

## **Personal Safety for Middle School Years – Ages 11 to 14**

### **Typical Developmental Stages, Common Challenges, Goals, Resources**

#### **Introduction**

As young people enter adolescence, our job as parents, teachers, and other caring adults is to help them to support their increasing independence while protecting their safety. Our leadership is still essential in ensuring that young people are protected from harm through our guidance and intervention when needed -- and empowered by having opportunities to learn, practice, and use personal safety skills.

Even with a strong foundation in childhood, experiences in the pre-teen and teen years can have a profound impact on a young person's trust that she or he has the right to be and feel safe. At any age, our belief in our own value, power, and capability is the most essential personal safety tool we have. As we become more independent, we can share in the responsibility for avoiding negative experiences that might undermine that belief – and for creating opportunities to help this belief to grow.

This section includes:

- Typical developmental personal safety stages for ages 11 to 14.
- Personal safety objectives and assessment questions checklist
- Common challenges for families with youth of middle school age, 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 Ages Eleven to Fourteen**

At any age, we 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 as young people enter their teen years.

##### *Pre-adolescence 11-12*

- Young people are more likely to learn from what they see their parents and other adults DO than from anything we can tell them. This means that we MUST model healthy, safe, and respectful behavior.
- Peers are increasingly important, and young people need to know how to recognize and resist negative peer pressure so they can make safe choices for themselves.
- Fears of embarrassment, ostracism, being a “snitch”, retaliation, and getting into trouble can cause young people to fail to set boundaries or seek adult help even if they know how.
- Transitions such as going from elementary school to middle school require increasing social competence in order to be accepted by others and to develop friendships.
- In larger environments with less adult supervision, bullying and harassment become greater risks, especially if a young person is different in any way.
- New interests in activities such as youth sports, games, and other group activities provide opportunities to develop teamwork and cooperation skills.

- Young people are more likely to recognize and witness unsafe behavior and benefit from knowing how to advocate for others by intervening if it is safe to do so and/or get adult help.
- The onset of fluctuating hormones can increase the risk of overwhelm and emotional meltdowns.
- Young people are safer if they know their 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 knowledge and skills can be greatly increased through social stories and practices where they are coached to be successful in rehearsing these skills using examples that are relevant to their lives.
- Personal safety rules and skills can be reinforced through in-the-moment coaching in everyday life so that they become habits.
- Young people can gain confidence and increase their safety through learning physical self-defense. They are safest if they know how to protect themselves before going anywhere without adult protection.

#### *Early Teen years 13-14 – All of the above plus*

- Independence often increases greatly both out in the real world and online, and teens need to be prepared to make safe and wise decisions while doing more activities without immediate adult protection.
- In early adolescence, young people can become overwhelmed with sexual feelings and often fall in love and develop crushes that risk leading to unsafe behavior.
- Guidance from supportive and safe adult mentors is essential in preparing young people to understand their changing bodies and handle sexual feelings in ways that are safe and respectful to themselves and others.
- Teens often feel pressured by friends into breaking the rules and testing boundaries, increasing the risk of unsafe activities such as unsafe and/or unwanted sexual experimentation; use of drugs and/or alcohol; going places without adult permission; participating in shunning, sexual harassment, and/or humiliating others; and smoking.
- Transition from middle school to high school increases the risks of bullying and abuse, increasing the need for boundary-setting, advocacy, and help-seeking skills.
- Increased independence increases risks of assault and abduction – young people need skills of awareness, target denial, de-escalation, self-defense, and overcoming resistance to getting adult help.

