



Back to School Safety Tips

By Bonita Billingsley Harris, Public Information Officer, Norfolk Sheriff's Office

Most of our children are preparing for the start of a new school year. Back-to-School families typically focus on new clothes, shoes, book bags and school supplies. However, Sheriff Bob McCabe and the Norfolk Sheriff's Office want to add a few simple safety tips to your list, for students of all ages.

First, teach your child to project confidence. Confident kids are naturally less of a target for predators and school bullies. A confident child stands tall, with shoulders back, head high and eyes alert to their environment. This type of posture projects strength, deterring anyone looking for a victim.

Children that look unhappy, with stooped shoulders and shuffling steps, look like they are in need of a friend. Child predators like to befriend a child first, offer presents and kind words, and take their time patiently to lure a child into a friendship before they abuse or molest them.

A big part of building confidence in your child is doing daily what we call, "Catch Them Being Good." It's easy to point out the things our kids do wrong. But praising them for doing something right goes much further in teaching your child to feel good about themselves. The best part is, it takes only seconds a day.

Second, teach your child to keep a safe distance from a stranger when he or she may be outside alone, like on a playground, a sidewalk or yard. We call it a "Circle Of Safety" and it's about 15 feet. Your child can still talk to unfamiliar people at this distance, but have time to turn and run, if necessary. For the most part, this is when your child is outdoors and finds themselves alone, like on a playground, on a sidewalk or in the yard, being approached by someone they don't know.

Keep an updated "Safety Print" ID card of your children, with their current picture, height, weight and fingerprints, courtesy of the Norfolk Sheriff's Office.

Third, teach your child to listen to their "Belly Brain." This is the "gut reaction" that instinctively tells us something is not right. Children have it too. We simply have to help them develop and trust it.

Today, this is a critical skill for your child to have, especially for those kids surfing the Internet. When your child stumbles across an unacceptable website, their "Belly Brain" is going to go off. They need to know to get off that site before any harm.

These three quick tips are simple, easy to learn and very effective. You can introduce and teach them to your child in minutes, for a lifetime of results. Visit Norfolksheriffsoffice.com for more safety tips and links to excellent sites that can help you and your family stay safe. The **Norfolk Sheriff's Office** Community Affairs Division is available for Back-to-School safety presentations for any non-profit organization. Call (757) 664-4979 for more information and scheduling.

(Child safety expert Joyce Jackson contributed to this report.)