

Talk to Kids About Protecting Themselves

Two years ago, when my eldest daughter was in the first grade, she had her first sleep over. We were all so excited, it was a momentous occasion for our entire family. Our daughter packed her purple overnight bag: toothbrush, change of clothes, blankie, shoes, stuffed animal... the works. And she confidently went off to another family's home for the night. I was more nervous than she was!

She came home the next morning in tears, saying that she never wanted to go to another sleepover. We felt so bad for her and could not understand why she was so scared. Two years went by without even one attempt at a sleepover. Not one.

When I asked my daughter why she didn't want to go spend the night at a friend's house (even right next door), she said it was because she was afraid something bad would happen to us if she wasn't home. My heart crushed. At times, I felt like she was being weak when her best friends would ask her to spend the night, but she didn't want to go. So, we didn't push her. We decided that she would go when she was ready.

Then, after two years, it happened. "Mom, I'm ready!" she giggled. We were so excited! We packed her bag: toothbrush, hairbrush, pajamas, jacket, 6 Webkinz and more trinkets than you would have ever dreamed could fit into this 12 by 20 inch overnight bag. If she was sleeping over, she was going to be prepared!

She went home with her friend's family after the girls' soccer game was over. She was gone until 4 o'clock the next afternoon. I was certain we were going to get a late night pickup phone call, but pleasantly surprised when we slept through the night without one peep. When she came home the next day, she was upset. "Oh no..." I thought silently.

She told us how the older brother of her friend had a friend over for a sleep over as well. She said that the kids were all playing downstairs from the parents and the older boys held the girls' arms behind their backs and hurt them. All kinds of things went through my head, but the most important thing was that my daughter clearly did not understand how to defend herself in this type of situation (which was mild considering what could have happened). The ability to protect herself was one thing my daughter could not stuff into her overnight bag that night, but it is something she will never again forget.

When kids grow up, it is important for adults to explain to them that they need to protect themselves. Adults need to tell kids that if someone, adult or child touches them in a private area or in a way that makes them uncomfortable, it is okay (and recommended) to say in a firm voice, "No!" and to be forceful if the person does not stop. Children also need to know that if kids are pressuring them to go along with something that makes them uncomfortable, to leave the situation and find an adult who can help them immediately.

There are many scenarios that happen with children hurting or touching other children inappropriately and this is something that parents need to prepare kids for. Children need to be empowered by knowing that this is normal, but also knowing how to handle the situation. Parents also need to explain to children that if an adult touches them in their private areas, in a way that makes them uncomfortable or in a forceful way, they should tell a parent, teacher or school counselor immediately.

The more children know about how to protect and defend themselves, the fewer children there will be who are abused, peer pressured or bullied. Kids need to be educated about body and personal safety in order to reduce these instances of abuse. Read books about these topics and talk about them often with your family. Don't be afraid to discuss something that is uncomfortable for you because it might end up saving your child from some very damaging experiences in the future.

There are many rites of passage as a child and many more as a parent. Make this a positive one that you empower your child with. By the way, I am signing my girls up for karate classes!

From a famous commercial:

"Karate classes til they are 18 years old = 2,000 hours

Cost of two kids in karate classes til they are 18 years old = \$33,600

A Stun and Run combination on a would-be attacker = Priceless"

