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KidWISESM



Helping Communities Face a Tough Issue

KidWISE Institute is an education and training organization located in Oakland, California. A pioneer in the field of child sexual abuse prevention and education, it was founded in 1993 at a time when newspaper headlines were making parents feel especially vulnerable. Many felt unequipped to protect their children from what they perceived as new dangers.

**Prepare
Don't Scare
"Children need
to be taught
how to deal
with all adults,
no matter who
they are. They
need to be
shown what
their power
is in each
situation."**

It was in the midst of this growing unease that I received a request to present a workshop on how to keep kids safe. Although I had been developing and presenting parent education programs for several years, this topic was not on my shelf. But, it sounded interesting, so I said yes, thinking I might be able to use the program again.

In the weeks that followed, I researched child personal safety programs aimed at parents. To my surprise I discovered that there were no programs for parents. Instead I found a number of programs on "stranger danger" for children. I also learned that children were receiving information at school assemblies and bringing home tip sheets to share. Typically, this material was filled with alarming statistics and warnings, much like the ones our parents gave us, such as "Don't talk to strangers" and "Don't get in the car with strangers."

As a concerned parent, clinical social worker and family educator, I felt that parents had the right to more complete and accurate information, as well as the skills that would help them keep their kids safe. So, I began to develop a workshop specifically for parents. Little did I know we were entering an era when parents would actively seek information through workshops and lectures, books and videos, and by talking to each other. The taboo on the subject of child sexual abuse was about to be lifted.

A New Approach

One of my goals in designing the first workshop was to put "stranger danger" in perspective. At that time child personal safety programs and literature overemphasized the danger of abduction. And while that may have scared some parents into wanting more information, parents in turn were scaring their kids about something that was highly unlikely to occur. It appeared that nothing was available to help parents teach their children how to avoid a more common form of child exploitation — sexual molestation.

My challenge was how to steer parents' attention toward such a sensitive subject. I came up with four potential solutions. First, I chose a name for the workshop that wouldn't scare parents away. *Raising Careful, Confident Kids* Second, I introduced the topic via subjects that

were familiar and non-threatening: self-esteem and open communication. (In the workshop parents learn that nurturing their child's self-esteem and creating open, safe family communication, will lower the risk of their child becoming a victim of sexual abuse or other forms of exploitation.)

The third approach was the one I was least sure about. Although the topic was very serious, I thought I could make it easier for parents to learn and participate if they could laugh a little. So I alternated between light content and the "tough stuff," which allowed parents to hear new or uncomfortable information during the moments they were smiling and relaxed.

Ultimately it was the fourth approach that put KidWISE on the map. I consciously avoided using scare tactics, role modeling a reassuring and moderate tone in all my communications with participants. It clicked. Parents reported feeling hopeful and more confident after attending the program. Soon KidWISE became known for our "Prepare Don't Scare" approach to teaching personal safety.

KidWISE Spreads its Wings

Two opportunities came along next that launched KidWISE nationally. One was turning the workshop into an audio learning program. The other was writing the book, *On the Safe Side* for Harper Perennial in 1994. *On the Safe Side* was published at a time when widespread publicity



