

# Out alone

Your guide to keeping your child safe



Out with you, out alone, or taking part in local activities

**NSPCC**   
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.™



As a parent, caring for your child is your number one priority. But sometimes when you're in a crowded area, it can be difficult to keep an eye on your child when you're stressed and busy.

So how can you keep your toddler safe if they tend to wander off? What should you tell your child to do if they get lost? How do you make sure that your children are safe when taking part in activities in the local community? And what should you do if you see a distressed child?

It is difficult to set an exact age when it's safe for children to be out alone and getting the balance right isn't always easy. So we've collected the best advice from professionals, as well as some practical tips from parents, to help you prepare your child for being out on their own.



**For more advice...**  
...on listening to your child, visit [www.yourfamily.org.uk](http://www.yourfamily.org.uk)

# What's your verdict?

**Top parenting advisor Eileen Hayes responds with advice for two parents talking about their children being out alone.**



## Going to the shops alone

"Carys is seven and Glynn is five. It's not much fun for them stuck indoors, so I sometimes let them go to the shops on their own, or to the playground until dinner is ready. It stops them getting under my feet, and it's probably good for them."

**Bethan, mum of Carys, 7, and Glynn, 5**

**Eileen** "All children need fresh air, exercise and the chance to be independent, but in most situations it is not safe to allow children this young to be completely out of sight. What if they were hurt at the playground and unable to call for help? What if they were approached by an adult who could harm them? If possible, let them play where you can see them from the window, or try to go to the park with them. They will enjoy having you there and you will know that they are safe."

## Find out more

**Child Accident Prevention Trust**  
Provides information on accident prevention  
**020 7608 3828**  
[www.capt.org.uk](http://www.capt.org.uk)

**Kidscape** provides information on bullying and keeping children safe  
[www.kidscape.org.uk](http://www.kidscape.org.uk)  
**020 7730 3300**

## Walking back from school

"Now that Lizzy is eight, we let her walk to school and back on her own. It's only about 10 minutes away and she knows to be careful crossing the main road. We both work full time, so we don't have much choice." **Rob, dad of Lizzy, 8**

**Eileen** "Children this young are rarely able to judge the speed of cars, so it is not safe for them to be alone near busy roads. Your child may also feel different from friends who are picked up by someone they can talk to about the day's events. Is there another parent who could share the school trips with you? Could you ask the school to organise an after-school club or early-bird scheme?"

# 10 ways to keep your child safe

1

**As soon as children are able to understand,** teach them their full name, address and telephone number. Practise these

with them until you're sure they can remember.

2

**In most situations,** children under about eight years old shouldn't be out alone, especially in busy towns. Even when out

playing, they need to be kept in the care and sight of an adult or a much older child who is mature and trustworthy.

3

**Never leave young children in unsupervised** play areas in shops or parks. And don't leave them

alone in the car or outside a shop, not even for a few minutes.

4

**If you're in a crowded place,**

keep children in a pram or buggy, hold hands tightly, or use reins. Don't walk far

ahead of small children who can't keep up. It only takes a moment for toddlers to wander off.



5

**You can start teaching children** simple rules about personal safety from as young as two or three.

Tell them clearly that they must never go off with anyone, not even someone they know, without first asking you or the adult who is looking after them.

6

**Teach older children safe ways of crossing roads,** going shopping and asking adults for directions, and let them

practise these with you until you are sure that they have understood.

7

**In busy public places,** arrange somewhere safe to meet in case you get separated, like an information desk or cash

point. Make sure that children know what to do if they ever get lost, and who is safest to ask for help – a police officer, shop assistant or someone with a young child.

8

**Help to build your child's self-esteem**

with lots of love, praise and attention. Bullies and dangerous adults may

tend to pick out less confident children or those who are neglected and often left alone.

9

**Let children know**

that they never have to do anything they don't like with an adult or older child – even if it's someone they

know. Practise this at home by never making them kiss or hug an adult if they don't want to.

10

**Listen to your children,**

especially when they are trying to tell you about things that worry them. Is there

a bully at school or a babysitter they don't like? Is there something about a neighbourhood activity that they attend that they are uncomfortable with?

