

Personal Safety for High School and Transition Ages 14 to 22

Typical Developmental Stages, Common Challenges, Goals, and Resources

Introduction

During the teen years, young people increasingly become responsible for their own safety. Our job as their parents, teachers, and other concerned adults is to transition from having the final say in decisions to becoming partners with them in decision-making to hopefully becoming their mentors in supporting their making wise choices for themselves.

We need to be clear and respectful in stating what is and is not okay with us in terms of their safety and behavior— and what is and is not possible for us in terms of financial support. However, as hard as it is, we also have to accept that young people need the opportunity to make their own mistakes. As Mark Twain wrote, “Good judgment is the result of experience and experience the result of bad judgment.”

That said, our role is still important in ensuring as best we can that the teens and young adults in our lives are protected from harm through our guidance and intervention when needed -- and empowered to take charge of their own safety by providing them with opportunities to learn, practice, and use personal safety skills.

Even with a strong foundation throughout childhood, experiences in the teen and young adult 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 learn to make choices that will help us to avoid negative experiences that might undermine our personal safety beliefs – and to create opportunities to help our beliefs to grow.

This section includes:

- Typical developmental personal safety stages for ages 14 to 22.
- Personal safety objectives and assessment questions checklist
- Common challenges for families with teens and young adults in the high school and transitional years, especially if a young person 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 14 to 22

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 go through their teen years and enter adulthood.

14-17 Year-Olds

- Young people become increasingly likely to be going on their own to new places with new people to participate in volunteer and paid work; educational programs; sports and other recreational activities, parties and other social events; etc.

- Most young people spend a tremendous amount of time online, texting, and exploring and communicating through the virtual world, increasing the risk of cyber-bullying and the need for Internet Safety skills.
- In order to learn to make wise decisions, young people need opportunities to take charge of their safety and develop positive relationships in the real and virtual worlds with the co-piloting and ongoing guidance of their parents, teachers, and other adult mentors.
- Experimenting with boundaries, testing the rules, and sometimes making unsafe choices can be normal – this means that adult supervision, intervention, and guidance are essential in ensuring that everyone stays safe.
- Young people who are dating need clear boundaries about what is and is not safe and how to uphold their boundaries and to respect the boundaries of others.
- Even as peer relationships become ever more important, strong relationships with parents and other adult mentors are essential for safety and long term well being.
- Self- advocacy skills are essential in setting important goals, persisting in overcoming obstacles to achieving goals, creating resources to help make achieving goals possible, and preventing and addressing problems.
- 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 they are far better off if we model healthy, safe, and respectful behavior.
- For better and for worse, friends can have a tremendous influence, and teens need to know how to judge the differences between someone acting friendly or being a true friend and 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.
- At the high school age, the risks of bullying, harassment, sexual assault, and dating and gang violence increase, especially if a young person is different in any way.
- The more that they are on their own without adult protection, the more important it becomes that young people know and are prepared to use self-protection and self-defense skills to take charge of their emotional and physical safety.
- Teens need to know how to avoid being lured into a car; what to do if they get lost or bothered in public; what to do if they are insulted, threatened or attacked; and how to be persistent in getting adult help both with adults they know and in public. This takes education, review, and practice.
- Young people often witness unsafe behavior and need to know how to recognize what is and is not safe, how to advocate for others by intervening if it is safe to do so and/or to overcome the obstacles to getting adult help.
- The stress of change and the pressure of increasing responsibilities can increase the risk of overwhelm and emotional meltdowns.
- To help prevent dating violence, young people need to know how to stay in charge of their often intense feelings, resist sexual pressure, use nonviolent communication skills to work out issues, and develop healthy and safe romantic relationships.
- As they start accepting rides with older friends and begin driving themselves, dangers of being in accidents due to distracted driving increase – and knowing how to set boundaries about this for themselves and others can help to prevent tragedies.

Transitional Years 18 -22 All of the above plus

- Young adults are getting ready to leave high school, working, going away to college, living with housemates, and/or preparing to become financially independent,
- Freedom from adult supervision, curiosity, and pressure from friends often leads to breaking the rules and testing boundaries that results in risky behavior such as unsafe and/or unwanted sexual

experimentation; abuse of drugs and/or alcohol; going places without adult permission; participating in shunning, sexual harassment, and/or humiliating others; smoking; and reckless driving.

- Transitions in where young adults live, who is with them, and what they are doing increase the need for boundary-setting, advocacy, self-protection, and help-seeking skills.
- Increased independence increases risks of assault and abduction, making the skills of awareness, target denial, de-escalation, self-defense, and overcoming obstacles to getting useful help from more experienced adults even more important.
- Challenges with negotiating friendships, romantic and sexual relationships, school and work relationships, and family relationships often lead to misunderstandings, blowups, hurt, anger, despair, and sometimes self-destructive, threatening, or violent behavior.
- Even when they are living away from home, young people are safest if people who care about them know who is with them, what they are doing, and where they are going.

