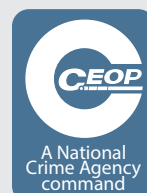


# Beyond 'stranger danger':

## Teaching children about staying safe from stranger child abduction

Geoff Newiss



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Parents and Abducted Children Together, PO Box 31389, London, SW11 4WY, UK

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## Executive summary

Every year about 50 children are abducted by a stranger. In some cases the child is sexually assaulted and, on rare occasions, murdered. Public attention will inevitably focus on these tragic cases. But the police record over 200 attempted abductions by a stranger each year. Even unsuccessful abductions are deeply disturbing to communities, parents and children alike.

This study, building on earlier work by PACT and CEOP, a National Crime Agency Command (NCA-CEOP), looks at the advice and information given to children on how to avoid abduction by a stranger. Thirty years ago simple 'stranger-danger' messages were commonplace, and even attracted government endorsement. Our research examines whether this approach remains relevant and effective.

### What is 'stranger danger'?

There is no definition of 'stranger danger'. In effect, it is simply a slogan for child safety strategies which focus on recognising, and taking action in response to, strangers. Whilst the approaches, materials and methods may vary, the common themes are not to talk to, go with or take things from strangers.

### Aims

The study focused on three main aims:

1. To establish *whether* parents, teachers, police and other agencies are providing information and advice to children on stranger child abduction;
2. To explore *what* information and advice, if any, is provided to children;
3. To identify *themes* or *issues* in the content or delivery of information and advice.

### Method

The research involved data collection with parents, teachers, police, police community support officers and representatives of the voluntary sector. In addition, previous research on child abduction safety programmes was reviewed.

The research is deliberately qualitative in style, with a focus on exploring and identifying issues 'from the ground up'. As a result, there is a natural limitation on how applicable the findings are to a wider public.

## Findings

The study finds that:

- Children increasingly struggle to distinguish between a stranger and a non-stranger, especially in an age of social media.
- Children who have had no abduction safety training will readily go with strangers when presented with a lure.
- Lack of resources and a heavy concentration on online safety mean many children do not receive anti-abduction training.
- Parents, teachers, the police and others expressed concern that anti-abduction advice for children should not be needlessly frightening.
- The crucial distinction is not between strangers and non-strangers, but between well-meaning adults and those with criminally abusive intent, whether strangers or not.

## Evidence and further research

An important finding from this study is that relatively little scientific research has been conducted into effective abduction prevention strategies in recent years. Important knowledge gaps exist, for example on children's changing perceptions of a stranger (in light of their greater exposure to social media); whether abduction avoidance behaviours should be taught on their own or as part of a broader programme on abuse; which factors (e.g. frequency of education classes, self-esteem) ensure that children maintain abduction avoidance behaviours; and the role parents should play in keeping their children safe.

## Education and broader prevention strategies

Whilst there is sufficient evidence to be sure that education plays an important part in promoting children's safety, it is not necessarily the only effective abduction prevention strategy. A broader abduction prevention framework might also include, for example, strategies to tackle offender behaviour, the role of police and criminal justice agencies, community involvement, and environmental measures such as street lighting and surveillance of public places. Consideration of these factors has been outside the scope of this study and should form the basis of any further work to develop comprehensive abduction prevention strategies.

## ***Recommendations***

This study offers five recommendations:

1. Clear information on the scale and nature of child abduction should be accessible nationally (this requirement will be progressively met by the setting up of the online Child Abduction Hub this year).
2. New safety materials to help teachers and parents talk to children about stranger child abduction should be developed, tested and made widely available.
3. These materials should consider carefully the degree to which advice to children should take account of the different types of abduction to which they may be vulnerable, e.g. stranger, non-stranger and parental.
4. Schools, police, local authorities and other agencies should review the strategies employed locally to keep children safe from stranger child abduction, in light of the findings of this study.
5. Further research as described above should be set in train without delay.



## 1. BACKGROUND

In 2013, Parents and Abducted Children Together (PACT) with the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (now the National Crime Agency CEOP Command) published *Taken: a study of child abduction in the UK* (Newiss and Traynor, 2013).

