

How to Raise a
**STREET
SMART
CHILD**

**THE COMPLETE
PARENT'S GUIDE TO SAFETY
ON THE STREET
AND AT HOME**

GRACE HECHINGER

How to Raise a Street-Smart Child

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to Safety on the Street
and at Home**

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INTRODUCTION

“You can’t be that worried about me when I’m out at night if you can go to sleep so early,” my teenage son said a few years ago. I told him it’s not that I didn’t worry; of course I did. But I added that I felt I’d taught him as much as I could. The rest was up to him now—and a bit of luck. If I was able to sleep, it was because I knew I’d done my best to teach him how to protect himself.

—Children growing up in today’s world need to gain a sense of personal security and safety. There are so many assaults on our sense of security that we are sometimes tempted to believe being defensive and fearful is the right approach after all. With everything that could happen, shouldn’t we keep ourselves always on guard? But we also have to think again of how terrible it would be to live with constant anxiety. Always living with fear is much worse than many of the minor traumas we may eventually have to face. And so, we want to give our children a sense of security in what is undeniably an insecure world.

Fortunately, our children do not have to hide at home to be secure. It is possible to live with an awareness of the crime and danger around us without becoming unduly fearful or paranoid. What we need to do is teach our children to take reasonable precautions. At times it may be difficult for us to be good role-models. We must modify some of our habits. We do not walk alone on deserted streets late at night, give rides to hitchhikers or let strangers into our homes. It is not only our children but all of us who have to live with these kinds of preventive measures.

My experiences with my own two boys have made me aware of the need to teach personal safety. While they were growing up, I wondered how effectively I had taught them. Sometimes I worried that I might have made them too careful or even fearful; at others I wondered if I had been concerned enough. Much of the advice given in this book covers what I wish I had known when my children were still small. My safety instructions were often hastily improvised. Luckily, most of them seemed to work.

Safety education is part of every parent’s responsibility. The best protection you can give your children is to teach them how to recognize difficult situations, how to avoid them if possible and, if not, how to react in the safest manner.

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Think of teaching about safety as you do about fire drills. In school children are trained, when a fire alarm sounds, to get in line and walk calmly out of the building. Fire drills are practiced regularly. There is no need to frighten children by telling them all the gory details of what might happen, such as burning or suffocating from smoke fumes. The point of matter-of-fact practice and instructions is that danger can be avoided. No one objects to fire drills on the grounds they might scare children. In all safety talks, we must always emphasize what children should do to protect themselves, never the bad things that might happen to them.

I have written *How to Raise a Street-Smart Child* as a concerned parent with a special knowledge of education, not as an expert in self-defense or crime prevention. In the course of my research, I have interviewed police officers, psychologists, psychiatrists, people involved in neighborhood safety programs, school safety officials, children and the parents of children who have been victims. I have also read a great deal about crime and personal safety and observed self-defense and safety classes for children.

Books about children's safety, when they exist at all, are frequently filled with horror stories, case histories as well as complicated instructions in physical self-defense, advice that can actually be dangerous. This book is different. It goes beyond the usual "Don't Talk to Strangers" line and offers down-to-earth information and practical suggestions for parents to protect their children's safety.

No specific physical defense techniques—holds, kicks, punches and the like—are described here because no one, child or adult, can learn these techniques from a book. Learning physical self-defense is like learning to drive a car or sail a boat: you must learn by doing. And you must be committed to practicing until you have mastered certain skills. Correct supervision and practice with a qualified instructor are also necessary. In addition, learning to judge when to use these techniques is as important as the specific measures themselves. When and how a child can be taught physical self-defense depends on the child's age and other factors.

Unfortunately, parents are often frustrated and confused when searching for ways to teach their children personal safety basics. Many tend to be shy about being specific, especially when discussing sexual molestation. Throughout this book I will stress how you can have simple, straightforward talks about these problems.

