

Personal Safety for Birth to Three Years

Typical Developmental Stages, Common Challenges, Goals, Resources

Note: The following handout is from the [Kidpower Child Protection Advocate Workbook](#) and includes information from [Earliest Teachable Moment: Personal Safety for Babies, Toddlers, and Preschoolers](#).

Introduction

Adult leadership is essential for keeping kids safe at all ages – and this is especially true for parents with very young children. Our belief in our own value, power, and capability is the most essential personal safety tool we have. Experiences at a young age can develop or undermine a child’s foundation for developing the belief that she or he has the right to be and feel safe.

This section includes:

- Typical developmental personal safety stages for the birth to 3 age range.
- Personal safety objectives and assessment questions checklist
- Common challenges for families with infants and toddlers, especially for children with a learning challenge, and goals for addressing these challenges.
- Some resources for helping to meet these goals.

Typical Developmental Personal Safety Stages for Infants and Toddlers

These are approximations –babies and toddlers learn and grow in widely different ways. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list but provides some key indicators about what developmental stages can be important for personal safety.

Infants 0-6 months

- Recognize mother and other primary caregivers as being “safe” and might become fearful about separation.
- Start to develop signals understood by the people around them for expressing happiness, interest, discomfort, fear, and wishes.
- Start to develop the belief that they have the right to be safe.
- Develop strong emotional attachments with mother and other primary caregivers that are important in preparing them to develop positive relationships with others.

Babies and Young Toddlers 6 -24 months

- Start to crawl and walk on their own, giving them more mobility without much awareness of what is and is not safe.
- Sometimes perceive danger, often irrationally to adults, but real to them.
- Increase their signals and ability to communicate their feelings, wants, and needs including their pleasure or disapproval about what others do or don’t do.

- Show interest in other people, especially children, and sometimes engage socially
- Start to use and understand simple language that can be understood by more people.
- Can start to understand simple directions, even if they don't follow them – like 'don't touch. Not in mouth. No.'"

Older Toddlers 2-3 years

- Become more competent at moving around and harder to hang onto, making wandering, running in front of a car, getting into water, climbing, etc. greater risks.
- Language grows from single words to full sentences to the ability to express and understand fairly complex ideas including enjoying and telling stories.
- Start to learn to make choices, use their words instead of acting on their feelings, to get adult help when they have problems, and to follow rules.
- Start to increase their social interactions with more people, including starting to play with other children.
- Often want approval from others and can get very upset by disapproval.
- As they understand more words, toddlers can become hurt by words and, as they can use words, they need to learn how to use words safely.
- Being curious about the differences in boy's and girl's bodies is normal and children need ways to address their curiosity safely and appropriately, including the safety rules about private areas.
- As soon as they have enough language, toddlers can understand and occasionally follow personal safety rules like: "Stay together, Check First, Wait. Mouth Closed Power, Don't touch, Stop! Move away. Get help. Use a regular voice. Throw away hurting words."-- and can benefit from social stories about how to be safe with people. Mouth Closed Power means being safe with your mouth – not using your mouth to bite, lick, or eat something you shouldn't – and being respectful with your mouth, not using your mouth to stick your tongue out at someone or, if you speak, to say unkind words.

Kidpower Personal Safety Objectives and Checklist for Parents

Children are safest when their parents and other caregivers advocate for and protect them, model safe and respectful behavior, and help them develop personal safety knowledge and skills along with other life skills.

The following objectives include key knowledge and skills that are essential for personal safety, and a checklist of assessment questions for yourself and your child. Since the 0-3 age range includes infants as well as toddlers, the questions for assessing children's ability to use personal safety skills are appropriate for children who are developing language skills regardless of their communication modality.

Objective #1: Understand what is safe and what is not safe with people and in our world as we change and grow.

Parent Considerations:

- Do I feel confident in judging what is and is not safe for my child's and my own personal safety? Do I know the warning signs of potentially abusive or neglectful behavior? Do I know not to trust someone just because of being likable, having a good reputation, or being in a position of authority and power?"
- Do I model for my child showing an awareness of what is safe and what is not?
- Is my child developing an understanding about what is and is not safe behavior from others in a way that seems appropriate for their age? By age 3, does my child know to move away and check first with the

adult in charge when encountering any person, animal, or thing that is unfamiliar and before going anywhere with anyone?

Objective #2: Communicate effectively about what we do want and what we do not want so that we can express our needs, feelings, wishes, thoughts, and boundaries in ways that are understandable to others.

Parent Considerations:

- Do I feel comfortable and effective about speaking up with each person who is responsible for my child's well being when I have a concern about my child's safety?
- Is my child becoming able to communicate boundaries in a way that is appropriate for their age? Is my child around age 3 starting to become able to understand and follow age-appropriate personal safety rules about touch? For example, rules such as, "Be Gentle! Ask First! No hitting!" -- and concepts such as "Private areas."

Objective #3: Understand the communications of others about their needs, feelings, wants, wishes, and ideas so that we can recognize and respect their boundaries.

Parent Considerations:

- Am I able to understand and integrate feedback from others responsible for my child's care and well being about how best to address safety concerns?
- Do I model for my child respect for the boundaries of others?
- Is my child at around age 3 starting to attend to and respond to the wishes of others in safe ways?