One of the main themes of *Taken* was the relatively high number of abductions perpetrated by strangers. Including attempted abductions, over 40 per cent of police cases involved a stranger. Approximately 50 children were actually abducted by a stranger (during the one year period), and more than 200 attempts were made to abduct a child. Findings from two separate surveys of children suggest that incidents in which a stranger tries to take a child (and less commonly succeeds in doing so) occur on a daily basis in the UK, though many go unreported to the police (see chapter 2).

‘Stranger danger’ initiatives came to prominence in the UK with the release of a series of Public Information Films during the 1970s and 1980s (available on the PACT website). These films were often used as a teaching aid in schools, sometimes delivered by a police officer. However, during the 1990s and 2000s questions were raised about whether ‘stranger danger’ was effective in keeping children safe, and whether it detracted from the comparatively greater risk posed by people known and related to children (again, see chapter 2 for further information).

There is anecdotal evidence that some children are still told about ‘stranger danger’ by parents and/or teachers. Following attempted abductions or suspicious incidents, police forces continue to issue ‘stranger danger’ alerts in the press, and schools often arrange sessions for children to be told about staying safe.

However, there is no clear picture of exactly what children are told, by whom, and in what context. It is not known how varied or uniform current safety advice is, whether it can be improved, whether it is effective, and how many children it is reaching. Whereas numerous initiatives have been launched in recent years to help parents and children navigate safe internet use, there appear to have been few such developments to ensure children’s safety when outside. This report documents findings from new research and seeks to shed light on some of these issues.

### What do we mean by ‘stranger danger’?

There is no definition of ‘stranger danger’. In effect, it is simply a slogan for child safety strategies which focus on recognising, and taking action in response to, strangers. Whilst the approaches, materials and methods may vary, the common themes are not to talk to, go with or take things (etc.) from strangers.

## Aims

The study focused on three main aims:

1. To establish **whether** parents, teachers, police and other agencies are providing information and advice to children on stranger child abduction;
2. To explore **what** information and advice, if any, is provided to children;
3. To identify **themes or issues** in the content or delivery of information and advice.

## Outcomes

The study was conducted in the expectation that the findings would inform the development of new teaching resources (for parents and teachers) on stranger child abduction. In particular, new resources may benefit parents and teachers in communities directly affected by a stranger abduction or attempted stranger abduction.

## Scope

Abductions by a stranger are characterised by a child being lured, coerced or forced to go with a perpetrator, at the risk of suffering immediate abuse<sup>1</sup>. However, separating stranger abduction from other forms of abduction is not quite so 'black and white':

- Some abductions are precipitated by grooming, both online or face-to-face. Adult perceptions of someone being a 'stranger' may not be shared by children who have built up some degree of familiarity with a person online or when out of the home.
- This study has not sought to examine the provision and content of online child safety materials. However, there is potential overlap in the purpose of online child safety materials and the more traditional 'stranger danger' approaches. Some views on this are explored in the report.
- Some perpetrators who are known to their victims use a similar *modus operandi* as a stranger abductor, luring a child to go with them in order to abuse them. Safety advice needs, ideally, to accommodate a broad range of abduction scenarios.
- Child abuse prevention strategies often teach children to recognise unsafe or uncomfortable situations, to understand when touching or cuddling is wrong, to know that some secrets should not be kept, and to tell a parent or other trusted adult if someone has made them feel unsafe<sup>2</sup>. Whilst these strategies are generally targeted at preventing abuse from perpetrators known to the victim, they are also valuable for preventing stranger child abduction.

These issues are raised again in chapter 4.

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<sup>1</sup> Newiss and Traynor (2013) reveal that often a precise motive is difficult to determine for attempted stranger child abductions. However, sexual abuse is often considered the most likely explanation.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the NSPCC's Underwear Rule: [www.nspcc.org.uk/underwear](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/underwear).

### Stranger child abduction: case studies

A 12 year-old girl was walking back from the shops when a car pulled alongside her and the man inside asked her if she wanted a lift. She refused his persistent requests and kept walking. The man stopped the car and quickly left the vehicle, causing the girl to run inside a nearby office block to seek help.