How to Raise a Street-Smart Child is arranged so that after you have read the first two chapters, you may either continue to the end or select the subjects most important to you. Chapter 3 deals with younger children (between five and eight) getting ready to go out on their own. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss mugging and street crime. Chapter 6 describes

how you can help a child after a bad experience. Chapters 7 and 8 treat sexual abuse both from someone known to a child and from a stranger. Chapter 9 deals with school-related safety problems. Chapter 10, also for younger children, is about safety in traffic and cars. Chapter 11, for all ages, discusses a child's behavior at home, whether alone, with parents or baby-sitters. Chapter 12 offers suggestions about what to do if your child is missing and discusses whether or not to have the child fingerprinted.

Many grade school and high school students are reluctant to report unpleasant or alarming incidents to their parents. They are afraid of subsequent excessive restrictions on their activities, of being blamed for not having prevented the incident or of simply not being taken seriously.

I hope this book will help parents and children speak with each other more openly about safety and about ways of preventing trouble; both generations will benefit. We cannot make our children completely safe, but we can reduce the risks by teaching them how to avoid potential dangers and by establishing good communication. In addition, we can minimize the undesirable aftereffects if unpleasant incidents do happen, and help youngsters to handle them more effectively.

While being realistic in protecting our children, we also want them to grow and thrive in the knowledge that the world is not primarily a threatening place. Yes, there are some people—young and old—who might want to harm them and about whom they need to be warned, but the majority of strangers are harmless and even friendly. Our goal is to teach our children, by our attitudes and actions that most adults can be trusted to care about children's welfare and happiness—and yet that they must be careful about the few who cannot.

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1

LIVING IN A DANGEROUS WORLD

On a fall afternoon when my older son, Paul, was nine, the phone rang. The mother of one of his friends was on the line asking with real concern whether Paul had come home safely. Yes, I replied, surprised at the question. I understood her anxiety when she explained that her son had just returned unharmed after he and another boy had been mugged at knifepoint. Paul had been with them until a few minutes before the incident. Even though he had been spared the scary experience, I was as upset as if he had been directly involved. It was such a near miss; it could happen to Paul or any other child at any time.

Such incidents of casual violence—and their aftermath—have become part of our lives. We acknowledge them grudgingly for ourselves and with even greater reluctance for our children, and we hope that like lightning they will not strike close to home. Yet each time we hear about an ugly episode, it diminishes our sense of personal safety. Whether we live in a bustling city or a placid suburb, we worry about the impact of crime and violence on our lives—and with good reason.

“We cut off the children’s television,” *New York Times* columnist Russell Baker has written with wit and poignance about every parent’s dilemma, “because we feared all that violence would turn them into monsters. Soon they were reading the newspapers and at grips with the real world . . . But what the real world offered was even worse.” Baker’s solution: cut off the children’s newspapers and give each a television set. “They haven’t been at grips with the real world for weeks, thank heaven for Kojak, Starsky and Hutch.”

Many parents would like to turn off the real world in which their children are growing up. And many news events that contain horrors for people of all ages become even more frightening for families with children.

One ironic example of how the real adult world can be more frightening than children’s traditional imaginary fears was the discovery of cyanide-laced Extra-Strength Tylenol® capsules in 1982 and how it heightened parents’ concern about the possible poisoning of Halloween candy.

The deaths in the Chicago area from poisoned Tylenol about a month before Halloween with its tales of witches and goblins, caused many parents to carefully monitor their children's trick-or-treat activities. Everyone was disturbed by the Tylenol scares, but children and families were distressed the most by the knowledge of one more reason for fear and mistrust.

The idea of anyone poisoning children's Halloween candy should be unthinkable; yet in 1982 it became a real worry for parents, another problem to deal with. Here was a case where the real news proved to be more frightening and bizarre than any story created for television.

Some communities banned door-to-door trick-or-treating and offered alternatives such as hayrides, costume contests and parades. Others planned to hand out toys or money instead of candy. In some places, centers were set up where a child's bag of candy could be X-rayed, and some hospitals offered to X-ray holiday treats to make sure they did not contain hidden pins or razor blades.

