

## **The O.U.R. Children's Safety Project**

Toddler enjoying her time at camp

Direct instruction with our kids paves the way for both their future safety and ability to effectively use language. As parents, we need to recognize our role in advocating for our child's safety.

...a child's emotional safety is directly linked to their physical safety and their ability to give consent.

### **What's Safety Got to Do with It?**

Christine Griffin, Washington H&V

Often families are caught off guard when I meet with them and mention child safety. Their expression says it all, "What does child safety have to do with communicating with or educating my child?" Honestly, it means everything to your child.

"Before a child can learn, a child has to feel secure." (LaPetite.com) Feeling safe makes learning possible. When children are comfortable and feel nurtured, they can get into that "play" mode which is the learning place. We can use language development to help build cognitive concepts of safety. When a child feels safe, that child is able to take the risks necessary to be in relationships, to explore, and to try new things. Research has shown that children who feel insecure, play and explore less, and have more difficulty with peer relationships. Children who have experienced abuse or neglect have great difficulty regulating emotions due to the many triggers they experience related to memories, thoughts, feelings and actions.

What is safe? How can we help our Deaf/hard of hearing (D/HH) kids understand the meaning of being safe? The word "safe" according to Oxford dictionary is defined as an adjective from the Old French *sauf* and the Latin *salvus* meaning "uninjured". It's interesting that safety is defined as "not" something! We teach that concept like any other abstract concept, using the term in a variety of situations, adding visual supports whenever we can, sharing books whose characters experience safety and those who don't, using prediction and examples from the child's knowledge and experience. In teen years, asking thoughtful questions, discussing similar events in the world, and role playing/problem-solving activates the child's executive function skills to increase an awareness of their physical and emotional safety and sheds light on their right to consent.

Through our Guide By Your Side program, I recently connected with a family whose child is a toddler and is intrigued and eager to go up to anyone she sees. Right away, I recognized similarities between this child and my own child when she was a toddler. When our daughter was little, I struggled to teach her age-appropriate skills. While I recognized a need, I could have used this safety information to draw upon as she grew. For example, what is acceptable when a parent is close by or when a child checks in with an adult first is different than approaching or chatting with anyone. Helping our kids tell the difference between people she and her adults

know and those her family doesn't have in her "circle of trust" is one developmental step. Developing her sense of safety, or intuition, is another. For now, adults are needed to keep this toddler safe. As an outcome from our interaction, the family created four stacks of 28 sign cards to give to teachers and extended family at a church camp they attended to increase their child's communication and safety. They also asked what activities their child would be doing for the day to guide camp volunteers and teachers. Subsequently, they were able to facilitate clear communication with their daughter's caregivers at camp, which is one of the protective factors that can help keep kids safe from abuse.

In the world of deaf/hard of hearing children and children in general, physical and emotional safety are important concepts. Consent is another one, closely tied to both types of safety

Physical safety is generally more visible and concrete such as "hot" and "not hot." We can feel the difference between the two immediately. Emotional (psychological) safety is more abstract. We don't know what is really going on in a child's head, except as they are able to communicate their feelings, and as they grow older, that sharing may switch to their peer group than to parents and teachers. Emotional safety can be described as feeling a sense of belonging, comfortable, happy, and secure.

Here are some examples of physical safety and emotional safety:

### **Physical Safety**

Feeling physically comfortable or showing behavior that indicates calmness, happiness

Letting family know where you are, with who and what you are doing.

Appropriate levels of supervision for the child's age and abilities

Looking both ways when crossing the street

Using safety gear such as helmets, seatbelts, safety gate

Having an escape plan in case of a fire in your home or other emergencies

Being safe from typical dangers: falls, hot surfaces, electric outlets

### **Emotional Safety**

Saying "No" or "Stop" and being heard – being respected and encouraged to set boundaries with people you know and don't know

Knowing you are loved, belong and included

Being free from manipulation, belittling, shaming

Keeping personal information about the child confidential and asking permission to share information (unless at risk)

Knowing concrete ways to handle a situation when someone is being mean or threatening

Knowing what to do in the case of an emergency (reduces anxiety)

Communicating worries and struggles that are listened to with empathy and encouragement, and followed through by adult action when needed

Sharing victories that are celebrated

### **Consent**

Knowing the difference between safe touch and touch not agreed to by both people

Discerning between Secrets and Surprises and providing actions to tell an adult when commanded "Don't tell" by someone.

Being touched or touching/kissing is a choice (Example: You don't have to kiss Aunt Stacy)  
Touching for safety or medical reasons may not be a choice but the child can be asked for permission. Touch should *never* be a secret) Example: audiology and placing earmolds  
Tickling and teasing stops when I say stop

By looking over these lists, you may come to realize that a child's emotional safety is directly linked to their physical safety and their ability to give consent. For kids who are D/HH, we need to directly teach them ways in which to be safe. Language and communication development is the cornerstone to our child's safety. An early example of this is to teach our kids the names of their body parts and help them to understand the many different feelings people experience (sad, happy, anger, fear, calm, love). Direct instruction with our kids paves the way for both their future safety and ability to effectively use language. As parents, we need to recognize our role in advocating for our child's safety. The Kidpower Put Safety First Commitment, which says: "*I WILL put the safety and wellbeing of myself and others ahead of anyone's embarrassment, inconvenience or offense—including my own*", empowers me to teach my child and others to take steps that might be uncomfortable but necessary for our children's well-being.

*Editor's note: A good introduction to these principles is included in the Parent Safety Toolkit at <https://handsandvoices.org/resources/OUR/index.htm>. Watch for information on this year's October through June monthly O.U.R. Zoom calls on second Tuesdays starting October 11. Learn more about Kidpower's personal safety education for all ages here: <https://www.kidpower.org>*