A group of five 11 and 12 year-olds were playing in a park with their parents some 200 metres away. A man had approached the group several times asking for their names but then left them alone. When one of the group, an 11 year-old girl, wandered over to some trees the man appeared and grabbed her arm, attempting to drag her behind the trees and bushes. The girl screamed and kicked, causing the offender to let go, and she fled back to the group and her parents.

Source: unpublished case studies taken from the Newiss and Traynor (2013) dataset

## Method

The research involved a series of interviews with:

### *Parents*

Parents with school-aged children were recruited in one area. Interviews were held at the participants' home address. The participants were advised about the subject matter before beginning, and were made aware they could stop the interview if they no longer wished to proceed. None did. Interviews followed a conversational style rather than a formal interview; some probes were used to direct responses to cover the aims of the research.

In addition, an online discussion was posted on a local 'Mum's network' attracting a short, but informative, dialogue.

### *Schools*

Primary schools in two areas were emailed and/or called and invited to participate in the research. Whilst many chose not to, some sent written responses. Loosely structured interviews were conducted in four schools.

Online media monitoring (of abductions and attempted abductions) revealed several cases in which schools (from outside the interview areas) had sent letters to parents following a local incident. Copies of letters or other safety materials were collected where possible.

### *Police and voluntary sector*

Contact was made with representatives from three police forces, including Police Constables and Police Community Support Officers with first-hand experience of delivering safety classes in schools. Interviews were loosely structured, and a written response was collected from one force representative.

In addition, the lead researcher attended two parents' workshops and a teachers' workshop hosted by a regional voluntary organisation (the Devon Child Assault Prevention Project) and interviewed the project manager. Finally, representation was taken from two national charities working in the field of child/personal safety.

The research is deliberately qualitative in style, focusing on identifying and exploring issues 'from the ground up'. This approach is ideal when research is concerned with conceptual development and meaning, rather than measuring.

There is, however, a natural limitation on how applicable the findings are to a wider public. As a result, the findings best show the variety and type of issues raised; they are not a good measure of the prevalence of any particular concern or issue.

### **Structure of the report**

Chapter 2 provides important context to the study, setting out key findings and conclusions from the previous literature on child abduction and the development of child abduction safety strategies. Chapter 3 presents the findings from this research with parents, teachers, police and other agencies. Chapter 4 offers a discussion and recommendations.

## 2. SUBJECT OVERVIEW

Understanding the circumstances of child abduction – who commits it, why and how – is vital to the development of effective prevention strategies and materials (Boudreaux *et al.*, 2000). This section provides a short review of what is known about stranger child abduction in the UK, followed by a summary of previous research on child safety strategies targeted at stranger abduction. Together these give important context to the new research findings presented in chapter 3.

### Stranger child abduction

#### *How many stranger child abductions occur?*

Each year in the UK police forces record more than 500 offences of child abduction<sup>3</sup>. In addition, more than 1,000 offences of kidnapping are recorded by police, though it's not possible to tell how many involve children rather than adults<sup>4</sup>.

The last comprehensive analysis of police child abduction data was undertaken by Newiss and Traynor (2013), published by PACT and the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (NCA-CEOP Command). This report collected data on a total of 592 cases (involving 675 victims) of child abduction or kidnapping (of a child) recorded by 49 of the (then) 52 UK police forces in 2011/12.

One of the main themes was the relatively high number of abductions perpetrated by non-family members. 247 cases (44 per cent<sup>5</sup>) were committed by a stranger (defined as someone who was not known to, or recognised by, the victim). In 47 of these cases, the perpetrator succeeded in taking a child. There were 186 attempted abductions; and in 14 cases it was insufficiently clear (from the data made available) whether the abduction had been completed or not (see Table 1).

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<sup>3</sup> In 2012/13, 514 offences of child abduction were recorded in England and Wales, and 43 in Northern Ireland. Typically over 200 offences of 'abduction' are recorded in Scotland each year, though this total includes adults as well as children. For more information on the legal offence categories, recent trends and statistical limitations see Newiss and Traynor (2013).