A mother in Stillwater, Oklahoma, told a reporter she would accompany her two children on their rounds and inspect every piece of candy they were given. She also said she might even substitute candy she had bought for the candy her children received. Some of her neighbors, she said, had banned trick-or-treating, "but I just couldn't say no when the kids enjoy it so much. They see all the costumes in the stores and they know it's Halloween. I'm just going to be very careful." Many parents across the country followed suit in their own fashion.

Others accepted the example of Jane Byrne, then Chicago's mayor, who said simply "I would not allow my children to take candy this particular Halloween." And a Massachusetts woman said, "With all the problems around, you can't be too careful about safety and children. I don't feel we're taking Halloween away from the youngsters. The children know what is going on." She reported that a little girl had said, "You're right. It's not worth a poisoned candy bar."

And for Atlanta families a few years ago, Russell Baker's suggestion to turn off real life would also have been welcome. For nearly two years in that city, there had been more than twenty killings and mutilations of school-age children.

During that tense time, there were some changes in the way Atlanta people lived. Curfews were imposed by the city for the evening hours, despite the fact that most abductions apparently occurred during the day. Schools began imposing tight security measures to protect students who might be alone in school buildings or playgrounds.

During the height of the scare, parents began routinely to restrict their children's movements and to call the police immediately if children could not be found. The news media began campaigns urging children not to go anywhere without parental approval. In many black neighborhoods, where most of the victims had lived, people said they felt trapped, as though they were living in a state of siege.

The tension and fear were felt by the Atlanta children. There were reports that some cringed at the sight of an approaching stranger. Others thought it necessary to travel in groups armed with sticks. Many children experienced recurring nightmares. Even after a suspect was apprehended and eventually convicted and the murders stopped, anxiety lingered and community vigilance persisted.

In another well-known incident, the first day that six-year-old Etan Patz had been allowed to walk alone to the school bus stop in New York's Greenwich Village he disappeared. Despite thorough police searches and some false clues, he has not been seen since the May day he vanished in 1979. The bus stop is a block and a half from the Patz home. His mother had watched him for most of the way from a fire escape. "You have to let them start having a little independence," she said quietly as she went over the incident.

The family had considered the neighborhood safe. Other children had walked alone to the bus. In spite of all this, like most parents, they had cautioned Etan about not going anywhere with strangers. Mrs. Patz told a newspaper reporter that the boy "thinks everyone of all ages is wonderful, trustworthy and kind."

Some people believe that Etan was kidnapped by the North American Man-Boy Love Association, a homosexual organization that promotes the legitimacy of emotional and sexual love between adult men and young boys and argues that state laws making such relationships illegal should be repealed. The family still does not know what happened to Etan.

The Tylenol scare, the Atlanta killings and the newspaper and television stories that reported the disappearance of Etan Patz reflect every parent's worst fears. Fortunately, few children are victims of serious crimes or violence. But when such incidents occur and are reported by the media, the news spreads quickly over phones and in school hallways. Every time a child is victimized, it makes countless other parents and children afraid. When told she was going to visit Atlanta, a six-year-old girl said, "Oh, it's dangerous for children there. There are bad people there that kidnap and kill them."

Stories of danger to other children make us feel that it could always happen to us—no matter how remote the possibility. Any story of calamity will make parents just a bit anxious; much as we would like to, we cannot forget that we have to teach our children to cope with a dangerous world.

The news media deal with the spectacular aspects of crime, but the more mundane aspects have touched all our lives. The impact was brought home to me when we were buying our older son's first bicycle. His heart was set on a special model. As we looked at the different bikes, a salesman warned, "I wouldn't buy one of those for my kid. They are the first to be stolen."

As parents, we faced a familiar dilemma. Was it better to tell a nine-year-old to settle for a less desirable bike because potential thieves would consider it less desirable as well? Or should we give him his special favorite accompanied by a warning about the dangers that came with it? Neither alternative seemed very attractive.

We decided to take the prudent course and bought a more conservative bike—a choice that looked like the lesser of two evils. Did our son enjoy it less? Paul does not remember the incident now, but he does remember enjoying his first bike. I will never forget it. The pleasure of selecting a gift for our child was marred by the darker considerations of the streets.

