



## What Educators of Kids With Disabilities Can Do to Reduce Their Risks of Maltreatment Protective Knowledge, Skills, and Actions From Kidpower

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### Introduction

A number of factors leading to greater risks of maltreatment for children with disabilities were identified by Harold Johnson, Ed.D., Special Education Professor Emeritus and passionate advocate for providing child protection and life skills for safety and success for these very vulnerable young people.

As educators, we can mitigate many of these risk factors by learning, using, teaching, and coaching the following protective knowledge, skills, and actions for ourselves, parents and caregivers, and the children. This article discusses ways to protect children with the following risk factors from maltreatment:

1. Having chronic disabilities that may overwhelm parents
2. Not understanding what constitutes maltreatment and that they have the right to say “No”
3. Limited communication skills that inhibit their ability to tell others that they have been abused
4. Frequently dependent upon others to meet their basic needs
5. May be considered to be unresponsive or overly responsive to affection
6. May be separated from their caregivers for extensive periods of time
7. Are expected to interact with a significant number of adults in a variety of contexts
8. May not recognize their own sexuality
9. May not know how to recognize or protect themselves in a “risky” situation
10. Are often socially isolated and frequently lonely

11. Are not recognized to be at higher risk of maltreatment

12. Are often not a “valued” member of the community

In teaching personal safety skills to thousands of people of all ages with all kinds of disabilities, we adapt by focusing on what each individual can do, rather than on what this person cannot. We have found that repetition and actually practicing instead of just talking can lead to positive results that surprise caregivers. A common language and teamwork from all the adults responsible for any aspect of care for the child can make a tremendous difference in protecting this young person from maltreatment and enabling her or his success in learning and understanding how to stay safe.

The following protective knowledge, actions, and skills from Kidpower can be introduced, adapted, and reinforced over time and can be incorporated into Individual Education Program (IEP), Individual Family Service (IFSP), and 504 Plan objectives to ensure equal access to education in the US.

### **1. Having chronic disabilities that may overwhelm parents**

#### **Actions for Educators:**

- Team-building so all adults work together for the benefit of the children, instead of working in isolation.
- Noticing, speaking up compassionately and clearly, and offering help when anyone on the team seems overwhelmed or triggered e.g. “I understand that it must be extremely frustrating and exhausting when he throws a tantrum. At the same time, it doesn’t look safe when you yell at him and shove his hands down so roughly. How can I help?”
- Allying yourself on the part of the parents that want the best for their kids. “I know how much you care about him and want him to be safe and happy. Let’s develop some strategies for reducing the triggers that lead to meltdowns and for responding when it happens in ways that are safe for everyone.”

#### **Parents and other caregivers can learn:**

- Emotional safety techniques for handling emotional triggers – e.g. Getting Centered, filtering for information.
- Strategies for managing upsetting behavior and reducing it when possible.
- Effective help-seeking skills to prevent overwhelm – e.g. Finding the right people to ask, asking in a respectful and persistent way.

#### **Help children and teens and teens who can to learn and practice:**

- Specific skills and habits that can make caregiving and being together easier – e.g. Pointing to what you want instead of grabbing it, Calm Down Power, Hands Down Power.

