



The WCPA News

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When Protecting Our Children, “Stranger Danger” Often Misses the Mark Written by Dr. Carol Hall-Whittier

Have you ever considered what the perfect life for a child would be like? What would be the conditions that would make for a safe, supportive environment? Picture a scenario where a child has loving parents and a support system made up of grandparents and other family members who provide love and nurture. That support system would also include the school, the spiritual community and the neighborhood community. In this scenario, the people who are a part of the support system are called the “caretakers”.

In this perfect life, all caretakers would be trustworthy and appropriate toward the child. The caretakers would work very hard to help the child to navigate through life by giving him or her myriad experiences and scaffolding those experiences so that the child could experience the best, take chances and grow in a safe environment. At school, teachers, principals, and counselors would work collaboratively with the family to nurture and give the child the capacity to envision a bright future. The child would make good friends while building academic and social competencies and those experiences would build a character that would enable the child to live out his or her vision. The caretakers would be partners in this endeavor, doing everything to keep the child safe while exposing him/her to the world.

Is this scenario just a dream? When considering the newspaper headlines each day, it is evident that there are many dangers in the world and it is impossible to protect children from each and every one. There are children who are victims of sexual, physical and emotional assault each day. All too often, these traumas come from the very individuals who should be loving, trustworthy caretakers of the child.

Recently, the nation was startled when hearing of a little eight-year-old boy who, walking from day camp alone for the first time, was ambushed and brutally murdered. Leiby Kletzky talked his parents into letting him walk home alone from his day camp in Brooklyn. After he and his parents reviewed the route — seven blocks — they agreed that his mother would meet him halfway. The boy never made it. Leiby stopped to ask a person who was a part of his close knit community for directions, but that person betrayed him and killed the precocious, independent little boy. Every parent in the nation probably shook with terror, knowing that this crime could happen in any of our communities.

Consider the paradox: the very experiences that help our children grow into decision-making, contributing members of society, are the same experiences that expose our children to dangers from which we must protect them. Children are innately inquisitive, loving beings who want to have friends, to please, and to be accepted for who they are. Yet wise parents and caretakers know that it is sometimes members of the family and/or caretaking community who place our children at risk for mistreatment. Often, the most difficult topic associated with child abuse is when a trusted person in the community is the perpetrator. When the perpetrator is a scout leader, a teacher, a family friend, a priest or pastor, or a neighbor, the breach of trust is almost unimaginable. Nevertheless, most abused children were abused by someone they knew – not by a stranger. In fact, 85% of the time in sexual abuse cases, the perpetrators were known by their victims prior to the abuse.

When children become victims of abuse by someone close to them, they often fail to report because of the fear that disclosure will bring consequences even worse than being victimized again. The victim may fear consequences from the family, feel guilty for consequences to the perpetrator, and may fear subsequent retaliatory actions from the perpetrator. Many children fear that they will not be believed if they accuse someone who is known and trusted by their family, and of course these fears are often justified. Lastly, sometimes young people are not aware that what is happening to them is abuse. Their abuser has convinced them that the experiences are normal, appropriate ways of interacting.

Parents and educators can take certain precautions to decrease the chances of children becoming victims. We can teach the children in our care to trust their feelings and intuitions. Children can be taught to trust their instincts that something isn't quite right and to act when they feel that instinct. The basic strategy to teach young people is, "No, Go, Tell." Caring adults can teach children to say (or yell) NO, to get away from a person who is trying to hurt them, and then to tell an adult they trust about what happened. Most importantly, of course, we as wise and careful adults must be willing to believe children when they share with us that they have experienced abuse, even if the adult involved is someone we know, and then to take appropriate action to safeguard that child – and other children - in the future.

All children should be taught basic information about the private areas of their bodies. When children understand that certain parts of the human body are private, and that adults and children do not touch, look at, or photograph these parts of one another's bodies, then children are better armed to understand when an adult is being abusive or inappropriate.

Another good strategy is to teach children the difference between surprises and secrets. While a surprise, such as a present or party, will eventually be known by everyone, secrets must remain a secret forever. Children can be taught that no adult should ask them to keep secrets and that they should always tell their parent or another trusted adult if a grown-up asks them to keep secrets.

To be very honest with ourselves, it is often so much easier to talk with our children and adolescents about avoiding strangers than it is to give them the type of information that is more likely to keep them safe. It takes courage to speak to children about private body parts, about adults who sometimes mistreat young people, and about what to do if it happens. It takes even more courage to admit that this isn't always the fault of unknown strangers but rather often of adults we know or even trust within our community circles. But while we cannot provide the perfectly safe life for our children imagined at the beginning of this article, we can be wise as we equip our children with helpful knowledge, we can be thoughtful as we teach our children to believe in their own instincts, and we can be brave as we report a suspicion about an adult within our community.