<sup>4</sup> In 2012/13, 1,387 offences of kidnapping were recorded in England and Wales, and 56 in Northern Ireland. The offence of kidnapping does not exist in Scotland.

<sup>5</sup> The percentage excludes cases where the relationship between the victim and offender was not known (n=29), giving a revised total of 563 cases.

**Table 1: Number of stranger abductions 2011/12 (police data)**

Relationship between victim and offender	Completed abductions n= (%)	Attempted abductions n= (%)	Not known if attempted or not n= (%)	Total cases n= (%)
<b>Stranger</b>	47 (19%)	186 (75%)	14 (6%)	247 (100%)

This table shows only the data for 'stranger' perpetrators. Figures on parental (n=98), other family (n=12), 'other known' (n=206) and perpetrators where the relationship between victim and offender was not known (n=29) are available in the full report (Newiss and Traynor, 2013). Percentages do not sum to 100 because of rounding. Figures are for the number of cases. Some cases involved more than one victim. In total 273 children were victims of stranger abduction or attempted abduction in the 247 cases.

Survey data has highlighted the gap between the number of offences of child abduction recorded by police in the UK, and the self-reported experiences of young people themselves.

Radford *et al.* (2011) asked a random probability sample of children and young adults in 2009 if – at any time in their childhood – anyone had tried to kidnap them. Kidnapping was described to the participants as an incident when they were made to go somewhere, for example in a car, by someone who they thought might hurt them. 0.2 per cent of those under 11 years old, 1.9 per cent of 11 to 17 year-olds, and 2.1 per cent of 18 to 24 year-olds reported an attempted kidnap. Nearly half of the attempted kidnappings (in each age group) were perpetrated by a stranger.

Gallagher *et al.* (2008) carried out a survey of 2,420 school children in the North West of England in 1996/7. Forty-one children (1.7 per cent of the sample, or 1 in 59 children) reported a stranger *tried* to get them to go with them when they did not want to at some point in their childhood, and four children (0.2 per cent of the sample, or 1 in 605 children) reported a stranger succeeded in taking them away.

Whilst findings from the surveys conducted by Gallagher *et al.* and Radford *et al.* are not directly comparable, they do suggest that young people's experiences of abduction and attempted abduction far exceed the number of incidents that come to be recorded as crimes by the police. Many incidents are simply not reported to the police (Gallagher *et al.* found that 60 per cent of victims of attempted abduction did not report the incident to the police).

### ***Who is abducted?***

Victims of stranger abduction (in Newiss and Traynor's sample) ranged in age from 0 to 18 years old, with a mean age of 11 years. Nearly four-fifths were aged 9 or over at the time of the offence.

Two-thirds of the children (in Newiss and Traynor's study) were female. However, the survey conducted by Gallagher *et al.* (2008) found no significant difference between the number of boys and girls reporting abduction or attempted abduction by a stranger.

Where ethnicity was recorded, 87 per cent of victims of stranger abduction (in Newiss and Traynor's study) were white, 5 per cent black, 6 per cent Asian, and 2 per cent 'other'.

### ***What are the typical circumstances of stranger child abduction?***

Gallagher *et al.* (2008) reported that nearly all victims of attempted or actual abduction were approached by the offender when outdoors (for example on the street or in a park). Newiss and Traynor (2013) found that nearly two-thirds of attempted abductions by a stranger reported to police involved a perpetrator in a vehicle. Whilst most children suffered no injury, nearly half the victims were grabbed, dragged or held by the offender (*ibid.*).

Gallagher *et al.* (2008) found that nearly three quarters of victims were with other children or adults at the time of an abduction or attempted abduction. Newiss and Traynor (2013) highlighted 22 cases (in 2011/12) in which young children were with their parent or carer when an attempt was made to take them, mostly from public places such as a shopping centre, play area or the street.

The motive for stranger-perpetrated offences, particularly attempted abductions, is often difficult to determine with certainty. However, a large proportion is believed to be sexually motivated (Newiss and Traynor, 2013; Finkelhor *et al.*, 2002; Bourdreaux *et al.*, 1999). Newiss and Traynor (2013) collected data on 15 children who were actually abducted by a stranger in which the motive was clearly sexual. Five suffered a sexual assault or rape.