### **2. Not understanding what constitutes maltreatment and that they have the right to say, “No!”**

#### **Knowledge, skills, and actions for educators, parents, and other caregivers:**

- Adopt Kidpower's 'Put Safety FIRST' Principle: "The safety and well-being of a young person are worth causing anyone embarrassment, inconvenience, or offense – including my own." This statement is easy to agree with, but hard to live by.
- When everyone on the team is in agreement and has a common language about what is safe and what is not safe, kids are less likely to be maltreated. Actions or words that demean, exploit, or harm kids are not safe. Lack of action that fails to provide a child with basic needs or that allows harmful behavior to continue is also not safe.
- Teach Kidpower's four boundary rules: 1. We each belong to ourselves. 2. Some things are not a choice. 3. Problems should not be secret (and touch, games, photos, activities and presents should not be secret). 4. Keep telling until you get help.
- Teach Kidpower's safety rule that touch, teasing, jokes, and play for fun and affection should be: 1. The choice of each person. 2. Safe. 3. Allowed by the adults in charge, 4. Not a secret so others can know.
- Teach the safety rules about private areas adapting this language and being as specific as is appropriate for this student: "Your private areas are the parts that can be covered by a bathing suit. For play or teasing, other people should not to touch your private areas or ask you to touch their private areas or take or show pictures about private areas. Sometimes your adults might need to touch your private areas to help you with cleaning or if you have a problem– and you can tell me or anyone else that they did it. Touch should never have to be a secret."
- How to adapt boundary-setting skills for each child's cognition and ability to communicate.
- How to avoid assumptions that stop us from trying to teach safety skills– e.g. Not uncommon experience for Kidpower instructors to be told that a student cannot speak and then, after simple repetition and practice, to have a child or teen say, "No." or "Stop." – which significantly increases that individual's safety vocabulary.
- How to use Kidpower's Positive Practice Method to set up role plays so children have fun and are successful in learning the safety rules and practicing how to say, "No."
- How to coach use of the safety rules and the boundary skills in daily life until they become habits.

#### **Help children and teens who can to learn and practice:**

- What is and is not your choice using very specific examples relevant to this child's life. E.g. Hugging must be the choice of each person, safe, allowed by the adults in charge, and not a secret. Having someone grab your arm to stop you from hitting is not your choice and should also not be a secret. E.g. Saying to kids in the moment, "I am sorry that you don't like my doing that and it's for your safety– it's not a choice and it's not a secret. You can tell everyone."
- No secrets safety rule using very specific examples relevant to this child's life– Others can know about problems, games, touch, photos, presents, and activities. Saying, "I don't keep secrets about touch." Or "Not a secret." Or, "No secrets."
- How to say "No" to unwanted touch – e.g. "Please stop." "I said stop." "Stop or I'll tell."

### **3. Limited communication skills that inhibit their ability to tell others that they have been abused**

#### **Knowledge, skills, and actions for educators, parents, and other caregivers:**

- Pay attention to changes in behavior, unexplained bruises, increased anxiety around a particular person, or inappropriate behavior by another person.
- Speak up about concerns and don't stop until you are satisfied with the answers.
- Get help when you cannot figure out what the problem is or if you are worried that a child might be being abused.
- Focus on what a student CAN do to ask for help. E.g. If a child is verbal, develop a simple safety vocabulary such as, "Not safe. Need help. Safety problem." Teach a Get Help Safety Signal.
- For a young person who relates to books, create a simple personal Safe/Not Safe book about specific concerns relevant and understandable to this individual – e.g. Cars, fire, touch, secrets, etc.
- Make a My Safety Plan book about where he/she goes and how to get help.
- Ask a verbal child or teen, "Is there anything you have been wondering or worrying about that you have not told me?"
- Discuss the Kidpower Protection Promise with each child or teen who can understand this to make SURE they KNOW you care.

#### **Help children and teens who can to learn and practice:**

- Knowing and following your safety plan for how to get help if you have a safety problem in public or with people you know. If a child can be mentally present but needs an assistant to move or communicate, practicing together can be very empowering for both.
- Saying or signaling or handing someone a card to say, "I need help."
- Persisting if someone doesn't listen at first or doesn't understand you. E.g. Pretend not to listen or to misunderstand, coach child to keep trying. Say, "Please listen. I need help." Or, go to someone else and ask again. Giving nonverbal children communication tools that they can use to ask for help and repeated practice using these in a variety of situations specific to the child.
- Finding communication tools such as dolls to help someone who is nonverbal show what happened.

