

Episode 25: Heartful Parenting Practice: STOP Saying “Stranger Danger”

Christy Keating 00:08

Hi, friends and welcome to the Heartful Parent Podcast. I'm your host, Christy Keating. In this podcast, we talk about it all, our parenting, our partnering and our professional lives, because they are all a part of us. And we were never meant to do this alone

Christy Keating 00:40

Hey, parents, Hey, friends, we're back for another episode of The Heartful Parent Podcast. And I'm really excited to be doing a solo episode for you this week, where it's just going to be you and me, chatting about something that's really important in the parenting space. So unlike a solo episode that I did earlier this summer, where I sort of confessed to you all about a big parenting fail that I had, where I completely lost it on my kiddo. This week, we are going to be talking about one of my most important parenting tools that I share with parents. So yes, still make good parenting mistakes, still having parenting fails like all of us do, even those of us who work in the space, but this week, that's not the focus. And this week, like I said, we're going to talk about a parenting tool that I think is really important. And we're gonna have a little bit of a reality check.

So if you have followed my work or been familiar with my work for any period of time, you know, if you are a member of The Heartful, Parent Academy, and PS, if you're not you should be if you attended the Safe Parenting Summit, if you found my work through the Parenting Outside the B.O.C.S. or Parenting in a S.N.A.P framework, you know, however you came to me, if you've been following my work for any period of time, you know a couple of things about me. So first, you know that I am a big proponent, and a big teacher of both brain and body safe parenting strategies. I believe that we cannot be safe, truly safe. If our brains aren't safe, you know, our emotional side isn't safe. And if our bodies aren't safe, right, so that is what I teach. That is the focus of my work.

I also believe that fear based education does not serve us. And so again, if you've been following my work, you know that I do not subscribe to fear based education. It doesn't serve us, it doesn't make us safer. It doesn't make us feel better. There's so many reasons that it doesn't help. And yet, fear. And fear mongering is absolutely pervasive in our culture.

So we're going to dig into that a little bit this week. And actually, we're going to talk about it next week as well. So, you know, in the world of media, as it currently stands, whether that's media on the news media, on the internet, social media, you know, text message notifications that you get, what we know is that fear sells, right making people fear things sells. And for that reason, there's a, as I said, a lot of

fear mongering, it's clickbait right for media companies. And we also know that there is a lot of misinformation and disinformation being promulgated on the internet, by people with various interests and various reasons for doing that. But you know, the bottom line is sort of the more fearful you make people, the easier it is to control them. And it doesn't serve us in parenting. It doesn't serve us in politics. It doesn't serve us anywhere. In my humble or not so humble opinion. One of the most pervasive fears that we see in parents and this is perpetuated by the media is the fear of kidnapping, stranger-kidnapping, right of our child being stabbed, snatched off the street.

And in fact, in a recent poll that was done, it was revealed that this fear, the fear that someone that a stranger will hurt or attack or kidnap our children is one like it's in the list of top five fears. They sort of broken it down. And it's the second and fourth biggest fear that parents have. It is huge. And so when you add that together, it is actually the largest fear that parents have of this random attack by a stranger of kidnapping by a stranger. And the unfortunate thing about that, let me first say, any of you that have attended any of my safety talks, I do give you skills, tools and information that you should be aware of and should share with your children because we we do need them to be savvy and smart out there. But the reality is that the likelihood of any shot particular child being kidnapped or abducted in this country in the US, at least, is so exceedingly low as to be a non issue, right? Like, it shouldn't even be in the top 15 or 20 of fears that parents have. Because the likelihood is so low.

Now, we're going to talk about that likelihood and the statistics around that in more detail next week, because I am really excited that we'll have Dr. Paul Renfro on the podcast next week. He is an assistant professor of history at Florida State University and wrote a book a couple of years ago called *Stranger Danger*. And he really debunks a lot of those myths around *Stranger Danger*. And so I hope that this week, coupled with next week will give you tools and strategies as well as realistic information about about the risks. I cannot tell you how many times I hear parents say, Well, I don't let my child walk to school because I'm afraid that they will, you know, be kidnapped.