Caution is a response of many parents to living in the modern world. We could have chosen to ignore the potential dangers. Perhaps Paul's bike would never have been stolen. But the odds in New York City were such that we believed prudence to be a better part of valor.

And the fact is that we fool ourselves if we think our children are not aware of street dangers. Children themselves know what they face whether or not they tell us they are afraid.

Fears of violence, crime and personal injury are common among children. More than two-thirds of the youngsters in a recent survey said yes when asked, "Do you feel afraid that somebody bad might get into your house?" A national study of more than 2,000 seven to eleven-year-olds, designed by Nicholas Zill, a psychologist and president of the non-profit research organization Child Trends, for the Foundation for Child Development, demonstrated that 68 percent were afraid an intruder might enter their homes. This fear was reported by all the children who participated in the study regardless of how old they were, whether they lived in urban or rural areas or whether they were poor or middle-class. Seventy-five percent of the girls and 62 percent of the boys expressed such fear.

This same group of children was asked, "When you go outside, are you afraid someone might hurt you?" More than one fourth (28 percent) answered yes. Of this group 32 percent were girls and 23 percent boys. For both questions the number of girls reporting being fearful was slightly higher than the number of boys.

Violence inflicted on children by their own parents also seems to contribute to crime-related fears. Children who reported that their parents spanked them and yelled at them were more likely to be afraid of attackers and intruders than children who did not report such punishment.

Regardless of the exact figures, for far too many youngsters the fear of being hurt on the streets or in the playgrounds is not merely the result of childish imagination but a realistic response to their environment. Mean and violent behavior figures in their lives—perhaps more so than many adults are willing to recognize. To the question, "Who is the per-

son you are most afraid of?" one child in five named a specific person or persons from their school or neighborhood who had hurt or threatened them in the past.

Fifteen percent of children in the United States, according to the Zill study, live in areas where parents say local crime is a problem. An additional 20 percent live in neighborhoods where their parents report there are "undesirable people in the streets, parks or playgrounds, such as drunks, drug addicts or tough older kids." But even in the so-called good neighborhoods, being harassed or threatened while playing is too frequent an experience to be dismissed.

Over half the children reported having been bothered by other children or by adults while they were playing outdoors. Forty-three percent said they had been harassed by older children and nearly 13 percent had been bothered by adults. More than one-third reported that they had been threatened with a beating; 12 percent said they had actually been beaten up. A ball or a similar item had been taken by force from one-fourth of the children; 5 percent said they had been robbed of money.

These events naturally affect children's perceptions about their environment. More than one child in six mentioned fighting, bullying, meanness, vandalism or crime as the thing they would most like to change about their neighborhood. They report that "people steal" and "people are mean." Some wishes for change have particular poignancy: "Stop older kids from fighting and picking on little kids" . . . "Get bicycles for all of us who got one stolen."

Most neighborhood incidents such as those described in the survey are not reported to the police. They do not appear in official crime statistics. The usual exceptions are when a bike is stolen or a serious assault takes place. Sometimes parents are reluctant to report even those. Children themselves may not even report many so-called minor incidents to their parents. But no matter how minor the incident may appear to an adult, it contributes to a child's overall sense of fear.

Even older students are known to have been adversely affected. The biggest worry of high school seniors, more than nuclear war or pollution, was found to be crime, according to another continuing study called *Monitoring the Future*, by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.

In a follow-up survey done in 1981 of 1,400 of the same children, now 12 to 16 years old, Dr. Zill found that crime-related fears were still present as children got older, even though a lower percentage reported them. To the question, "Do you feel afraid that somebody might break into your house?" 31 percent said yes in contrast to 68 percent when they were younger. Even at age 16, more than one-fourth were afraid that someone might force his way into their homes. While there was a drop from the earlier figure, virtually one-third of the teenagers remained fearful. The figures were higher for girls than boys.