Kidpower Teenpower Fullpower Personal Safety Objectives and Assessment Questions Checklist for Teens and Adults

Since teens and young adults need to learn to take charge of their own safety, these assessment questions are written from their perspective. Their parents can help them to answer or discuss the answers so that there is a common ground of understanding about personal safety concerns and expectations.

Even with increasing independence and self-advocacy, leadership from more experienced adults is also still essential. In addition to having their own personal safety and self-advocacy skills and knowledge, teens and young adults also need support from their parents, educators, peers, and other mentors. As a team, we can advocate for and protect each other, model safe and respectful behavior, intervene in the moment to stop unsafe or disrespectful behavior, and help everyone 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 teen and young adult children along with their parents.

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

Personal Safety Considerations:

- Do I feel confident in judging what is and is not everywhere I go? Do I stay aware all the time when I am out in public? Do I know how to split my attention rather than have tunnel vision? 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 know the warning signs of potentially unhealthy or violent romantic or intimate relationships?
- Do I consistently have and act on a knowledge of what is safe and what is not? For example, safe or distracted or reckless driving; unsafe use of drugs or alcohol; being proactive in preparing for emergencies; avoiding and speaking up about unsafe or disrespectful behavior; etc.
- Do I let my parents or the people where I live know before changing my plan about where I am going, who is with me, and what I am doing?

- Do I notice and move away from anyone who is starting to act unsafely?
- Do I feel able to resist pressure from peers to act unsafely or disrespectfully?
- Do I feel prepared to make safe and respectful sexual choices?
- Do I have the emotional support I need from experienced adults when I feel upset or have problems with other people?
- Do I use online or mobile technology safely and respectfully?
- Have we made a realistic assessment about every place I might go, potential dangers, and how prepared I am to handle these dangers?
- Do I feel good about my body? Do I have the answers I need to my questions and concerns about sex and sexuality?

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.

Personal Safety Considerations:

- Do I feel comfortable and effective about speaking up with each person who is responsible for my well being when I have a concern about my safety?
- Are my parents able to work out concerns and issues and to set boundaries with me even when I get upset? Am I able to talk with them about my needs in a way that is respectful and persistent even if we are all upset with each other?
- Do I know how to communicate about boundaries with people I know? Do I understand and follow personal safety rules such as the kind taught by Kidpower about touch in healthy relationships?
- Am I prepared to set safe boundaries about sexual activity even if I feel pressure from others and/or from my own feelings? Do I know how to protect myself from date rape, sexual harassment, distracted driving, and other unsafe behavior?
- Have I had practice setting positive, strong boundaries about situations that are relevant to my life? Have I rehearsed boundary-setting skills through role plays in ways that are fun, emotionally safe, and successful??

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

Personal Safety Considerations:

- Am I able to understand and integrate feedback from others responsible for my education and well being about how best to address safety concerns?

- How well do I do with respecting the boundaries and differences of others, even when I am upset or disappointed?
- Does I notice and respond to the wishes of others in safe ways?
- Do I understand my role in preventing bullying, date rape, assault, sexual harassment, and other violence by acting respectfully and safely towards others even if I think they have been disrespectful towards me? Do I understand that it is illegal and immoral to take advantage of anyone who is incapacitated by drugs or alcohol or learning differences –sexually, by getting them to do unsafe things, or in other ways? Do I feel confident in my ability to go against the crowd or to report unsafe behavior to adults with the authority to do something about it?

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

Personal Safety Considerations:

- Do I feel confident in my ability to stop or leave an abusive, threatening, or dangerous relationship or encounter? Do I know how to resist being tricked into giving a potential attacker privacy and control? Do I know not to accept rides from even charming people unless I know them well and others know that I am with this person?
- Do my parents and teachers refuse to allow others to harm anyone they are responsible for, including themselves? Do I know how to do this myself?
- Do I feel confident in communicating about boundaries and relationships? For example, “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.”
- Do I know how to use awareness and target denial to avoid most unsafe situations with other people?
- Do I know how to defuse conflict with someone who is being very rude or threatening?
- Do I know how to protect myself physically in a dangerous situation? Have I 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.

Personal Safety Considerations:

- Do I know whom to ask for help, how to ask, and how to keep asking until I get the help we need?
- Do I ask for help from an experienced adult with the power to do something anytime I feel unsafe with another person, even if it is embarrassing, even if someone we care about will get upset, or even if I did

something wrong?

- Do I know when and how to interrupt and bother busy people if you have a safety problem?
- Do I feel able to persist even if the person I go to for help seems too busy, doesn't understand me at first, or is irritated with me for interrupting? Have I rehearsed doing this in a role play?
- Do I know how to find adults with the power and commitment to helping me everywhere I go?
- Do I know how to communicate when help is needed urgently and immediately because there is an emergency?

Objective #6: Develop positive relationships with peers.

