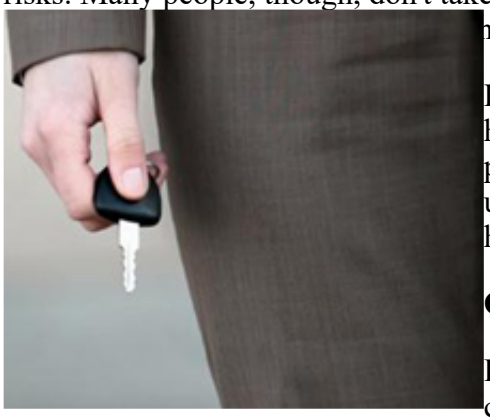
Playing it safe

Look both ways before crossing the street, buckle up before driving and never stick a knife into a plugged in toaster: whether you realize it or not, you take precautions all the time to safeguard yourself from everyday risks. Many people, though, don't take the same measures to protect themselves from the "bad guys" (or girls) and every minute worrying about hazards that lurk outside the door?



But, even if you don't want to focus on the negative things that "could" happen, it is always a good idea to brush up on how to be aware of potential dangers and reduce the possibility of becoming a victim. Read up on how to make a few minor changes to your routine and stay out of harm's way.

Out and about

Be smart. Walk in well-lit, populated areas and park in supervised lots close to the attendant's watchful eye. Try to vary your travel routes from day to day so that it's more difficult to predict your habits.

- **Be aware of your surroundings.** Take note of people walking ahead and behind you. If you sense you're being followed, turn around and—if a stranger is making you uncomfortable—go to the nearest shop or neighbour and contact the police.
- **Walk tall and with determination.** Even if you don't feel completely secure on the inside, walk as if you do! A potential attacker will be more attracted to people that appear easy to overtake. And may be scared off by people that look as if they might fight back. Look straight ahead and walk at a steady quick pace.
- **Lock car doors when leaving and entering the vehicle.** Take a quick look at the front and back seats when re-entering your car to ensure no one is hiding in your car.
- **Never leave keys in the car** even if you're just running into the convenience store for milk. You may have milk for your tea, but there's a good chance you won't have a car to drive home in. Avoid storing spare keys in the car; why give potential thieves a helping hand?
- **Take a friend to the ATM** if you're doing banking at night. If you are by yourself, use banking machines in well-lit areas, and where there are other people around.
- **Join a self-defence course.** Improve your confidence, peace of mind and fitness level by learning how to defend yourself from potential attackers.

Home—a safe haven

- **Always keep your doors locked**, even if you're just running out for a few minutes or are in the backyard mowing the lawn. Making this part of your regular routine is one of the easiest ways to prevent a break-in.
- **Connect with neighbours regularly.** Whether formal or informal, it's a good idea to create a "neighbourhood watch" policy with other people on your block.
- **Report anything suspicious to the police.** If you ever notice an unidentified driver and car parked outside of your home check with your neighbours, and if no logical explanation presents itself, call the local police department.
- **Install motion sensor lights outside your home.** A well-lit exterior will discourage potential intruders.

- **Ask for I.D. and call the company before letting a repairperson, meter reader, etc. into your home.** Confirm that the person is a legitimate employee of the company.

- **Install a timed lighting system.** Make it look like someone is home and moving from room to room, even when the house is empty.

- **Keep curtains and blinds drawn** at night to make it difficult for outsiders to determine who and how many people are home.

- **Get a neighbour or friend to collect the mail or newspapers** if you go on vacation. Nothing says, "no one is home" like a stack of letters crammed in your mailbox or newspapers on your doorstep.

Street-proofing your kids

Even though you may not be able to follow your children around everywhere, you can teach them the smarts and skills to avoid trouble. Today this goes far beyond "never talk to strangers." Make sure your children know:

- **Important information.** Have your kids memorized their full name, address, telephone number and city inside out? If not, get them to practice this vital information now.

- **The three W's:** Your children should always tell you where they're going, who they're going with and when they'll return home.

- **What strangers look like.** While most kids remember, "never to talk to strangers," they may not understand that strangers come in all shapes and sizes—including people that appear and act friendly.

- **To call 911.** Teach your kids that 911 is the number to call if they need help, feel that they are in danger, there is a fire, or someone is hurt. Remind your children that police are helpers in the community.

- **To stick in pairs or groups** when they're at the park, the mall, the movies, etc.

- **Where to wait if you're running late.** Arrange to meet your kids in the community centre, nearby donut shop or other public areas if picking them up after school or extra curricular activities. Make sure they never wait in isolated areas such as empty parking lots.

- **Safe play zones.** Create a map of your neighbourhood outlining "approved" and "off-limit" areas for playing.

- **How to turn down offers of rides or gifts from strangers.** Role-play different situations where children may be tempted by strangers. Show them how to: 1) Step back from the stranger; 2) Say "no" boldly; 3) Run away from the stranger. Acting out the scene will help your kids feel more confident handling real-life scenarios.

- **What to do if someone tries to grab them.** Teach children to drop to the ground and throw a tantrum (kicking, biting, screaming etc.) if a stranger tries to force them into a car or isolated area. The stranger will likely be scared off by the attention.

Net-proofing

While the Internet has created some wonderful learning opportunities, it has also created a host of potential hazards for today's Web-savvy kids. Take matters and the mouse into your own hands: help your children learn to identify and avoid the pitfalls of the Web so they can log on to its finer features.

Install a block or filter on your computer, but remain the number one filterer of online information. Filter software can greatly reduce your child's access to "adult" or other inappropriate sites. However, remember that even with software that blocks your "off-limit" sites, more than 15 per cent of these still get through. Filtration programs help, but they don't replace the watchful eye of a parent.

Talk about online stranger danger. Without really knowing the person on the other end, many children innocently reveal personal information (school, age, name, address etc.). Teach kids not to give out personal information ever and make sure they understand that the person they're chatting to is still a stranger.

Keep high-tech gear out in the open. Put your computer in a common space, such as the living room or den, so that you can keep better track of sites your kids are visiting.

If you aren't already, become computer savvy. You may never be as up-to-speed as your children, but it's wise to have some knowledge of the Internet. It will give you a better understanding of what you are up against and the issues you need to be concerned about.

Draw up a "computer contract." Create a list that clearly outlines the rules and regulations of computer use in your home and at school.

“Playing it safe”—whether travelling, at home or online—is the best way to keep you and your family out of harm's way. Planning for and creating safety guidelines will not only prevent potential problems, but also help you feel more prepared and in control should an emergency arise.

For more information on keeping yourself and your family safe, contact your local fire or police department.