I was actually recently out for a walk, I often walk in the morning with one of my dogs. And I watched as this middle schooler she looked like she was probably eighth grade. You know, so not the beginning of middle school, like eighth grade headed on to high school kid walked to school with her parent trailing her by like 15 or 20 feet behind, all the way to make sure that she was okay. Like this kid clearly knew the way to school was clearly independent, clearly, like, knew what was up and. And she either was embarrassed by having her parent there and like trying to get away from her mom, or her mom just said, Hey, I'm just gonna follow behind to make sure you're okay. I don't know what the exact circumstances were. But Mom was trailing this kid. And I thought, This is crazy pants like we do not need to be doing this. And like taking away that sense of freedom and independence and responsibility from our children.

So like I said, we're going to talk about that more next week. But this week, I want to talk about that phrase, *Stranger Danger* that many of us were taught growing up, right? *Stranger Danger*, *Stranger*

Danger, you know, don't talk to strangers be afraid of strangers. And that phrase, which was coined by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. And look, they do some good work, but they're also, you know, there's good work and they're part of the problem, and that they kind of perpetuate some of these fears. And that phrase, Stranger Danger has become such a pervasive part of our lingo, and our like cultural language that ask any parent and almost any kid and they will tell you, Oh, yeah, I've heard it. I was taught it, and I've taught it to my child. And so today, what I want to share with you are all the reasons why you should stop using the phrase Stranger Danger, like I will consider it a win, win. This phrasing is eliminated from our lives as parents and eliminated from teaching that happens in schools and by police officers, and, you know, wherever sort of safety education takes place, so why am I saying that Stranger Danger is not like should be banned from your vocabulary or your lexicon? Well, first of all, it's because as I already said, the risk to our children by strangers in terms of kidnappings, or abductions is incredibly low. We're going to talk about those statistics next week. But here's the other reason that reasons that it is not helpful.

So first, kids do not view strangers in the same way that adults do. Right? Ask any child, like who is a stranger? And sure, they might point to people that they've never met her don't know. But if I walk up to that child and say hi there, hi, my name is Christy. I'm a friend of your mom's or you know, whatever. Like, I am no longer a stranger to most children. They won't think of me as a stranger.

Christy Keating 09:24

I will never forget when my older daughter was little and she went to the park. She actually went with her nanny. We had something similar to this happened on a couple of occasions. But on one occasion, she went to the park with her nanny and came back and reported to me that she had met her new best friend. She had gotten to play with her new best friend at the park. And I asked her, Well, what was your, you know, what's your best friend's name? And she said, I don't know. And I said, Well, where does your best friend live? And she said, I don't know. And I said, Well, did you talk to her? Do you know who your best friend's parent was? And she said, I don't know. And so here was my child identifying this other child as her new best friend. She didn't know her name, where she lived or who her parent was.

And so that just really drove home for me that our kids really think about friends, acquaintances and strangers in a different way than your I do. Okay, the second reason that that phrasing Stranger Danger is ineffective, is because frankly, it is dangerous for children to be afraid of all strangers. The reality is that the overwhelming majority of strangers out there, whether it's in a store, or a neighbor, or you know, walking down the street, the overwhelming majority of strangers are safe, would mean your children no harm, and would be a reasonable person for them to get help from if they needed it. Our children need to be able to ask for help. Now, when I'm talking about asking for help from strangers, you know, yes, I say look for moms first look for women, second look for dads next, and men. Fourth, just because you know, we're going to play the odds here. But whether it's a man, woman or other gendered person, almost every stranger out there means no harm to your child. And we need our

children to feel like they can ask for help from those strangers. If they get lost or separated from you. If you know something else unsafe is happening, and they need adult intervention or you know, whatever it is, it is dangerous for children to be afraid of strangers, not to mention the fact that it doesn't feel very good to walk around in the world. Afraid of anyone we encounter, right? That is not a healthy fun or safe way to live.