Five victims first met the offender online, reflecting a growing concern about the use of mobile and internet technology, including social networking sites, in grooming people for sexual exploitation (CEOP, 2013; Lilley and Ball, 2013; Jago *et al.*, 2011; Paskell, 2013). A UK survey of 1,031 nine to 16 year-olds who use the internet as part of the EU Kids Online programme, found that 4 per cent had met in person with an individual they first encountered online (Livingstone *et al.*, 2010).

Some children are abducted by strangers in more unusual circumstances. Newiss and Traynor (2013) found eight cases in which a child was abducted for revenge or because of a dispute. These were typically older children, all were male, who were more likely to be injured as a result of the incident. Five children were abducted by a stranger for financial gain, either in a kidnap and ransom scenario or as a result of being robbed. Four young children were victims of an attempt to take them from a school or hospital by a perpetrator posing as a family member or representative of social services.

## Stranger child abduction safety advice

Research in both the UK and the United States (US) has examined a range of child safety training programmes focused on abduction by a stranger.

### *Resisting lures*

Many programmes concentrate on training children to resist strangers' lures. Research consistently shows that children will readily go with strangers when presented with a lure (Holcombe *et al.*, 1995; Poche *et al.*, 19981; Moran *et al.*, 1997).

Poche *et al.* (1981) distinguished between simple lures ('would you like to go for a walk?'), authority lures ('your mother told me to come pick you up') and incentive lures ('I have some toys in my car...') (cited in Miltenberger and Olsen, 1996). Holcombe *et al.* (1995) added two other lure types: assistance lures ('can you help me carry these things to my car?') and conversation lures ('what is your name, how old are you?...').

Miltenberger and Olsen (1996) identify three critical behaviours a child should perform when confronted with an abduction lure: verbal, motor and reporting behaviour. These have been characterised widely as 'yell, run and tell' (see, for example, Kidscape *Protect children from paedophiles*, undated).

### *Acquisition of abduction avoidance behaviours*

Miltenberger and Olsen's (1996) review of numerous studies found that behavioural skills training 'involving some combination of instructions, modelling, rehearsal, praise and corrective feedback' is generally effective in helping children to acquire abduction avoidance behaviour.

The critical point here is that simply giving a child the conceptual knowledge about personal safety (telling them the rules) is a poor method for ensuring they adopt the right behaviour when the situation requires (see also Moran *et al.*, 1997). Kraizer *et al.* (1988) stress that knowing the right answers in a pencil-and-paper personal safety test is not a good predictor of children's ability to perform abduction avoidance behaviours in a simulated abduction scenario. Learning through action is required. Kraizer *et al.* (1988) explain:

*Children learn through a combination of discussion, role-play, application of skills to varied situations, and successive building and refinement of the child's ability to actually use the techniques being taught... Children need an opportunity to clear out their own misconceptions, to receive new information and then to practice new skills so they make them their own – so they become part of the child's repertoire in everyday life.*

Miltenberger and Olsen's (1996) review suggests that whilst both individual and group training is effective, the former appears more so. Studies of classroom-based group training indicate that some children appear not to learn the desired behaviours, though teachers are more effective when equipped with a protocol for conducting behavioural skills training. Evidence suggests that safety videos should be used in addition, rather than instead of, the full array of behavioural skills training.

The same review also concluded that people trained to deliver behavioural skills training were more effective in instilling abduction avoidance behaviours in children than parents.



However, the authors clarify that the findings suggest better teaching materials need to be made available to parents; it is not that parents are incapable of teaching their children (*ibid.*)

Finally, research has highlighted the important role that self-esteem seems to play in children's ability to acquire abduction avoidance skills. Kraizer *et al.*, 1988 summarise:

*Children who had high self-esteem going into the [personal safety training] program were more successful... Self-esteem appears to be a desirable precondition to the intervention, enabling assimilation of the information presented... This is significant because many practitioners have intuitively felt that self-esteem plays an important role in personal safety education.*

### **Maintenance of abduction avoidance behaviours**

Various studies have examined children's *maintenance* of abduction avoidance behaviours using 'in situ probes' (Miltenberge and Olsen, 1996) in which a mock-abductor unknown to children who have received abduction training presents them with a lure in a real setting. Holcombe *et al.* (1995) found maintenance strategies (using verbal rehearsal, modelling, feedback and role play) to be generally effective though long-term maintenance requires repeated intervention.