### **Kidpower Personal Safety Objectives and Assessment Questions Checklist for Parents**

Even though preteens and young teens care increasingly competent at taking charge of their own personal safety, adult leadership is still essential. Young people are safest when their parents, educators, and other caregivers advocate for and protect them, model safe and respectful behavior, intervene in the moment to stop unsafe 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 middle-school-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, bullying, 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 and acting on an awareness of what is safe and what is not? Am I setting a good example about driving safely, not abusing drugs or alcohol, being proactive in preparing for emergencies, etc.
- Does my child know how to recognize potential abuse, bullying, harassment, and other unsafe behavior such as distracted driving both from adults in charge and from peers?
- Does my child respect our family rules about letting me know before changing our plan about where he is going, who is with her, and what they are doing?
- Does my child notice and move away from another young person who is starting to act unsafely?
- Is my child able to resist pressure from peers to break the safety rules?
- Do I know how to teach my child how to make safe and respectful sexual choices in accordance with our family values?
- Does my child tell me about problems she or he is having with other people?
- Does my child know how to use online or mobile technology safely? Before my child is allowed to explore the Internet without my or another adult’s direct supervision, do we have a very clear Technology Use Agreement in place?
- Have I made a realistic assessment about every place my child might go, potential dangers, and how prepared my child is to handle these dangers?

*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?
- Do I feel confident and effective when setting boundaries with my child even in the face of intense resistance?
- Does my child communicate about boundaries in age-appropriate ways? Is my child around able to understand and follow age-appropriate personal safety rules about touch? For example, the Kidpower rules about touch in healthy relationships, including: “Touch or games for play, teasing, and affection should be the choice of each person, safe, allowed by the adults in charge, and not a secret.” 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.”

- Is my child prepared to set boundaries about sexual activity even if he or she feels pressure from others and/or from his or her own feelings? Does my child know how to protect her or himself from date rape, sexual harassment, distracted driving, and other unsafe behavior?
- 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 education and well being about how best to address safety concerns?
- Do I model for my child respect for the boundaries and differences of others?
- Does my child notice and respond to the wishes of others in safe ways?
- Does my child know refusal skills to prevent date rape, harassment, bullying, and other unsafe behavior by not going along with others, speaking up or reporting unsafe behavior, etc.

*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, “Problems should not be secret.” “Please stop. I don’t like that.” “That’s not safe.” “That hurt my feelings.” That seems like bullying.” “That is against our safety rules.” “That is not respectful.” “Stop or I’ll tell.” “Stop or I’ll leave.”
- Does my child know how to use awareness and target denial to avoid most unsafe situations with other people?
- Has my child taken a physical self-defense workshop?

*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 whom to ask for help, how to ask, and how to 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 even if it is embarrassing, even if someone we care about will get upset, or even if she or he did

something wrong?

- Does my child know the difference between when you have to wait even though you want something and when you should interrupt because you have a safety problem?
- Does my child persist if the parent or other adult he or she went to for help seems too busy, 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?
- Does my child know how to communicate when help is needed urgently and immediately because there is an emergency?

*Objective #6: Develop positive relationships with peers.*

**Parent Considerations:**

- Do I have positive, mutually supportive relationships with other adults?
- Am I able to say "No" to my friends and other parents without feeling guilty or getting angry?
- Do I show respect and insist on respect? Do I model resolving conflicts in peaceful and effective ways?
- Does my child sometimes enjoy activities and games with other young people? Does my child participate in a positive way in sports, clubs, games, youth groups, or other social activities with children?
- Does my child know how to get acquainted, get to know someone, become friends, work out problems, recognize and speak up if a friend is making unsafe choices, and stay friends?
- Is my child able to say "No" to her or his friends in a way that is both respectful and powerful?
- Is my child able to accept disappointment gracefully? For example, losing games, getting outvoted about what to do, etc.
- Does my child recognize and work out social problems? For example, working out disagreements in win-win ways, speaking up when others make unsafe or hurtful remarks, advocating for the well being of others, reaching out to people who are being bullied to left out, and taking leadership in insisting that everyone in the group is treated with care and respect;

*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 an adult who can help if she or he feels scared?
- Do I know how to intervene 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?
- Do I model expressing appreciation and gratitude even if things aren't perfect?
- When upset, does my child stay respectful with her or his words and body in how he or she expresses these feelings? Does my child express positive feeling and appreciation as well as negative ones?
- Does my child feel good about her or himself most of the time? For example, does my child act proud about accomplishments and take in compliments or does my child express negative self-messages instead?

