

ARE YOUR TEENS SAFE?

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

I was visiting some friends last week when their 21 year-old daughter, Cindy told her dad she was going out for a run around a track not far from her home. As she went out the door I saw she had her Ipod with her. It wasn't until she had gone that I remembered a story I had seen on TV about six months earlier. It was a similar situation where a woman was running on a well-used track that included a wooded area. She was alone listening to music on her Walkman and did not see or hear the perpetrator running up behind her. She was raped and killed. It was a totally random, senseless killing that could have been avoided. I also know of a man who drove his car into the path of an oncoming train not far from where we lived in rural New Zealand. Because he had his radio turned up loud he didn't see or hear the train coming and was killed instantly. I am sure there are many individuals whose lives have ended prematurely on train lines, in parks and on roadways because they were not paying attention to what was going on around them.

We can never prepare our kids enough regarding their safety. Many times on these TV programs or on the news I hear it said, "But nothing bad ever happens around this town." We can be so easily lulled into a false sense of security by the familiarity of our surroundings, the trust we build between neighbors and friends, and the misguided idea that we are indestructible. We forget that while we may feel safe around people we know, we do not always think of those passing through, or moving into town. We don't even know what goes on behind other's closed doors. If we don't tell our kids what the potential dangers are they can so easily be cajoled into taking risks to save face amongst their friends.

It is important to start early. Tell your children about stranger danger. They also need to be informed that most danger situations come from people they know or are even related to. Describe acceptable and unacceptable touching, no matter who the other person is. Tell them they need to always let you know where they are, what they are doing, and when they will be home. Decide on an emergency signal for anytime a situation doesn't feel right. Tell them about unacceptable circumstances such as driving drunk or driving with someone who has been drinking. Create rules regarding no visitation when you are absent from home. Monitor what information they are putting about themselves on Facebook, Twitter and other social media sources. Check their rooms for drugs or any dangerous paraphernalia. Create rules about clothing and explain that perpetrators need no encouragement where bare skin is concerned. Don't back down. Make sure they draw the curtains before changing and that all house windows and doors are locked. Car doors should also be locked when driving and seat belts worn.

It is vital that you cultivate healthy communication with your teens. It's important to survival. Observe their moods and encourage them to talk through their worries. Believe them when they tell you something you don't want to hear. It has taken a great deal of courage for them to alert you to a problem and you must act immediately. If there is a safety issue at school, make an appointment with the Principal. If you are concerned about unsavory friendships, then tell your teen what you are concerned about. It is not a matter of being judgmental. As a parent you are responsible for your children's safety.

Even the most protective parents can overlook potential dangers. My friend's dad (an ex school Principal) didn't see any problem with her using the particular track she had chosen or the Ipod she carried. He didn't check to make sure she had her cell phone with her or when she would be back. You might think that at 21 years of age Cindy shouldn't have to be told these things, although she did carry her cell phone. Well, the fact that she overlooked those dangers means that nobody is too old to be told if it will eventually keep them safe. I was so concerned about it that I sent her a note on Facebook later and she appreciated it.

Your kids need to know that you are not being a 'kill joy' by laying down strict guidelines for them. If you tell them exactly what the dangers are in any given situation they will learn to make wise choices.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.