Okay, and the third and biggest reason why the phrase Stranger Danger should never enter your lexicon is because roughly 93% of abuse, childhood sexual abuse does not occur at the hands of strangers, but at the hands of someone that you know, a family member, a neighbor, a coach, a teacher, a friend, an older child, the overwhelming majority of childhood sexual abuse is at the hands of someone we know, someone we trust. And the problem with using the phrase Stranger Danger, is that that sort of effectively puts blinders on us sort of has the impact or the effect of having us forget that the risk is more likely to come from people in our inner circle, if you will, or even our outer circle, it's not likely to come from a stranger. And so if we talk to kids about strangers, then they are fearful of strangers. And they are also not equipped with the tools information and sort of empowerment, to be aware of where danger might actually come from. Okay, so Stranger Danger, like X it out, don't talk about it, get rid of it. Never say it again to your children. If you agree with me, you might be then asking the next logical question, which is great, Christy. Fantastic, but what do we use instead? So here's what I would like you to use instead. And again, I will consider it a win. You know, the crowning achievement of my professional life if I hear this phrase, more often than not from parents, who I talk to and hear from, I would like you to replace the phrase Stranger Danger with the phrase Tricky Person. Okay what is a Tricky Person, and why does this matter? Well, first of all, after I shared the definition with you, you will see that it makes a lot more sense. And it's a lot easier for children to understand.

Christy Keating 14:11

So, here's the definition of a Tricky Person first, it can be a stranger, it can be a family member, or it can be a friend. Okay? Can be someone that we know a lot. Someone that we know a little or someone that we don't know at all. Okay, that's the second like identifying thing. Third, it can be any gender they can be any gender or and any age. Abusers can also be other children. Number one stranger family member or friend. Number two, someone we know a lot, a little or not at all three, any gender any age. Now, if you're doing the math on that you're looking at that or hearing that and saying, Christy, that's pretty much everyone. And yes, you're right, it is it's really all inclusive. So Here is the differentiating characteristic of a Tricky Person. A Tricky Person is anyone who tries to trick a child into breaking a safety rule, or makes them feel uncomfortable for any reason. I mean, aside from having to do chores, right, like I don't mean to get, you know, tongue in cheek about it, there are lots of things our children could say make them uncomfortable, right? That they don't like to do. That's not what we're talking about here. This is an adult or an older child, or or peer aged child who tries to get them to break a safety rule, or tries to make them uncomfortable, you know, safety rules, you surely have them. You know, safety rules are things like trying to touch the bathing suit areas, or a child's mouth, asking a child to keep a secret, you know, interfering with a child's privacy, any of those kinds of things that you are

inevitably talking with your children about anyway, those are safety rules. And any child or adult who tries to get your kiddo to break those safety rules is a Tricky Person.

It is also, you know, they're also a Tricky Person, if they make them feel uncomfortable, right, if it just gives them an "oh" or icky feeling in their body or their tummy. Right? That is how we classify a Tricky Person. And this language makes so much more sense, it's so much more clear to our kids. And what it does is it takes the blinders off, and allows us and our kids to be aware of risks coming from anywhere close to home, or not close to home. And of course, as we've already discussed, the risks are much more likely to come from close to home.

So I'm going to leave this week's podcast episode there because as I said, next week, we have Dr. Paul Renfro coming in to talk about his book, *Stranger Danger*, and how that phrase kind of came to be a pervasive part of the American lexicon. And, you know, Western culture lexicon, and why it's not helpful to us, like sort of what it's done to us as a culture and in families. And I'm really excited for you to hear from him. If you have any questions about this, email me, you know, reach out christy@theheartfulparent.com.

And if you would like more support around this, or around parenting in general, you know, around those brain safe and body safe parenting strategies. Like I mentioned at the beginning, you need to be in The Heartful Parent Academy, we are one of only about four positive discipline certified products in the entire United States, and only about six or seven worldwide. There are 13 core modules in there, where we talk about everything from self care, to partnering to heartful parenting, to safety. Pretty much everything that you need to know to parent with brain safe and body safe strategies. It is awesome. The members in there are heartful, loving, caring parents, and we'd love to have you join us.

In the meantime, get rid of *Stranger Danger* and start using Tricky Person. Teach it to your child today. Use it from here on forward, and we'll talk about this in more detail next week.

I'll talk to you soon