Personal Safety Considerations:

- Do I have positive, mutually supportive relationships with people around my age?
- 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 resolve conflicts in peaceful and effective ways?
- Do I enjoy activities and games with other young people in the real world as well as the virtual world? Do I participate in a positive way in sports, clubs, games, groups, or other social activities?
- Do I feel confident in being able 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?
- Can I say "No" to my friends in a way that is both respectful and powerful?
- Am I able to accept disappointment gracefully? For example, losing games, getting outvoted about what to do, being turned down for a date, or having a friendship or romantic relationships end, etc.
- How well do I feel prepared to 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 or left out, and taking leadership in insisting that everyone in any group I am part of 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.

Personal Safety 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?
- Do I know how to throw away hurting words instead of taking them inside?

- Do I know how to escape and get to safety if I feel scared?
- Do I know how to intervene in a way that is powerful, appropriate, and respectful if someone is treating me 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.

Personal Safety Considerations:

- Am I able to stay calm and mindful with my words and my body instead of reacting automatically in disrespectful or unsafe ways when I feel upset or unhappy? I know how to recognize and manage my emotional triggers?
- Do I express appreciation and gratitude to others even if things aren't perfect?
- Do I feel good about myself most of the time? Do I take pride in my accomplishments and take in compliments? Do I know how to stop negative self-messages?

Common Personal Safety Challenges and Goals for Teens and Young Adults

Challenge: Student becomes overwhelmed with anxiety about going to a new school and having to make new friends.

Goal: Teen increases confidence and social competence by learning:

1. How to push past shyness and introduce herself to another student 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 others 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 student becoming successful at participating in activities with other teens and feeling more relaxed about changing schools.

Challenge: Student 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: Student 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 adult mentors in communicating his feelings and finding closure with his best friend, even if their friendship is over.

Success will be measured by this student 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: New college student gets caught up in joining peers in harassing and cyber-bullying others in order to be accepted.

Goals: This student 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 student stopping the unsafe behavior, making amends, and becoming better able to stand up to peers in the future.

Challenge: High school or community college student endures sexual harassment instead of setting boundaries or getting help because she wants to date and fears rejections because of her learning differences.

Goals: This young woman starts to develop positive relationships with young people her age by:

1. Developing the understanding that she is worthy of being treated with respect and appreciation 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 when to report harassment.
4. Learning how to find and participate in interesting activities where she can meet people socially.

Success will be measured by self-reporting that this young woman is feeling better able to protect herself and to make new friends.

Challenge: Seventeen-year-old gets into a fight after being teased about his learning differences and both he and the other teen are injured and arrested.

Goals: This young man learns how to control his anger and stay out of trouble by:

1. Getting support for his feelings about being teased, including professional help if needed.
2. Learning how to identify and control his emotional triggers.
3. Learning how to leave a potential confrontation in a powerful and respectful way.
4. Knowing how to in setting boundaries in the face of negative reactions.
5. Recognizing when threatening or violence behavior crosses the line and needs to be reported.
6. Learning how to find and participate in interesting activities where he can meet people socially.

Success will be measured by self-reporting that this young man is feeling better able to stay in control of his temper, de-escalate confrontations, and make new friends.

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 the Teen and Adult Section of the Free Online Kidpower [Library](#) such as:

[*Teaching Sexual Safety and Boundary-Setting Skills to Teens and Young Adults*](#)

[*Stopping Sexual Harassment in Schools*](#)

[*Teenpower Boundaries With People You Know*](#)

[*Protecting Kids From Sexual Predators.*](#)

[*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*](#)

The issues defined in these two CollegePower articles are important, even if young people don't go to college.

[*CollegePower for Parents: Supporting Your College Student's Safety, Independence, and Wisdom*](#)

[*CollegePower for Students: Take Charge of Your Own Safety*](#)

5) [Fullpower Safety Comics](#) for teens and young adults in cartoons and basic language. Each of these little books provides an affordable entertaining tool for introducing, learning, and practicing personal safety skills.

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

About Kidpower

Kidpower Teenpower Fullpower International is a global nonprofit leader in providing positive, effective child protection education and personal safety skills to all ages and abilities. Since being established in 1989, Kidpower has protected over two million children, teens, and adults, including those with special needs, from bullying, sexual abuse, abduction, and other violence through workshops, consultation, and educational resources. Our K-12 curriculum is used by families, schools, and youth organizations for their own child safety programs. Instead of using fear to teach violence prevention, Kidpower makes it fun to be safe!

www.kidpower.org

About the Author

Kidpower Founder and Executive Irene van der Zande is a master at teaching safety through stories and practices and at inspiring others to do the same. Her child protection and personal safety expertise has been featured by USA Today, CNN, Today Moms, the LA Times, and The Wall Street Journal. Publications include: [*Bullying: What Adults Need to Know and Do to Keep Kids Safe*](#), the [*Kidpower Safety Comics*](#) series, the [*Relationship Safety Skills Handbook for Teens and Adults*](#), and [*The Kidpower Book for Caring Adults: Personal Safety, Self-Protection, Confidence, and Advocacy for Young People*](#). For more information, contact

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