When asked again, "Do you feel afraid when you go out that someone might hurt you?" 17 percent of the older children answered yes. A higher percentage of girls was afraid than boys. As indicated, there was some dropping off with age, but not a really substantial decline until ages 15 and 16.

Teenagers continue to report being bothered in their neighborhoods. Again the numbers are smaller, but the problem remains.

TV's Scary Messages

Young children get video messages early, sometimes with strange results. When our friends, parents of a five-year-old girl, told her that her grandmother had died, the little girl's first question was, "Who shot her?"

The overwhelming presence of violence on the home screen and its distortion of real life further complicate parents' efforts to teach children how to deal with the world in the safest and most rational manner. The prevalence of televised crime and violence and the frequency of portraying aggressive acts, especially in programs aimed at, or regularly watched by children, present a real problem. By the time the average child graduates from high school, he or she will have seen more than 13,000 violent deaths on the small screen by current estimates.

By homogenizing age groups, television treats young children as if they were grown up; they are part of a large common audience. Consequently, even young children can appear to be quite sophisticated about major issues, including violence and crime. How they absorb and handle the information they get from television is another matter, as the five-year-old in the story illustrates. Television lets children enter into experiences they never would have had before the days of video. But exposure is one thing and understanding quite another.

In a society saturated with television, the question must be asked, Does it play a role in making children and young people more afraid of crime than they otherwise would be? The answer, according to researchers in the field, seems to be affirmative. The more television children watch, the more crime-related fears they will have. "The fear that 'somebody bad might get into the house,' reported earlier by Dr. Zill, is so widespread among American children that it cuts across all economic groups. "The influence of television is certainly a factor," he says.

There is evidence linking television to children's fears. When they were asked, "Do you feel afraid of TV programs where people fight and shoot guns?" nearly one-fourth of the children responded yes. It is mostly youngsters aged seven and eight who say they are frightened by violent programs. "Many parents are surprised that elementary school children are still frightened by television programs, thinking this stops at a

younger age,” says Dr. Zill. In another survey, by the National Center for Health Statistics, 27 percent of the mothers in the sample reported that their children’s sleep was disturbed by seeing certain television programs or movies.

There is a direct correlation in Dr. Zill’s survey between the amount of time children spend watching television on the usual weekday and the children’s reports of crime-related fears. Children described as heavy viewers (who watched three hours or more each day) were more likely to say they were afraid of intruders and attackers than children who spent less time in front of the television set. Even when there are controls for family background differences and actual crime incidence, heavy viewers are still more fearful than light viewers and nonviewers.

Television research by the Yale University husband-and-wife team Jerome and Dorothy Singer further confirms the finding that children who are heavy viewers, especially of violent action-filled programs, overestimate how frightening the real world is. These TV bred young viewers believe there is more crime in their neighborhoods than actually exists. “Some are even scared to ride their bikes,” Dorothy Singer says.

“Television is the first mass-produced environment into which all children are born and in which they will live from cradle to grave,” according to Dr. George Gerbner, dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Gerbner, an authority on the social impact of television beyond the children and violence arguments, has studied more than the link between violence on the screen and crime in the streets. The power of the medium over what we all think and learn, he believes, is comparable to the pervasive influence of the medieval church. The television screen provides a constant learning environment, especially for children.

Television explains the world and our common culture to us. It constructs a reality of its own. Its picture of what exists shows what its creators consider important and how they see a variety of ideas and events being related. Children often get their view of how the world works from watching television. And not only from children’s programs. Experts point out that after the age of six only 20 percent of a child’s viewing time is spent watching children’s programs.

The television world, however, is not like the real world. Its distortions and exaggerations contribute to shallow and false perceptions. For example, on the small screen crime occurs about 10 times more often than it does in real life. Fifty-five percent of prime time TV characters are involved in violent confrontations once a week. In real life, the incidence of violence is a small fraction of that. In television’s world four-fifths of all prime time and weekend daytime programs contain violence and two-thirds of all major characters are affected by it. During weekend and daytime children’s programs, the rate of involvement in violence is even greater—a shocking 80 percent. While the networks