



**AMBER
ALERT**

BREAKING THE ICE: CREATING A DIALOGUE WITH YOUTH

Being Equipped to Educate Youth

It is the role of the parents to discuss these matters with their child, but as youth professionals, it may also be beneficial to be equipped to educate youth on how to protect themselves from harmful situations. Keep in mind that this is a very sensitive topic and some youth may not be comfortable talking about it.

**DIRECT THE
CONVERSATION**

If you find yourself educating youth about tough situations such as sexual abuse, keep these things in mind when guiding the conversation;

Keep in Mind

- **The concept of ‘stranger danger’**

This phrase aims to educate children on how to avoid dangerous situations and individuals. Although it is not an inherently bad idea, the message is not often clear to children. As adults we have the experience and decision making ability to know what is appropriate and what may seem like a dangerous situation. To children, when they think of “strangers” they may think of “scary” or “mean” people, but studies conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) showed that in two thirds of cases of non-family abductions, the child or family members were acquainted with the abductor. **Often times reservations are made up of closely knit families and friends, so you can see how this may be a bit confusing for children trying to identify potential threats.** It is also important to note that some people, who would be considered “strangers” such as law enforcement officials, are the ones who can help them. Make sure they understand the difference.

- **Being clear while communicating with youth is the most effective prevention strategy**

Using concrete examples is a way to communicate with youth so that they can understand the message you want to portray. For example, give them a scenario like “what if you went over to a friend’s house and you were asked to play a game that made you uncomfortable?” When creating a scenario that kids can relate to, they are more likely to give an answer you can use to guide the discussion.

- **Model healthy boundaries**

Modeling healthy boundaries is important for youth to know so that they understand what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. It’s essential to talk about “safe zones” with youth and let them know they have to power to say “no” or “stop” if a situation is uncomfortable. Model saying “no” to make sure that they know that their “no” will be respected. Teach them that their personal safety depends on them getting away from situations where they feel threatened and to let a responsible adult know about the situation. What starts as inappropriate behavior, or crossing boundaries, can lead to abuse, assault or even abductions.*

* NISMART, or the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Throwaway Children, found that that two-thirds of the cases of nonfamily abductions reported to police, most of which were for relatively short periods, involved sexual assault.



• **Be approachable**

As a youth professional, youth need to be able to trust you and feel comfortable in order for them to open up and really inform you on what's going on in their lives. Initiating conversations and being respectful while answering questions can go a long way. Start by asking simple questions like “**How was school?**” or “**Did you have a good day?**” Make the youth understand that you genuinely care if they are doing well.

• **Build a positive network of adults**

Children need to know who they can go to if they ever are in trouble. It is important to establish their “network” not only at home but away from home as well. For example, if they are in school, who would they go to in order to seek help? Who would they go to at a specific youth serving organization? It is also important that youth have more than one person they can go to for help. If the only person they trust is the abuser, then they will not get the help that they need. If in any circumstance they cannot think of any one individual, please point them to the Tribal police, elders, and others who can provide assistance in keeping them safe.



• **Be familiar with the area in which you serve**

Knowing the community that you work in will provide you with a strong knowledge base on what is appropriate and who should be notified if a situation is out of your control. In some communities certain topics may be considered taboo or inappropriate to discuss. Although this may be true in some areas, it is still important to educate youth, families and the community on strategies to keep youth safe. It's also important that youth know that they have a trusted adult that they can come to if they are in a harmful situation. Take the time to talk to elders or Tribal police in your community to be proactive in the safety of youth.

Disclaimer: Every community is different, and it is important to keep that in mind when attempting to deal with these situations. This resource is not meant to act as a “one size fits all”, but rather provide some ideas. You know your community best, which makes you your own best resource when deciding how to handle these situations.

Sources

- Missing Kids, http://www.missingkids.com/en_US/publications/PDF10A.pdf
- Stop It Now, <http://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/tip-sheet-8>
- OJJDP, <https://www.ojjdp.gov/jjjournal/jjjournal598/safe.html>