**Remember the 3 Ws!**

Even with older children, make sure that they always tell you **who** they are going out with, **where** they are going and **when** they will be back. If possible, get a phone number where you can reach them.

**Don't over-protect your children.**

While it's important for children to play in a safe area, they do need to be challenged once they are old enough and take risks to develop.

## Further information

**Your Family**  
(brought to you by the NSPCC)  
[www.yourfamily.org.uk](http://www.yourfamily.org.uk)

**Parents Advice Centre**  
(Northern Ireland)  
0808 8010 722  
[www.parentsadvicecentre.org](http://www.parentsadvicecentre.org)

**Parentline Plus**  
0808 800 2222 (including  
ParentLine Scotland)  
[www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

**ParentsCentre online**  
[www.parentscentre.gov.uk](http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk)

"We've started teaching our little girl about safety by turning the key rules into a rhyme that we sing together when we pick her up from nursery."

Liz and James, parents of Chloe, 3

No matter how much you teach your child about safety, remember the limits of their age and maturity.



## Keeping children safe when taking part in activities

There are so many activities to choose from in local communities, particularly during school holidays, and you may want to encourage your children to participate. But how do you know if they are safe?

Day care activities, such as pre-school playgroups, holiday play schemes and crèches, can register with their local authority, which means they have to meet certain standards. However, whether registered or not, you should expect the same standards from all organisations.

To find out about day care centres or clubs in your area, ask other parents for their recommendations, check the local paper or internet or ask your local council's Childcare Information Service. Once you've found one, you'll need to get a real feel for the place, so always

visit the centre or club you're thinking of letting your child attend before enrolling them. If the children there are happy and smiling, it's a good sign. Friendly staff, who welcome questions, are also essential so don't hesitate to ask:

- **Are the staff and volunteers suitable to work with children?**

All staff and volunteers should go through a proper recruitment process, which includes interviews, references and necessary legal checks, such as with the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB).

- **Does the organisation have a child protection policy and code of conduct?**

All organisations should have a child protection policy and a written code of conduct, outlining good practice when working with children and a clear procedure for dealing with concerns about possible abuse. Organisations should be

happy to show you these when you ask. Ideally, there should be a named person or club welfare officer who will answer any queries you might have. Unacceptable behaviour, such as bullying, shouting, racism and sexism, should not be tolerated.

- **Does the organisation/activity have a health and safety policy?**

Find out if a trained first-aider is available at all times and find out what sort of policies and procedures they follow.

- **How does the organisation provide for intimate care needs?**

In the case of very young or some disabled children, you should check out routines for toileting, feeding and administering medication.

- **What are the arrangements when children go on outings?**

You should be informed of arrangements for all outings – including the transport there and back, worker-to-child ratios and emergency contact details. If the outings are a regular arrangement, then your consent should be obtained before the first outing and may not necessarily need to be

obtained for every subsequent trip. For one-off outings, your consent should be obtained each time.

- **Does the organisation have an internet safety policy?**

If the organisation allows children to access the internet, find out what guidelines or filtering software they have in place for safe surfing.

- **How can you or your child (or a child you know) voice concerns?**

If you are concerned you must take action. Speak to other parents or to the leader in charge of the activity. If, however, you are unhappy about the way your concern is dealt with and are still worried, contact the NSPCC Helpline on 0808 800 5000, or your local children's social care department (known as social work services in Scotland) or the police.



"When we saw an ad for a junior gymnastics class, Christy jumped at the chance. From the initial phone call to the office I was impressed; the helpful assistant assured me that all staff were CRB-checked and the instructor was fully qualified and insured. We were even invited to come and watch a display of the children's work at the end of the session. Christy loved it and her smile at the end of the day told me everything I needed to know." **Donna, mum of Christy, 7**

## What should you be wary of?

- **No parental presence** – parents should be encouraged to stay and watch their children, and cheer them on. Be wary of clubs that say you can't.
- **Inappropriate practices** – activities encouraging rough play, sexual innuendo and humiliating punishments are completely unacceptable.
- **Individuals who take charge and organise activities themselves**, without the knowledge of the organisation or independently of organisational guidelines.
- **Favouritism** – no child at a club should be singled out for extra-special praise or favouritism – every child should be praised for their individual merits.
- **Unhappy children** – if the children aren't enjoying it or frequently drop out, it's a sign that all is not well.
- **Lack of communication** – make sure that the staff involve you and keep you up-to-date with your child's progress.
- **Invitations for children to spend time alone with staff or volunteers** (or even to visit their homes).



