

KIDS' SAFETY IN CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

It is always extremely alarming to read about a crazed gunman breaking into a public building and shooting at people. It seems that nowhere is safe against predators these days, even in churches. For this reason our church decided to create a safety and security team to come up with a program to better protect our church families. In summary, they created a safety plan that covered the integrity of the building and its people. Once the plan was completed, one of the team talked with all parents after the service one Sunday about child safety while at church. I thought these points were well worthy of passing on.

Children are to be supervised at all times. If they are in the auditorium, they must be in sight of their parents. In fact while the service is on, they need to sit beside or in front of parents, or with selected others. They may not wander unsupervised at any time. We have had some serious problems with kids roaming all over the building or sitting out in the foyer talking during the service. It is too easy for a stranger to walk in through the unlocked front door on a Sunday morning and abduct a child.

Our parents have been made aware that they are responsible for their kids at all times while on church property and this includes outside the building. We have had small children running around in the parking lot and up the grassy banks. This is obviously dangerous. We have an electronic "alert" sign in the church auditorium to indicate any potential or actual danger. Children are signed in and out of Sunday school classes and the only person who can pick them up is the person who took them there. The church also has a TV camera monitoring system for classrooms. This program has successfully heightened awareness of child safety, in particular, in our church. Schools have had to put safety and security programs in place that are audited regularly.

It is pertinent to make a few points about child safety in public buildings such as malls. Parents need to train their young kids to stay with them at all times when shopping. It is easy to control a child in a stroller but where you have 2-5 year olds who don't want to be constrained, there has to be some way of keeping them from being separated from parents. I suggest that 2-3 year olds should be in a stroller or otherwise constrained whether they want to be or not. But if they are not constrained, the point is to train them to stay by you. Tell them that if they can't see you, to stay where they are and call your name. Tell them not to allow a stranger to take them anywhere.

I recall coming across a child of about 5 years of age in obvious distress in a huge mall in Nashville, TN. We asked her if she was lost and she said she was. We did not touch her, but just spoke gently to her. Not far away there was a stage so we told her to stand up high so her parents might see her easily. A

booth holder nearby called security for us while we stayed with the child. When the security guy appeared, we told the child that this man was safe and would take her to her parents who had been located a long distance away in the mall. The lesson there was that neither parent nor child was aware of where the other was – for at least 20 minutes. Anything could have happened. Kids under the age of 11-12 years of age should not be dropped off or be unsupervised in public places like malls, pools, movies or fun parks. They should know about stranger danger, inappropriate touching or responding to unsafe suggestions made by anyone. Kids need to have open enough communication with their parents to talk about uncomfortable situations.

Our kids rely on us to keep them safe. We can't afford to take chances. We are ultimately responsible for our kids in every situation.

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.