Importantly, Holcombe *et al.* (1995) also found that children both acquire and maintain the motor avoidance behaviour ('run') better than they do the verbal behaviour ('yell').

### **Children's understanding of, and response to, strangers**

Other research has highlighted the difficulties of a 'stranger' based approach to keeping children safe from abuse and abduction. Mayes *et al.* (1990) found that (particularly young) children demonstrate only a tenuous grasp of the concept of a stranger and non-stranger, and differentiate poorly between them.

Moran *et al.* (1997) studied the verbal responses of 168 children (aged 6, 8 and 10 years old) to video sequences of child interactions with strangers as well as familiar and semi-familiar adults. They found that more than half of 6 and 8 year-olds signalled they would be compliant to a stranger making a request, offer or demand. Ten year-olds were less likely to comply with an offer from a stranger (with just over 20 per cent complying) though compliance increased when the stranger made a request (40 per cent were compliant) or a demand (just over half were compliant).

The study by Moran *et al.* (1997) also demonstrates the tendency of children to comply with adults making a request or demand because of the socialization process which encourages children to be helpful, respectful and obedient to adults. Self-interest (standing to gain something or enjoy something) is also a powerful factor in children's willingness to accept an offer from a stranger (*ibid.*).

A child's propensity to be obedient can also be used to control them once they are under the control of an abductor. Elliot (2000) cites the example of a three year-old girl abducted from a park who, when explaining why she didn't call for help, said that the perpetrator told her to be quiet.

Finally, Moran *et al.* (1997) warn of the prospect that 'if children are taught that strangers are potentially dangerous, will they assume that all strangers are dangerous, and conversely, that all non-strangers are safe?' The theme is reiterated by David Finkelhor (2013) in an article for the *Washington Post*:

*Many schools and parents use the mantra 'Never talk to strangers'. It's doubtful that this really helps. Everyone is a stranger at first; it's all about the context of the meeting, and that's hard to convey. But we do know that children are vastly more likely to come to harm and even be abducted by people they know than by people they don't. We'd do much better to teach them the signs of people (strangers or not) who are behaving badly: touching them inappropriately, being overly personal, trying to get them alone, acting drunk, provoking others or recklessly wielding weapons. We need to help children practice refusal skills, disengagement skills and how to summon help. We need some new prevention mantras.*

### **Fear and parenting**

Cases of child abduction – particularly non-family abduction – can command enormous media attention (Soothill *et al.*, 2004). This can impact on the public perception of where the actual risk to children lies (Slovic, 2000; Gill, 2007), and can create disproportionate levels of fear (Valentine, 1997; Furedi, 2001). Constraints on children's movement and outdoor activities, and the serious consequences on children's social, psychological and physical development, have been reported (Hillman *et al.*, 1990; Gill, 2007).

Kraizer *et al.* (1988) indicates that effective training programmes can prevent 'both the fear and reality of abduction'. The same authors, reporting findings from their evaluation of a training programme in Denver, USA in 1986, asserted that children felt more able to keep themselves safe 'which acts as an antidote to fear'. For Kraizer *et al.* (1998) reducing fear is not just a larger social good, it is also an instrumental part of a training programme's effectiveness in keeping children safe:

*Fear among children does not reduce their vulnerability, but a case can certainly be made for its reducing their ability to feel capable as they learn to move about in the world.*

### 3. FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

This chapter summarises findings from the new research conducted for this study. There are five sections: findings from parents, schools, police, the voluntary sector and from online sources. Some examples of the materials available to teach children about staying safe from stranger child abduction are summarised in Annex A.

#### Parents

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 12 parents – eight mothers alone and two couples (mother and father). Their children were aged between 3 and 14 years old. In addition, six parents who are part of a local online ‘Mum’s network’ responded to an online discussion posted by the PACT research team.