**Remember:** A good club should always encourage parents to be part of their child's activities.

## Find out more

### Safe Network

Provides advice and guidance about keeping children safe during club or group activities  
[www.safenetwork.org.uk](http://www.safenetwork.org.uk)  
[info@safenetwork.org.uk](mailto:info@safenetwork.org.uk)

### 4children

Provides information and support to parents  
[www.4children.org.uk](http://www.4children.org.uk)  
020 7512 2100

### Suzy Lamplugh Trust

The leading authority on personal safety  
[www.suzylamplugh.org](http://www.suzylamplugh.org)  
020 7091 0014

## Knowing when to take action

Keeping children safe is everybody's business. It can be difficult to know when to act and what to do, especially when another adult is involved. You may feel embarrassed or afraid of the adult's reaction. The important thing is to try and stop children being hurt. It's better to seem like a busybody than to ignore a child who may be in danger.



- If you see a distressed child that you think is being bullied, stop and ask why the child is upset. Get help from other adults passing by if you need to. If you are still concerned, get a good description of those involved and phone the police. Don't give up until you're sure the child is safe.

- If you see a child being ill-treated by an adult, offer to help. If you try to be kind and positive, you will be doing the right thing. If your offer of help is refused but you are really worried about the child's safety, get a good description of the adult and ring the police.

- If you aren't able to help a family you know who may be in trouble, or if you know of a child who may be in danger, please contact the NSPCC Helpline on 0808 800 5000, or your local children's social care department (known as social work services in Scotland) or the police.

**Keeping children safe is everybody's business**



# NSPCC Helpline

**Don't talk yourself out of it. Talk to us.**

## The NSPCC Helpline

If you're finding it hard to cope as a parent and want to talk, or you're worried about a child who is at risk of abuse or in need of help, the NSPCC Helpline is here to help 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Call **0808 800 5000** to speak to a helpline advisor. For help by email [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)

**If you are hard of hearing, you can contact us Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm by:**

- textphone **0808 056 0566**
- British Sign Language interpreters on videophone **020 8463 1148**
- British Sign Language interpreters on IP videophone or webcam – [nspcc.signvideo.tv](http://nspcc.signvideo.tv)



**"Don't just keep worries to yourself. Talk to us"**

## More advice from the NSPCC and Your family

### Our parenting pack

If you've found this leaflet useful, you might like to try some of the other titles in our parenting pack. They include plenty of advice on practical, positive parenting, and cover subjects like managing stress, encouraging better behaviour and when's the right time to leave your child home alone.



included in your parenting pack

### Home alone

Provides practical advice to parents on issues related to leaving children at home alone, including how children feel when alone and how to choose a suitable babysitter or childminder.

To request a parenting pack, please send an A4 SAE (with £2 in stamps) requesting a parenting pack to **NSPCC Publications, Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH**, or download copies from [www.nspcc.org.uk/parenting](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/parenting)



### Worried about a child?

Provides practical advice on how to protect children from abuse, including the steps that can be taken by anyone worried about the safety of a child.

Download a copy from [www.nspcc.org.uk/worried](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/worried)

Something else you might find useful

## Does your child take part in activities in a group or club?

We can help you keep your child safe.

[www.safenetwork.org.uk](http://www.safenetwork.org.uk)

**safe** network  
Safe Activities For Everyone



**NSPCC** Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH  
**[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk) • 020 7825 2500 • [info@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:info@nspcc.org.uk)**

Registered charity numbers 216401 and SC037717. Photography by Jon Challicorn, posed by models. Stores code: NS278

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