**Common Personal Safety Challenges and Goals for Middle-Aged Youth**

*Challenge: Thirteen-year-old girl becomes overwhelmed with anxiety about going to a new school and having to make new friends.*

Goal: Girl increases confidence and social competence by learning:

1. How to push past shyness and introduce herself to another young person 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 ask questions and show interest in others.
4. How to persist when kids don't notice her or reject her at first.
5. How to find a different person to hang out with.
6. How to get adult help when she needs to.

Success will be measured by this girl becoming successful at participating in activities with other kids and feeling more relaxed about changing schools.

*Challenge: Twelve-year-old boy is suddenly cut off by his best friend, who joins other kids in teasing and shunning him for his hearing differences, leaving him isolated, extremely sad, and failing in school.*

Goal: Boy learns to use social-emotional skills to protect his feelings and make new friends by:

- 1) Getting support for his depression, including professional help if needed;
- 2) Learning about the differences between safe and unsafe behavior in friends;
- 3) Finding more positive peer groups to join with;
- 4) Getting help from adults in communicating his feelings and finding closure with his best friend, even if their friendship is over.

Success will be measured by this boy feeling competent and valued instead of helpless and worthless - and

becoming more able to negotiate friendships and more motivated to do well in school.

*Challenge: Fourteen-year-old boy gets caught up in joining peers in harassing and cyber-bullying others in order to be accepted.*

Goals: This boy develops the social-emotional skills to act safely and respectfully towards others through learning:

1. Refusal skills and how to assess safe and unsafe behavior in peers.
2. The destructive impact of participating in unkind or cruel behavior.
3. How to resist the impulse to behave in ways that are inappropriate or unsafe no matter how she or he feels inside .

Success will be measured by child stopping the unsafe behavior, making amends, and becoming better able to stand up to peers in the future.

*Challenge: Thirteen-year-old girl endures sexual harassment instead of setting boundaries or getting help because she wants to be liked by boys her age and fears rejections because of her learning differences.*

Goals: This girl stops enduring sexual harassment by:

1. Developing the understanding that she is worthy of being treated with respect just the way she is.
2. Learning how to persist in setting boundaries in the face of negative reactions.
3. Recognizing when behavior crosses the line and how to get adult help.

*Challenge: Parents feel helpless in the face of their teen's refusal to obey rules or respect boundaries, resulting in power struggles and family conflict.*

Goal: Parents develop tools for managing unsafe and disrespectful behavior with patience, understanding, and firmness by:

1. Getting emotional and practical support, including professional help if needed.
2. Learning how to assess when to hold on and when to let go.
3. Learning how to manage emotional triggers and deal with very negative reactions to boundaries.
4. Involving the teen in learning how to calm down, wait, delay gratification, accept disappointment, and be safe with his or her body and words.
5. Knowing how to insist on realistic, fair consequences when necessary.

Success will be measured by self-reporting by parents and the teen about positive steps they are taking to prevent and resolve problems, and work out realistic agreements – and about reductions in conflict.

## **Resources**

1) Kidpower Resource pages on:

[Bullying Prevention](#)

[Sexual Abuse Prevention](#)

[Stranger Safety/Kidnapping Prevention](#)

2) Articles from Free Online Kidpower [Library such as:](#)

[Stopping Sexual Harassment in Schools](#)

[Teenpower Boundaries With People You Know](#)

[Resisting the Illusion of Safety](#)

[Protecting Kids From Sexual Predators](#)

[Common Questions About Bullying and Answers from Kidpower](#)

[Bullying Facts and Solutions.](#)

[Preparing Children for More Independence](#)

[Safety for Kids on Their Way to School: Checklist for Parents](#)

[Internet Safety](#)

[How to Prevent and Stop Cyber-Bullying](#)

[Unlimited Adaptability: Teaching People Safety Skills to People With Different Abilities](#)

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

5) [Older Kidpower Safety Comics](#) is for adults with older children ages 9 to 13 who are more likely to be somewhere without immediate adult protection. [Fullpower Safety Comics](#) is for Teens and Young Adults in cartoons and basic language. Each of these little books provides an affordable entertaining tool for introducing and practicing personal safety skills with the young people in your life.

6. Email consultation – people all over the world send personal safety questions to [safety@kidpower.org](mailto:safety@kidpower.org) for individualized answers.