a sentence stating the disability and how it might affect your child's ability to handle situations
- a phone number of someone who could be contacted

Safety network

Help your child identify safe people and places in the community. This list might include:

- Neighbors
- Community helpers such as fire fighters, police officers, security guards, doctors, or nurses
- Public places such as a fire station, police station, place of worship, hospital, or clinic

Resources

You never know when or where a problem might arise. Make sure your child always has a way to reach someone who can help. Provide a cell phone—and emergency phone numbers—for your child to carry at all times.

Transportation

Help your child learn to "expect the unexpected" and know what to do. For example,

- Explain that if someone makes your child feel uncomfortable on the bus, he or she could move closer to the driver.
- Discuss what your child should do if the bus goes on a detour or breaks down. This response might include calling you or another trusted adult on the cell

phone.

Common sense

Common sense safety tips are good for everyone—with or without disabilities. Here's a good list for the whole family to review.

At home:

- Keep doors locked at all times.
- When you leave, lock your windows.
- Don't open your door to strangers or let them into your building, apartment, or house.
- Have a working fire extinguisher and know how to use it.

Out and About:

- Don't leave a purse in the grocery basket when you turn away
- Don't give personal information to strangers
- Stay alert to what is going on around you.

It's a big world out there. With some discussion and planning, it can be a safer one, too.