

Supporting safe interactions

In society we encounter and interact with strangers daily to have our needs met, such as shop assistants when paying for food at the supermarket, or asking for assistance at the train station. Your child or young adult will see strangers in stores, at the park, around their neighbourhood and in their school environment.

Who is a 'stranger'?

The term 'stranger' is an abstract concept and one which an autistic person may find difficult to understand. A stranger can be defined as 'someone that you do not know'. By using this language, teaching the concept of strangers may become more accessible for your child.

It is important that you do not teach your child that strangers appear a certain way e.g., they look 'scary' like the villains in their cartoons or shows. Having pre-conceived ideas can be dangerous and limit independence, reducing the likelihood of your child engaging with strangers when necessary, such as the police if feeling unsafe, or to ask for assistance when in the community.

Who is a safe stranger?

It is important to highlight to your child that they will come across people that they do not know who could be thought of as 'safe strangers'. When talking to your child or young adult about strangers, explain that nobody can immediately tell if someone is safe (or nice!) by just looking at them.

Examples of some 'safe strangers' may be teachers, shop assistants, police officers and paramedics. However, your child will also need to be aware of whether a safe stranger is displaying safe or unsafe interactions.

Teaching safe or unsafe interactions can be challenging for some autistic people due to difficulties with understanding social cues and communication that may be 'unsafe'.

It is therefore important to support your child to understand:

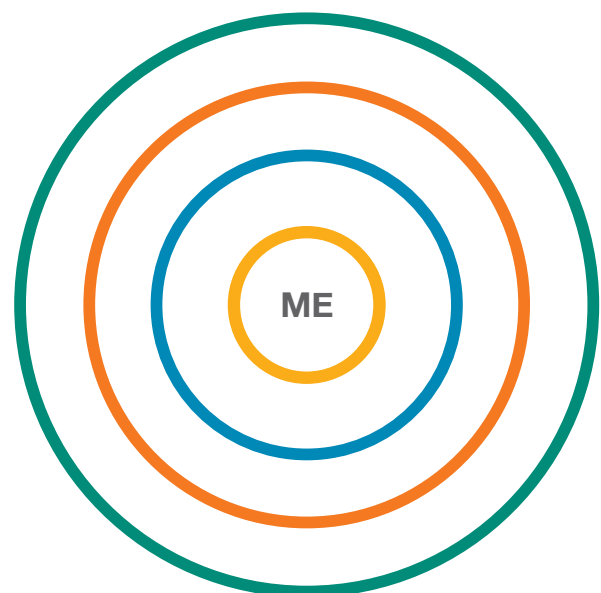
- Who is a stranger?
- Who is a safe stranger?
- What safe or strange interactions can I spot?
- How can I respond?

How to teach your child to identify a stranger

Teaching your child to identify who is a 'stranger', can be supported using visuals. Visuals provide important tools and help to make learning and concepts more concrete for autistic people. To do this we can present children with pictures of familiar, known people alongside pictures of unknown 'strangers' that they might meet whilst in the community. You may then get your child to sort through these pictures. You can also do this naturally when out in the community, pointing out safe strangers such as a uniformed police officer in order to give more context to this teaching.

Other teaching opportunities can include showing your child safe places that they could go to if they needed help e.g., a local store or the homes of trusted family and friends.

The 'circle of trust' (see below) can be used to support your child's understanding of this. Photos or names of familiar, known people can be added to the inner circles, with unknown strangers on the outer segment of the circle.



How to teach what are safe and unsafe interactions

A critical way of teaching your child or young adult about strangers is by teaching them about safe and unsafe interactions. This will facilitate them when encountering people they do not know or when engaging with people that they do know.

Support your child to recognise signs of an unsafe interaction. Examples of unsafe interactions can include but are not limited to:

- If an adult asks them to disobey their parents
- If an adult asks them to keep a secret
- If an adult makes them feel uncomfortable
- If an adult asks them to do something without permission

We should teach the appropriate and 'safe' interactions that we can have with different people and teach that 'safe strangers' should never try to harm them. Again, this can be taught through visuals. For example, I can talk to a police officer, and they can talk to me, but I should never touch them in private areas, and they should not be touching me. You may even highlight some scenarios to your child and young adult and ask them what they would do and offer suggestions of what they could do to keep them safe. Example scenarios include:

- A stranger comes up to them in the park and asks them to play with their dog 'over there'
- A woman who lives on the same street as them invites them to have some juice at their house
- A stranger asks them if they want to be dropped home in their car

Responding to a stranger

Teaching children 'don't talk to strangers' comes with complications and will ultimately prove detrimental to autistic individuals and how they can interact with society. We must instead teach the types of interactions that we can have with the different groups and teach strategies for responding to 'unsafe strangers'.

Teaching your child or young adult responses such as 'No!' can be helpful if they perceive danger. Ensure your child knows that it is okay to say no in situations, and to seek help. Strategies that can support with how to respond include:

- Role playing a range of scenarios encouraging your child to practice saying no
- Role playing a range of scenarios encouraging your child to seek for help
- Role playing a range of scenarios where your child explains why they responded the way they did e.g., 'because the adult told me I should leave my mum and walk with them'
- Visual stories to explain how to react in moments of danger
- You can also practise interactions with 'safe strangers' and how they can appropriately communicate when they require help or support



Ensure your child knows that it is okay to say no in situations, and to seek help.

In modern society, we should also think about teaching children how to respond to a stranger online and these same strategies can be used to support with these instances.

In addition to spotting unsafe interactions and potentially risky scenarios, it is important that your child or young adult recognises assent and consent, particularly if they are not able to consent vocally. Assent is the expression of approval, where 'assent withdrawal' would be the opposite of assent.

Examples of assent

- Smiling
- Moving towards/turning their body towards
- Active engagement
- Fast responding
- Nodding
- Saying yes
- Giving a thumbs up
- Making requests

Examples of assent withdrawal

- Frowning
- Head down
- Moving away/turning their body away
- Lots of prompting required to engage
- Shaking their head
- Saying no
- Requesting to stop
- Giving a thumbs down
- Displaying behaviours that challenge