

DID YOU KNOW . . .

That with all the lighthearted fun of summer comes safety risks as well? Oh, I know that parents and caregivers are well aware of the need for sunscreen and safety around pools or beaches and outdoor grills. But what about the more subtle dangers . . . are you watching out for those as well?

The carefree, relaxed days of summer are wonderful for the children, but for parents and caretakers, they can actually mean increased supervision and vigilance. Your school age children are not under the care and supervision of teachers and other professionals for any part of the day. For many parents, summertime means children being home all day long, or going back and forth to friends' houses. There are pool parties, outdoor games and all sorts of group activities, such as festivals and fairs. There may also be trips to Disney World or other recreational sites. All of these activities, while an important part of childhood, also pose additional risks to children.

It is at many of these events that perpetrators go looking for the next victim—a child who is easy to abduct; one who is alone long enough to be molested; or children who only seem to have one parent present. Consider the crowd at a carnival or festival, or at a large site such as an amusement park. We all know the happy chaos that exists in such places: food, music, laughter, and loud noises. How many stories have we heard recently of parents who turned away for just a moment to answer a cell phone, deal with another child, or attend to any number of distractions, only to find that a child has gone missing? How many times have we heard disclosures on talk shows about children who were molested or raped in restrooms or when allowed to walk alone to a neighbor's house? We all think it won't happen to us, but for many families, this nightmare has become a reality.

You may wonder what having a single parent household has to do with this topic? Sadly, pedophiles in particular like to drive around neighborhoods looking for homes where children are outside alone a great deal, or where there only seems to be a mother present. Soon, the man stops, or parks a few blocks away and walks past the house, sometimes with a dog or some other tool to make him look harmless and trustworthy. The single mother, who appears to struggle with all the demands placed on her, trusts this charming man a little too quickly. Before long, they are dating and in due time, this man has access to her children. Many even go so far as to marry the woman to gain access to the children.

Does this mean that women should never trust men they meet on their block, or that children should be kept inside the house all summer long? Absolutely not! Children deserve to have a childhood that is as innocent and carefree as possible. What it does mean is that parents have to do their homework and be watchful. For a single mom, check out the registered sex offender website before letting a relative stranger have access to your children. Ask him to agree to a background check, if you feel the need. If he balks for any reason, move on. No relationship is worth risking the safety and well-being of your child!

For those summertime activities, be prepared. Take your child to the local police department to get fingerprints of every child, if you haven't already. Make sure that you keep recent photos in your wallet. Know what your child wears each day. If your child is old enough, have a cell phone for the child. If you can't afford a phone, agree on a mutually-known meeting place if someone does get lost. Create a code word that only you and your child know, so if you have an emergency and have to rely on a friend to pick up the child, your child knows that it's okay to go with that persona. And most importantly, *know who your children are with*. If you are going to an

event such as a carnival or other large group activity where there will be many strangers, try to have extra adults accompany you so that children never have to be alone. Make sure that young children stay with you and your group. Plan activities that include many parents or trusted adults, so that there is plenty of supervision at all times. Children are meant to run and play and not sit quietly in one place. They are meant to explore and enjoy their environment. It is up to us, as the caretakers, to make that environment as safe as possible. For teenagers, the same suggestions for successful teen parties **(Matt, please insert link here)** holds true for summertime gatherings.

Finally, do not let the free time your children have this summer expose them to greater risks online. Parents can and must monitor social networking and other online activity to ensure child safety, even when children are teens. Children can unwittingly engage in social activities with perpetrators, believing that the offender is another teenager. At a recent conference, many of us were horrified to hear the story of a 12-year-old who met “teenagers” online who turned out to be middle-aged pedophiles. She finally met one in the woods behind her house and he kidnapped her. Just as the police were closing in on the location of the perpetrator and the girl, who had been sexually assaulted, the perpetrator killed the girl and then himself. Children of all ages can innocently post photos online that give predators clues as to the identity and location of the child, which then places that child at greater risk.

The bottom line is that children have the right to enjoy childhood and should have every opportunity to do so. Parents and caretakers must think ahead and take every reasonable precaution so that the innocence and joy of youth is preserved for the children in their care. To do anything less is an injustice to the trust God placed in us as caretakers for His little ones.

God bless you and the children in your care. Have a safe and glorious summer, filled with blessings!!

Debora Jones