### **4. Frequently dependent upon others to meet their basic needs**

#### **Knowledge, skills, and actions for educators, parents, and other caregivers:**

- Emotional safety techniques to take the power out of triggers and getting help skills to avoid overwhelm.
- Reinforce the safety rules about touch by saying, "I am doing this for your health. You can tell anyone."

- Talk with people with respect as you help them with cleaning, dressing, or other necessary activities to reinforce the concept that you are helping them for their health and safety– not just moving them around.
- Finding ways to give choices where possible within the child’s understanding and abilities even if less efficient. “Would you like a blue shirt or a red shirt?” Do you want to put your shoes on yourself or have me help you?”
- Acknowledging upset feelings about caregiving while still continuing with the activity. “I understand that you don’t like this and I’m sorry. I need to help you get cleaned up now.”

**Help children and teens who can to learn and practice:**

- How to say or sign, “I don’t like that.” Or, “Please let me do it myself.”
- Ways to express feelings that can be answered with compassion such as “No!”
- Ways to ask for help if abusive behavior is happening in the context of caregiving, such as “Not safe. Need help.”

**5. May be considered unresponsive or overly responsive to affection.**

**Knowledge, skills, and actions for educators, parents, and other caregivers:**

- Understanding that the true goal is connection – and that there are many ways to connect in addition to physical affection.
- Finding meaningful ways to connect with this individual child – perhaps through doing a fun activity together.
- Teaching children who are capable how to respond to social cues such as greeting people and being respectful without asking them to accept forced affection.
- For those who are overly affectionate, using physical redirecting techniques and setting boundaries about asking first.

**Help children and teens who can to learn and practice:**

- Specific skills for responding to social greeting cues such as looking someone in the eyes, offering to shake hands, saying, “Hello.”
- Using the “I want a hug/No Thanks” practice for getting used to asking and accepting rejection.
- Practicing “Hands down Power” and “Safe Mouth Power.”

**6. May be separated from their caregivers for extended periods of time**

**Knowledge, skills, and actions for educators, parents, and other caregivers:**

- Treating each person responsible for the well-being of this child even for a short time as part of the caregiving team.
- Insisting on safe and respectful behaviors for all members of the team.

- Creating a common language about safety such as the Kidpower Safety Signs or Social Story books in order to ensure consistency.
- Insisting on basic protection rules such as welcoming parents and other caregivers to be present within boundaries or having the door open or a window people can see through rather than being in a room completely alone with the child.

**Help children and teens who can to learn and practice:**

- Boundary rules and skills and help-seeking skills.

**7. Are expected to interact with a significant number of adults in a variety of contexts**

**Knowledge, skills, and actions for educators, parents, and other caregivers:**

- Same as #6 – having a teamwork approach, common language and practices about safety and respect, and core child protection policies in place.

**Help children and teens who can to learn and practice:**

- Boundary rules and skills and help-seeking skills.

**8. May not recognize their own sexuality**

**Knowledge, skills, and actions for educators, parents, and other caregivers:**

- Understanding and acceptance of a young person’s need for physical contact, a safe outlet for sexual feelings, and boundaries about what to do with these feelings.
- Simple and concrete ways to explain about sexual feelings and safety rules.
- Same 4 Kidpower boundary rules apply – touch must be safe, okay with each person, allowed by the adults in charge, and not a secret.

**Help children and teens who can to learn and practice:**

- Acting out or reading about different situations and whether or not each of the four boundary rules is true.
- Being able to sign or say or use the Safety Signs for: Safe, Okay with Each, Allowed by the adults in charge, and not a secret.
- How to get help if someone breaks the safety rules.
- What is and is not appropriate behavior in different settings.
- How to use their Hands Down Power rather than touching inappropriately.
- How to redirect strong physical affection onto an object such as a stuffed animal or favorite jacket instead of onto a person.

