

Personal Safety for Preschool – Ages Three to Five

Typical Developmental Stages, Common Challenges, Goals, Resources

Introduction

Our belief in our own value, power, and capability is the most essential personal safety tool we have. Parents and caregivers must take responsibility for protecting children from experiences that might undermine that belief – and for providing experiences that help them to develop that belief. Childhood experiences can have a profound impact on a child’s trust that she or he has the right to be and feel safe.

This section includes:

- Typical developmental personal safety stages for ages 3 to 5.
- Personal safety objectives and assessment questions checklist
- Common challenges for families with preschoolers, especially if a child has a learning challenge, and goals for addressing these challenges.
- Some resources for helping to meet these goals.

Typical Developmental Personal Safety Stages for Three to Five Year-Olds

Children learn and grow at different levels so this is an approximation. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list but provides some key indicators about what developmental stages can be important for personal safety.

Between Ages 3-5, these issues and opportunities are likely to increase:

- Enjoy exploring and getting around, making wandering, running in front of a car, getting into water, climbing, etc. greater risks for more active or adventurous kids.
- Are learning to make choices, use their words instead of acting on their feelings, get adult help when they have problems, and follow rules.
- Often want approval from others and can get very upset by disapproval, which helps with social development but makes a child more vulnerable to emotional coercion.
- Curiosity 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.
- Can understand and increasingly follow personal safety rules like: “Stay together. Check First. Wait. Mouth Closed Power. Hands and Feet Dower Power. Don’t touch, Stop! Move away. Get help. Use your Heart Power. 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.
- Relationships with different peers and adults become increasingly important, increasing risks of bullying and the kind of emotional coercion that can lead to abuse.

- The skills of setting appropriate boundaries and noticing and respecting the boundaries of others become increasingly important.
- Development of impulse control to start to make safe choices no matter how you feel inside.
- Children are often going new places and doing new things, which gives them new opportunities and presents new risks.
- Many children can become overwhelmed and experience emotional meltdowns.
- Children can learn stranger safety rules, what to do if they get lost, and how to be persistent in getting adult help both with adults they know and in public.
- Personal safety rules can be taught through social stories, skills can be developed through practices, and then use of rules and skills can be coached in everyday life.

Kidpower Personal Safety Objectives and Assessment Questions 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 important 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 preschool-aged child.

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 he or she is kind and charming, has a good reputation, or is 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 demonstrating an understanding about what is and is not safe behavior from others? 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?
- Do I know how to teach my child the safety rules about touching private areas, stranger safety, and checking first in a way that does not put scary or explicit ideas in my child's head.

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 her or his age? Is my child around able to understand and follow age-appropriate personal safety rules about touch? For example, rules such as, “Be Gentle! Ask First! No hitting!” And “For play or teasing, don’t let others touch your private areas or ask you to touch their private areas or show you pictures or movies about people and their private areas.”
- Do I know how to help my child practice setting boundaries in ways that are relevant to our lives, fun, emotionally safe, and successful? Do we rehearse boundary-setting skills through role plays?

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?
- Does my child notice and respond to the wishes of others in safe ways?
- Do I know how to coach my child in the moment if she or he is crossing the boundaries of others?

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?
- Is my child expressing concepts and language in any modality such as, “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?
- Does my child ask for adult help if she has a problem with another kid or if he feels unsafe with an adult?
- 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?
- Does my child sometimes enjoy activities and games with other young children?
- Does my child recognize and work out social problems? For example, taking turns, 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 know how to throw away hurting words instead of taking them inside?
- Does my child know how to run to his or her caregiver and get help if she or he feels scared?
- Do I know how to intervene in the moment in a way that is powerful, appropriate, and respectful if someone is treating my child in an unsafe or disrespectful way?

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:

- Am I able to 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?
- Does my child use words in any communication modality to express feelings and stay respectful with her or his words and body in how he or she expresses feelings?
- Does my child feel good about her or himself? For example, does my child act proud about activities and take in compliments or does my child express negative self-messages instead?

Common Personal Safety Challenges and Goals for Preschoolers

Challenge: Child is isolated and has difficulty forming friendships, causing her to resist going to day care or preschool.

Goal: Child increases social competence by learning:

1. How to introduce herself to another child and join an activity.
2. How to be part of a game or conversation in a way that works well for everyone.
3. How to persist when kids don't notice her or reject her at first.
4. How to get adult help when she needs to.

Success will be measured by child becoming successful at participating in activities with other kids and having less times when she doesn't want to leave home.

Challenge: Child is teased by other kids for having trouble hearing or understanding, resulting in his feeling frustrated and acting out aggressively.

Goal: Child develops positive alternatives to handling teasing that do not involve physical aggression by learning:

1. How to set boundaries about hurtful behavior from others by communicating, "Please stop. That's not funny."
2. How to persist in setting boundaries in a powerful and respectful way.
3. How to protect himself from hurting words that others say or he says to himself.
4. How to be interrupt and get help from busy adults.

Success will be measured by child using language in any modality to communicate boundaries and get help – and by a reduction in the times he is becoming physically aggressive.

Challenge: Child has poor sense of personal boundaries and acts inappropriately towards others. For example, hugging strangers; trying to play "doctor" and taking off clothes, pulling dresses up or pants down at inappropriate times and places; tickling and cuddling in ways that seem sexual; trying to touch or look at the private areas of others.

Goals: Child develops better understanding of what is and is not safe and of how to see and respect the boundaries of others by learning:

1. About personal space and appropriate distance in different kinds of relationships.
2. The safety rules on touch in healthy relationships and about private areas.
3. How to resist the impulse to touch in ways that are inappropriate or unsafe no matter how she or he feels inside – and to satisfy curiosity in other ways such as asking questions from adult caregivers or looking at books or dolls.

Success will be measured by reduced incidents where the child is pushing into the boundaries of others or acting inappropriately.

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

1) [Kidpower Coloring Book](#) –free download used by many families and preschool programs

2) Articles from [Starting Early](#) Section of Free Online Kidpower [Library](#)
[Touch in Healthy Relationships](#) – includes the Kidpower rules about touching private areas
[Kidpower Answers for Parents of Small Children](#)
[Choosing Safe People to Care for Your Children](#)
[Managing Aggressive Behavior in Young Children: Seven Strategies for Preventing Meltdowns](#)

3) Free Online [Kidpower Puppet Power Videos](#) for Introducing Personal Safety Skills to Young Children
www.kidpower.org/library/videos/puppet-power/

4) Free Online [Kidpower Safety Signs](#) – simple graphics and gestures used by many families and preschool programs to create a common language around personal safety skills.

4) [Kidpower Safety Comics](#) for Adults With Children Ages 3-8 provides an affordable entertaining tool for introducing and practicing safety skills with your kids.

5) [Managing Wandering for People With Autism](#) – useful tips even if your child is not on the Autism Disorder Spectrum.

6. [Safety Plans for Families With Children With Disabilities](#)

7. Email consultation – people all over the world send personal safety questions to safety@kidpower.org for individualized answers.

