

# How Parents Can Talk to Their Kids

Children need to have rules and a sense that adults will protect them

**I**N A SOCIETY SHOT THROUGH WITH violence, parents anguish over how to protect their children and help them put the threat and fear of random brutality in perspective. In a conversation last week with NEWSWEEK's Jean Seligmann, David Elkind, professor of Child Study at Tufts University and author of more than a dozen books on child development, including "The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon," offered some advice.

**NEWSWEEK:** How can parents strike a practical balance between keeping their kids safe and not terrifying them unnecessarily?

**ELKIND:** We can't just tell kids to go out and play anymore; there aren't too many safe havens for them. It's important to talk to children about violent things as they happen, like a kidnapping they've heard about on TV, and to emphasize that the probability of its happening to them is very small. Children need a sense that somebody cares enough to protect them. To provide that sense, we must become adults to our kids. We have to set limits, rules, standards that are good for kids. So many parents are afraid of their kids—afraid they won't like them. We have to assert our adulthood.

**How can parents make sure children are safe when they can't be with them all the time?**

We can teach prevention. For little kids, the best protection is that they should not be alone in public places. All children should be conscious of strangers, and be discriminating and wary of them. This won't make them grow up suspicious as long as they have adults around whom they know and can trust: relatives, friends of their parents, parents of friends.

We can teach communication. Ask your children to keep in touch with you when you're apart, and be sure that you keep in touch with them as well. Let them know where they can reach you by phone, and when you're traveling, give them an itiner-



LARRY WILLIAMS—ST. LOUIS POST DISPATCH

**No safe havens:** Suburban St. Louis parents won't let their kids walk home alone

ary. We can teach kids to call us to come and get them—or get someone else to bring them home—if they find, for example, that they have to walk in the dark unexpectedly. We can teach them to travel in pairs.

**What about children who are home alone?**

This used to be a problem of poor children, but now middle-class kids are home alone, too, and the suburbs have some of the same social ills as cities. While it's sometimes necessary for an 8- or 9-year-old to be home alone, the data show that it's a frightening experience for them. Be sure the child knows how to lock and unlock the doors and what to do if a stranger calls or knocks on the door. Give them phone numbers of people to call if there's any problem, and give them strategies to cope, rather than just saying, "This is good practice for you." Sometimes parents throw up their hands, thinking that because they can't do everything to protect their children completely, they can't do anything, but that's not true.

**How can we reassure our children that the world is a safe and inviting place for them to explore?**

One thing about contemporary society is that we've lost control of the information flow our children get. In the past, parents could monitor the movies kids saw, the magazines and newspapers that came into the house. Now with TV, children get information they never would have had before. So we have to do more both to prepare them and to help them deal with what they've seen, like a body being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu on the TV, or a homeless person on the street where they walk. We should give children a

healthy respect for the world out there, but focus on the good things as well as the negative ones. It's not a jungle out there; there's not someone dangerous lurking around every corner. There are lots of decent people who will help them.

## WHAT CHILDREN FEAR

### Social Problems

Youths, ages 9 through 17, worry about the following happening in their future:

- 42%**  
contracting the AIDS virus
- 32%**  
being injured in an auto accident
- 28%**  
being beaten up or attacked
- 24%**  
having to fight in a war
- 17%**  
having a marriage end in divorce
- 14%**  
becoming homeless

### Economic Worries

- 61%**  
not being able to find a good job
- 49%**  
not having enough money
- 43%**  
not being able to get into college
- 23%**  
having their parents lose their jobs

YANKELOVICH YOUTH MONITOR