When a traumatic experience such as physical or sexual abuse happens to a child, there are steps to take to restore the child's emotional health. West County Psychological Associates has a variety of therapists with backgrounds and expertise in different areas, different ages of children and a wide variety of family issues. Services are available for preschool children through adults. Contact our office for more information.

Dr. Whittier is an experienced educator who has worked in an urban school district as a principal, instructional leader and teacher for over 34 years. She received her training as an urban leader from St. Louis University where she earned a doctorate in education. Her work has been built on the belief that the school functions as a community that is self-motivating and that views the growth of its members as fundamental. Dr. Whittier is adept in providing leadership training for principals, staff, and parents. She is especially interested in providing professional development for school personnel in the areas of transformational leadership; collaborative cultures; literacy learning; and effective use of assessments and evaluations to perfect the practice of professionals who are preparing students to live in a democratic society.



From the Director

Along with the nation, my colleagues, our clients and I have been thinking about and discussing the horribly devastating events at Sandy Hook Elementary School. In the midst of all of this chaos, how do we, as teachers and parents, help our children live in a safe, secure world? I'm not sure that the entire answer is in protecting our children from the outside world. It's more about helping children feel secure within themselves in spite of the outer turmoil and unpredictability that may be occurring. How do we help our children develop a resiliency that allows them to feel the immediate fear and anxiety when they are made aware of horrible events, but then allows them to pick up their lives and feel safe once again? How do we help children develop an internal sense of confidence that says that, while there may be difficult days, in general life is good and there is much to look forward to?

We start by putting fair but firm rules into place and then being consistent about carrying out consequences when the rules aren't followed. What this does for children is to put predictability into their world. They know what to expect when the rules are in place.

We also need to be careful that, in our quest to protect our children, we are mindful of not overly protecting them. Not allowing them to hurt or fail when it's appropriate doesn't provide them with the strength to overcome adversity. Remember, it is by conquering adversity that we develop inner strength. Equally important, we need to help them acknowledge a sense of well-being from making good choices. While children need some affirmation from us, helping our children affirm themselves will have a stronger impact in developing a healthy internal sense of themselves. For example, instead of saying "good job" when a child does something well, we ask instead how it felt to him when he succeeded at what he was doing. When the child says that he did a good job, that creates a stronger sense of internal well-being.

One of the questions that parents and teachers ask after publicly violent events is about what and how much we discuss with children. I don't think that we can deny the reality of what has occurred. However, neither should we overstress the negative. We allow children to express their feelings without denying the reality of the situation. Saying that you, as the adult, were scared or frightened by an event is the normal response. The more our children can express these feelings, the less the feelings consume their internal worlds. After this, we encourage children to go back to their normal activities. Eventually getting back to normalcy leads to maintaining an internal sense of security.

Lastly, the most important way to insure that children can remain secure in this unpredictable world is by maintaining healthy relationships with them. We do this by having frequent conversations about what they are thinking and feeling. We need to start this process at very young ages. We need to talk about what is going on within them. We need to listen to them. In fact, when we find ourselves listening more than talking with our children, and they know they are being heard, fears and anxieties begin to diminish.

This is not an easy world we live in. We can't protect our children from the unpredictability of the outside world, but we can help make their inner worlds safe.

-Mary

Our Philosophy

We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.

Opportunities for Growth and Professional Development

Call the West County Psychological Associates' office to register: (314) 275-8599

High School Girls' Group

8 Thursday nights, 5:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. (January 24th through March 14th)

This interactive group is designed to provide a place for girls to discuss what's on their minds in an atmosphere of safety and support. It will help girls with anxiety, social skill problems, family and peer relationships, and sense of self. Cost is \$40 per session, and full payment is required at the first meeting. A phone interview will determine if the group is appropriate for your teen, and once the group is established it will be closed to new admissions. Mary Saggau, MSW, LCSW will facilitate the group. She has extensive experience in high school counseling as well as adolescent and family therapy.

Compassion Fatigue: How to Take Care of Yourself in a Giving Profession

Thursday, February 28th, 9:00 a.m. – Noon \$50 Presented by Mary Saggau, MSW, LCSW

This seminar discusses the symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. Risk factors are identified for those most likely to suffer. A quality of life scale will be completed to identify each participant's compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue levels. Suggestions will be made for workplace support, work-to-home transitions and personal resilience planning. Come prepared to discuss how this challenging issue impacts your life.

