



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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Be Smart: Educate and Protect Your Children

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Senator Ritchie's Weekly Column

It was just roughly three weeks ago that the nation's attention turned to St. Lawrence County, where two young Amish girls were taken from their home. We all felt an immense sense of joy, relief and gratitude—as well as a tremendous sense of pride in all members of our community who joined in the search—when the girls were reunited with their parents and siblings.

Now, as we reflect on this shocking crime, it's important to know what you can impress upon your children to ensure they stay safe and out of harm's way. Each year, thousands of children are reported missing. One of your best lines of defense against kidnappers can be talking with your child about the rules pertaining to strangers. When you have the discussion, here are several key points to touch on:

Speak to your child in a calm, nonthreatening manner: Fear can often be paralyzing to a child. It's important that when you talk about safety issues, you do it in a way that will empower your children and teach them what to do in harmful situations—not scare them.

Don't go anywhere alone: Make sure your children know never to go anywhere alone and know never to wander off. If your child is old enough to go places with friends, make sure they know the importance of the “buddy system.”

Learn to spot dangerous actions: The fact of the matter is, that you can't tell if someone is capable of harming you just by looking at them. Make sure your child knows how to spot dangerous actions—like someone trying to lure them into a car, bribing them with candy or other items, etc.

Know what to do when you are in danger: While in any other instance it might not be acceptable to scream, kick or act out of turn, make sure your child knows that if they are in danger, doing these types of things *are* acceptable and can help them get the attention of someone who can help. It's also important

that children know to yell phrases such as, “help, I’m being kidnapped,” so others don’t just assume he or she is throwing a temper tantrum.

Keep the lines of communication open: Children need to know that a trusted adult will always be there if they feel uncomfortable, scared or confused. Make sure your children know the lines of communication are always open and that they can share anything with you.

As a mother and a grandmother, I cannot imagine the pain of having a child go missing. While the recent abduction in St. Lawrence County was truly a tragedy, out of it came a teachable moment and a reminder that we need to stress safety with our children. If you haven’t talked with your child yet about how to protect themselves from abductors, don’t wait to do so.