

United States Department of State

Overseas Security Advisory Council

Security Guidelines for Children Living Abroad

Living abroad provides both parents and children with special opportunities and experiences to share the history and culture of a foreign land. As we know, child rearing practices and standards vary widely around the world. What may be acceptable in one society may be taboo in another. You need to understand local customs—but remember, you set the standards for your child's safety and security.

Much of the information in this pamphlet you may already know, but it can serve as a useful reminder and an opportunity to review these issues with your child. You may also want to discuss it with any daycare providers you employ, as well as your child's teachers and school administrators.

Precautions in the Neighborhood

Children should:

- Be alert, cautious, and prepared.
- Know the safest route to school, stores, and friends' houses, avoid isolated areas, and be able to identify safe places to go in an emergency.
- Report any crimes, suspicious activities, or anything that does not seem quite right to the police, school authorities, and parents and guardians.
- Try to walk and play with a friend or in a group rather than alone, and always let a parent or guardian know where they are going to be.
- Stay away from known trouble spots, poorly lit or isolated areas, and strangers who hang around playgrounds, public restrooms, and schools.
- Avoid being around others who tend to engage in forms of violence or use alcohol or other drugs.
- Know to settle arguments with words rather than fists or weapons, and to walk away when others are arguing.

School and Daycare

Parents and guardians need to:

- Determine the reputation of a prospective school, daycare center, or babysitter, and find out if they are licensed, certified, or regulated in any way.
- Find out as much information as possible about individual care providers. Ask for and check references.

- Visit schools and daycare centers unannounced to assess the quality of care that is provided and to observe how the care provider relates to children.
- Consult with other parents and guardians who have used the school, daycare center, or babysitter.
- Be aware of the school or daycare center's hiring policies and practices to ensure that reference, background, and previous employment history checks have been conducted on its employees.
- Make sure a system of positive identification is in place to ensure that only authorized persons have permission to take children from the school or daycare center.
- Prohibit the care provider from taking their children on an outing without their authorization to do so.
- Inform the care provider as to who is allowed to pick up their children each day.
- Determine whether the facility meets relevant building codes and fire safety regulations and whether emergency plans are in place to deal with evacuation, power outages, and inclement weather.
- Be careful about individuals who have custody of their children. Such individuals should be selected for maturity, experience, and trustworthiness rather than convenience, proximity, and low cost.

Child Abuse

What is Child Abuse?

Child abuse refers to the physical or mental injury, sexual misuse or exploitation, negligent treatment, or other maltreatment of a minor.

Child abuse is usually not an isolated event but a pattern of behavior that someone in power uses in interacting with a child. Such behavior generally increases in severity and frequency and may be exhibited on either a regular or sporadic basis.

Child abuse occurs in all classes and cultures where isolation, the inability to cope with daily pressures, parental self hate, unprepared parents, social stress, economic instability, or a misdirected sex drive exists.

Child abusers do not all fit a specific profile, but many tend to have been victims of child abuse, family violence, or substance abuse themselves.

Types of Child Abuse

Physical abuse is when someone inflicts bodily harm that leaves a physical injury on a child.

Sexual abuse is when someone in a position of power (usually an adult or older child) sexually mistreats a child either directly or indirectly.

Emotional abuse is when a child is made to feel worthless, unwanted, and unloved. It is any chronic or persistent act by an adult that endangers the mental health or emotional development of a child.

Neglect is when parents or guardians fail to provide for a child either because of ignorance of proper child care, failure to nurture, or deliberate maltreatment.

Preventing Child Abuse by Parents and Guardians

Prevention is often difficult because the line between discipline and abuse is not always clearly drawn, and the child involved is usually financially, physically, and emotionally dependent on the abuser.

Those who abuse children in their care often do so in response to emotional stress or feelings of powerlessness.

Prevention efforts need to be directed toward lessening or eliminating the factors that may cause abusive behavior. Factors can include low self esteem, lack of education, poor child care skills, separation or divorce, social isolation, depression, illness, and financial problems. Education and counseling should be stressed.

Preventing Child Abuse by Others

Parents and guardians need to:

Know where their children are at all times, be familiar with their children's friends, and show their children safe places in the neighborhood where they can go if they ever feel scared.

- Be alert to a teenager or adult who is paying an unusual amount of attention to their children or giving them inappropriate or expensive gifts.
- Teach their children that no one should approach them or touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. If someone does, they should tell parents or guardians immediately.
- Be careful about babysitters and any other individuals who have custody of their children. Babysitters should be selected for maturity, experience, and trustworthiness rather than convenience, proximity, and low cost.
- Keep a complete written description of their children (including hair, eye color, height, weight, date of birth, and specific physical attributes), take color photographs of their children every 6 months, ensure physician and dental records on their children are current, and arrange to have their children fingerprinted.
- Teach their children to be on the lookout for certain kinds of situations or actions rather than just certain kinds of individuals because abusers can be relatives, neighbors, friends, teachers, ministers, or strangers.