Objective #4: Take charge of the emotional and physical safety of ourselves and others when experiencing or witnessing disrespectful, abusive, threatening, or violent behavior.

Parent Considerations:

- Do I feel confident in my ability to stop or leave an abusive, threatening, or dangerous relationship or encounter?
- Do I model for my child refusing to allow others to harm anyone in my care, including myself?
- At around age one, is my child starting to learn ideas, body language, and words for, "No!", "Stop!" "Don't!!"?

Objective #5: Be persistent in asking for help so that we can advocate for the well being and safety of ourselves and others, sometimes in the face of obstacles.

Parent Considerations:

- Do I know who to ask for help and how to ask and keep asking until my child and I get the help we need?
- By age one, is my child starting to demonstrate ideas, body language, and words, for "Help!"?

- Does my child at around age 3 ask for help when he needs it?
- Does my child at around age 3 understand the words “safe” and “not safe”?
- Does my child persist if the caregiver asked doesn't understand her at first or is irritated with him for interrupting?
- Does my child know which adults can be counted on to provide help?

Objective #6: Develop positive relationships with peers.

Parent Considerations:

- Do I have positive, mutually supportive relationships with other adults?
- Do I show respect and insist on respect? I know how to resolve conflict in peaceful and effective ways?
- At around age 3, is my child starting to enjoy activities and games with other young children?
- Is my child starting to recognize and work out social problems? For example, taking turns with a toy, stopping a game that is getting too rough, expressing feelings in an understandable and respectful way, paying attention to the feelings of other kids, and noticing and learning from what other kids do.

Objective #7: Know how to protect our feelings and our bodies if others act in thoughtless, mean, scary, unsafe, or dangerous ways.

Parent Considerations:

- Do I know how to keep someone’s hurtful words or disrespectful behavior from ruining my day?
- Do I know how to escape from someone who is threatening to harm me or my child?
- Does my child at around age three know how to throw away hurting words instead of taking them inside?
- Does my child at around age 3 know how to run to his or her caregiver and get help if she or he feels scared?

Objective #8: Stay in charge of what we say and do so that we can avoid or stop unsafe behavior from others and act safely and respectfully ourselves no matter how we feel inside.

Parent Considerations:

- Do I stay calm and mindful instead of reacting automatically in disrespectful or unsafe ways when I feel upset or unhappy? Do I model for my child recognizing and managing my emotional triggers?
- As my child develops language, is my child starting to learn how to use words to express feelings, and to stay respectful with words and body in how he or she expresses feelings?

Common Personal Safety Challenges and Goals for Families With Infants and Toddlers

Challenge: Parents feel overwhelming anxiety about harm coming to their child, making it harder for them to feel safe when their child is engaging in therapeutic and educational activities.

Goal: Parents increase confidence and reduce worry by learning effective ways to protect their child including:

1. what to watch out for and the six protective factors to prevent child maltreatment;
2. how to communicate needs and speak up about concerns in a powerful, persistent, and respectful way;
3. how introduce and teach personal safety skills to their child as soon as the child can understand.

Success will be measured by self-reporting by parents about positive steps they are taking to address their concerns and amount of time they are spending using, introducing, and practicing personal safety skills.

Challenge: Parents have trouble managing a child who acts out aggressively or intrusively.

Goal: Parents will use a variety of strategies to help the child behave safely including:

1. Getting up and intervene quickly to stop unsafe or disrespectful behavior sooner rather than later.
2. Identifying and, if possible, avoiding or redirecting triggers that lead to aggression or acting out..
3. Involving the child by age 3 in learning how to calm down, wait, delay gratification, and be safe with body.

Success will be measured by self-reporting by parents and reduction in aggressive incidents.

Challenge: Parents worry about a child who is shy and unwilling to interact with others and push child to be polite and more affectionate, resulting in more clinging and a power struggle.

Goal: Parents develop better understanding about the need for some children to be more reserved and how respecting this will be best for the child in the long run including:

- How allowing play and affection to be a choice for the child (as well as the other person) helps the child to learn about boundaries.
- How to advocate for the child when another person tries to force play or affection.
- How to stay relaxed, take time, and make it safe and interesting for a shyer or more reserved child to engage with others.

Success will be measured by self-reporting of parents and observations that parents are accepting the child the way he or she is rather than pressuring the child to engage before she or he is ready.

Resources

Free Kidpower Online Library:

- [Kidpower Coloring Book](#) –in 10 languages, used by many families and day care programs
- [Kidpower Answers for Parents of Small Children](#)
- [Managing Aggressive Behavior in Young Children: Seven Strategies for Preventing Meltdowns](#)
- [Kidpower Puppet Power Videos](#) for Introducing Personal Safety Skills to Young Children
- [Kidpower Safety Signals](#) – simple graphics, words, and gestures used by many families and day care centers to create a common language around personal safety skills.

Publications: Cartoon-illustrated [Kidpower Teaching Books](#) and [Safety Comics](#); [Earliest Teachable Moment: Personal Safety for Babies, Toddlers, and Preschoolers](#)

Training and Consultation: Contact safety@kidpower.org for free email answers to specific safety questions; workshops in different locations; school and organizational packages that include training for professionals; International Child Protection Advocacy; and other services.