Anxiety in Children and Adolescents: What Every School Should Know

Monday, March 11th, 2013 9 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. *Lunch on your own, Noon – 1:00 p.m.*

Presented by Amy V. Maus, MSW, LCSW \$85 per attendee

School professionals today must become prepared to understand and respond to students suffering from a wide array of anxiety-related problems. Discussion will focus upon understanding these disorders, how these problems can impact students' school-related functioning, a basic overview of available treatments, and many recommendations for helpful school responses. *Topics Covered Include:* Generalized Anxiety, Panic Attacks, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Social Anxiety and Selective Mutism, Separation Anxiety, and Trichotillomania (compulsive hair pulling).

Creating a Culture of Reflection

Thursday, March 21st 5:30-7:30 p.m. \$50 Presenter: Dr. Carol Hall-Whittier

Learning organizations are made up of staff members committed to personal mastery as well as team learning. This seminar will focus on how to enhance professional practice through the creation of a culture of reflection.

*Action Research *Critical Friends *Reflection Notebooks

We will consider how leaders can include time, structural arrangements, and specific processes during a school day to support staff learning. Please bring your own example of a teaching and learning issue for a reflection activity.

Motivating the Unmotivated Student

Friday, April 12th, 9:00 a.m. – Noon \$50 Presenter: Amy V. Maus, MSW, LCSW

How many students today appear lazy, disinterested, and unmotivated? Our culture has developed a cycle between these students' parents and their schools. This cycle encourages parents to assume more of the responsibility for schoolwork, schools to provide ever increasing amounts of information to parents, and adults to promote rewards, trips, cash and candy for students willing to accomplish *anything*. This seminar explains the way out of this cycle. With liberal use of real case stories and examples, this presentation aims to help administrators and teachers reestablish accountability, work ethic, and a joy for learning within their students.

Money Scripts: What are Your Beliefs and How Do They Affect Your Finances?

Thursday, May 2nd, 9:00 – Noon \$50 Presenter: Mary Saggau, MSW, LCSW

We all have beliefs about money – likely due to scripts internalized from childhood. What we don't realize is that these beliefs unconsciously drive our spending behavior, as much or more than our actual financial situation. Unexamined beliefs may keep one in a poverty mode unnecessarily, or may cause an individual to spend when there really is a shortage of funds. Come and learn about money scripts and identify beliefs active in your life.

Ask the Therapist

With Jennifer Webbe Bannister, MSW, LCSW, DM



Q: At what age should my children get cell phones?

A: As a therapist and school consultant, the same question always seems to arise. At what age should children get their first cell phones? We have seen families that allow cell phones for their children as young as seven. Other families hold out until high school. I believe there are several factors that go into this decision. There is no magical age for cell phones, but rather questions we need to ask ourselves about our children.

Are your children independent thinkers?

Independent children make good decisions because they allow themselves to consider various options and are confident in their choices.

Do your children need a cell phone for safety reasons?

There are many safety reasons for which children need to have access to a cell phone. Some of those scenarios are:

- They walk home from school alone.
- Parents both work and they need to inform them of their whereabouts.
- Children who have illnesses in which the parent must be called often for medication dosage.
- The home does not have a landline.

Do your children understand that there will be rules and limits about cell usage?

This is very important when we let our children loose with a cell phone. They need to understand that some plans come with restrictions and extra costs. They also need to understand your rules and expectations. This goes along with being responsible and able to limit themselves.

Can they be trusted to use the phone, text, photo, and video functions responsibly?

This is a topic that needs to be discussed with the child prior to receiving a cell phone. Should the child break the rule there must be serious consequences. If school imposes a consequence, parents must be cooperative in supporting the school.

Do they really need a smart phone, or will a basic cell phone do?

Having so many options for younger children can be very tempting, time consuming and distracting. If the phone is needed strictly for communication with parents and caregivers, this option is not necessary.

Will they agree to safety settings and apps?

For example, as a therapist and school consultant I always advise that the GPS portion of the phone be disabled. If you would like to track your child personally, there is an app for that. It is not necessary for friends and social networking sites to know where your child is located. This can be very dangerous.

Can you, the parent, afford additional phones and plans?

Remember that children are children. They forget their phones at friends homes, they leave them on the playground and they drop them in toilets. If you choose to allow your children to have cell phones, keep the cost of the phones down, as you will surely be replacing one or two.

There is no magical age when it is right to give our children phones. There are just some simple questions we need to ask and rules that need to be followed.