Children should:

- Know how to properly use pushbutton and dial telephones to make emergency, local, and long distance calls. They should memorize their name, address, telephone number, and parents' or guardians' work numbers.

- Be familiar with key phrases of their host country's language to enable them to communicate clearly in a time of crisis.
- Know how to answer the door and telephone when home alone. They should not let a caller at the door or on the telephone know they are home alone nor allow anyone into the home without asking permission to do so.
- Always ask their parents' or guardians' permission to leave the house, play area, or yard or to go into someone else's home.
- Understand how to operate door and window locks. However, they should not go into their home if the door is ajar or a window is broken.
- Play with a friend or in a group, try to use the buddy system, and never go places alone.
- Avoid isolated areas during the day and at night; stay in well-lit places when it is dark; and be cautious of elevators, parking lots, public restrooms, broken-down buildings, woods, and isolated fields.
- Be alert, walk confidently, pay attention to surroundings, and walk against the flow of traffic to prevent someone from following in a vehicle.
- Stay at least 15–20 feet from the door of a vehicle if someone stops to talk to them. They should never get into a car or go anywhere with any person unless they have the permission of a parent or guardian.
- Understand that no one should be asking them for directions or to help look for something, and no one should be telling them that a relative is in trouble and he or she will take them to the relative. If someone tries to take them somewhere, they should quickly get away from him or her and yell or scream "This person is trying to take me away" or "This person is not my father or mother."
- Know not to wander around if they get separated from their parent or guardian in a public place. They should go to a security office, checkout counter, or lost and found and quickly tell the person in charge they need help.
- Tell their parents or guardians if something happens that makes them feel uncomfortable or frightened in any way or if someone asks them to keep a secret, accept a gift, or pose for a picture.
- Be aware that no one should touch them on parts of the body that would be covered by a bathing suit.

If You Suspect Sexual Abuse

Young children usually do not lie about or make up the fact that have been abused. On the other hand, parents do not always believe a child who tries with a limited vocabulary to tell an experience he or she doesn't fully understand.

If you discover your child has been sexually abused, you will experience shock, outrage, and disbelief that such an experience has happened to your child. However, it is important that you try not to react too strongly, because your child's ability to cope with the abuse depends largely on how you react to the knowledge.

Knowledge of the possible changes a child might experience as a result of molestation gives parents an edge and ensures that these symptoms don't go unnoticed. No single sign is proof that there has been abuse, but given groups of signals, you should be alerted that something may be wrong.

Possible physical signs include: vaginal discharge, bloody underpants, pain and itching in the genital area or genital injuries, difficulty walking or sitting.

Possible changes in behavior could include: sleep disturbances—nightmares, bedwetting, fear of sleeping, tiredness from lack of restful sleep; eating problems—loss of appetite, obesity, swallowing problems; fear of certain people or places; excessive masturbation; re-enactment of abuse using dolls, drawings, or friends; withdrawal, clinging, fear of separation.

Most children don't tell about sexual abuse because they are afraid they will be blamed, disbelieved, or even rejected by you. To protect themselves, and you, preschoolers often minimize the experience, repress the incident, and deny the pain. Your care in under-reacting and assuring your child you believe and still love and trust him or her is essential to your child's healing.

What your child needs most at this critical time is your comfort, love, and support, and your reassurance that he or she is still okay—and that you're not angry with him or her. Underplay your own valid emotions of rage and injury.

If you suspect your child has been sexually abused, contact your doctor immediately. He or she will be able to recommend you to counseling professionals. Appropriate help can minimize the long term effects of any unfortunate incidents in your child's life.

Child Abduction

Precautionary steps for parents and guardians:

- Maintain a complete identification packet on each child—including recent photographs, description, birthmarks, fingerprints, handwriting samples, voice and video recordings, and passport information.
- Teach each child a code word to indicate that the child is safe and being treated well in the event of kidnapping.
- Have on hand a complete checklist of what to do and who to contact during the initial stages of abduction (for example, contact the Regional Security Officer, Corporation Security Director, or local police authority).

Steps parents and guardians should take if they receive a call that their child has been abducted:

- Remain calm, and maintain a cooperative but professional attitude.
- Request details of demands by caller, and identify to whom the demands are directed.
- Make a note of the caller's voice, background noise, and any other identifiable information.

- Tape-record the conversation if possible.
- State that it will take time to meet the demands and to make appropriate private arrangements.
- Ask to speak with your child to know that he or she is alive. If this cannot be done, then ask a question that only your child would know the answer.
- Try to end the call on a positive note, no matter what the actual substance of the conversation. Assure the caller that his or her demands will be met.
- Dedicate the telephone number on which the call is received to receive any subsequent calls.

These are just some of the important safety and security issues facing those raising children abroad. Also, there will be other important issues unique to your location that you must consider. Ensuring that your children and those responsible for their care understand and follow safety and security practices is a never-ending job.