**9. May not know how to recognize or protect themselves in a “risky” situation**

**Knowledge, skills, and actions for educators, parents, and other caregivers:**

- All of what is in #2 above.
- How to teach awareness and avoidance skills.
- How to notice potential problems oneself and to advocate for solutions.
- How to insist on knowing about any changes in what a child is doing, where a child is going, and who is actually with the child.

**Help children and teens who can to learn and practice:**

- How to use their awareness to notice what others are doing and whether it is safe or not.
- Refusal skills with people they like in order to make safer choices.

**10. Are often socially isolated and frequently lonely**

**Knowledge, skills, and actions for educators, parents, and other caregivers:**

- How to use connection rather than emotional coercion to help a young person learn and do what they need to be safe and successful.
- Acceptance of a young person's need to have fun and connect with others.
- Identifying behaviors that make connection harder and people less likely to want to spend time with you. Using Social Story Books to help develop understanding of what these behaviors are and of what needs to change so everyone can have fun and stay safe.
- Recognizing the power of emotional coercion and how to create role plays addressing this for different kinds of personalities and needs.

**Help children and teens who can to learn and practice:**

- Getting to know you skills in greeting and talking with people.
- Friendship skills such as Listening Power and Waiting Power.
- Boundary skills such as Fence Power.
- How to use their "No, Thank You Power" to resist pressure from people they like to do things that should be their choice and are unwanted, unsafe or unhealthy.
- How to communicate messages such as, "I like you and please stop." Or, "I like you and that's not funny."

**11. Are not recognized to be at higher risk of maltreatment**

**Knowledge, skills, and actions for educators, parents, and other caregivers:**

- Information about these risk factors and how they apply to each child or teen's specific situation.
- Understanding about the "Illusion of Safety" that can lower our guards and make our kids more vulnerable.

**12. Are often not a "valued" member of the community**

### **Knowledge, skills, and actions for educators, parents, and other caregivers:**

- Recognition that “If you feel you don’t matter, you shatter.” (Offra Gerstein, MFCC, *Relationship Matters*)
- Developing social rituals for giving and taking in compliments for each person.
- Apologizing if you say or do something hurtful in a moment of frustration instead of just forgetting and moving on.
- Teaching and coaching the use of emotional safety techniques such as the Kidpower Trash Can.
- Creating ways of acknowledging and celebrating each person – photos on the wall, positive stories, having opportunities to help others, etc.

### **Help children and teens who can to learn and practice:**

- How to express feelings, “I feel sad.” “I feel as if I am not important.”
- How to throw away hurting words others say or you say to yourself and give affirmations. For example, throw away, “I wish I was different.” Take in, “I am proud of who I am.”
- Giving and accepting compliments.

### **Additional Resources**

- [Video series: 7 Kidpower Strategies for Keeping Your Child Safe with Dr. Harold Johnson and Irene van der Zande](#)
- [Unlimited Adaptability: Personal Safety Skills for People With Disabilities and Other Special Needs](#)
- [Kidpower Safety Signals for Everyone, Everywhere](#)

**For more information about Kidpower’s resources for teaching these People Safety Skills and concepts, please visit our online [Library](#) and our [RelationSafe™ Bookstore](#).**

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Kidpower Founder and Executive Irene van der Zande is a master at teaching safety through stories and practices and at inspiring others to do the same. Her child protection and personal safety expertise has been featured by USA Today, CNN, Today Moms, the LA Times, and The Wall Street Journal. Publications include: cartoon-illustrated *Kidpower Safety Comics* and *Kidpower Teaching Books* curriculum; *Bullying: What Adults Need to Know and Do to Keep Kids Safe*; the *Relationship Safety Skills Handbook for Teens and Adults*; *Earliest Teachable Moment: Personal Safety for Babies, Toddlers, and Preschoolers*; *The Kidpower Book for Caring Adults: Personal Safety, Self-Protection, Confidence, and Advocacy for Young People*, and the **Amazon Best Seller *Doing Right by Our Kids: Protecting Child Safety at All Levels***.