A range of views were recorded across several themes set out below.

#### *Perspectives on risk*

Most parents demonstrated a reasonably nuanced understanding of the risk of abduction. There was a common appreciation that the media focus on very high profile cases most probably disguises a more complex picture, though this tended to fall into two distinct views. Roughly half the parents (in the face-to-face interviews) felt that child abductions were very rare and that media reporting exaggerated the scale of the problem. The other half suspected that many more abductions occur that the public do not hear about because of selective media reporting.

Two parents expressed the view that educating children about staying safe from the risk of abduction is a low priority. One parent responded:

*In all honesty, road safety and ‘common sense’ type issues bother me more.*

Four parents held a clear sense that abduction (and abuse more broadly) is more likely to be perpetrated by someone related or known to a child than by a stranger:

*Statistically it is family members that post more of a risk to kids than strangers.*

*A lot of abductions happen by people who are sort of ‘known’ by the child.*

Recent high profile cases were mentioned as examples where perpetrators were known to the victim(s).

Many parents mentioned the need to keep children safe when they use the internet and some questioned whether their child’s online activity poses more of a risk to them meeting up with somebody they should not rather than the ‘traditional’ scenario of a child being snatched off the street.

## Strangers

For roughly one-third of the parents interviewed face-to-face ensuring their child's safety seemed inextricably linked to warning them about 'stranger danger'. Each of these parents remembered being told about 'stranger danger' themselves as a child – either by a parent, teacher or police officer. These parents were quick to agree that children should be taught to not talk to strangers, not go with strangers and not to take anything from strangers.

Most parents recognised, however, that there are both practical limitations and potentially negative implications from the rigid adherence to 'stranger danger' rules. One mother outlined how she had told her eldest two children not to talk to strangers but explained that when a 'little old lady' talks to them in a supermarket queue she would expect them to be polite and talk to her. Whilst generally believing that telling children not to talk to, or go with, strangers was still the right thing to do, this parent admitted that a lack of consistency in the application of these rules could be confusing for children.

Four parents were clear in their belief that teaching children not to go with strangers was positively unhelpful. One parent (responding to the online discussions) commented:

*I know the schools teach children not to talk to strangers but I don't agree with that, I think that makes for a very unfriendly world. In reality 99.9% of strangers are just being friendly.*

Another parent was more concerned that limiting children's engagement with people could have potentially damaging effects on their ability to recognise unsafe situations and to seek help:

*I believe it is important for them to be confident to talk to strangers in order to also have the confidence to know when something doesn't seem right. I bring my kids up to be confident around people so they also have the confidence to get help or talk to someone if they ever need to.*

## Online safety

Many parents talked about keeping their children safe from strangers when online. Most of those with school-aged children were aware of resources (in school or online) to help them understand the risks and what actions to take. For some, this seemed to be a natural extension of the 'stranger danger' model, albeit in a different environment. Others, however, were concerned that their children did not recognise strangers as being strangers online and that the forums in which they meet people can create a 'false sense of security' because they are not actually talking to someone face-to-face.

## Age specific

Most parents interviewed demonstrated a clear sense that the information and advice given to children has to be tailored to their age.

For parents of young children there was a much greater focus on telling their children what to do if they got separated from their parents, for example in a shopping centre. Some related their personal experience of such situations or were concerned that their child had a high proclivity to wander off. Their advice had a degree of overlap with some of the

common ‘stranger danger’ messages (see below), including finding ‘safe strangers’ (e.g. shop workers, people in uniform or other parents) and shouting for help.

As children get older, and are more likely to experience the world outside their home without their parents or other carers, the need to engage children with issues of their own personal safety naturally grows. One parent, referring to her 3 year-old child, said:

*He is not aware of stranger danger as such but I guess as he gets older, I will have to speak more about that with him.*

Parents of older children talked about adopting safeguards when their children were old enough to go outside and walk home on their own. Practical examples, such as sticking with friends, being aware of their surroundings and using toilets in shopping centres rather than public toilets were mentioned.

### ***Being able to talk to children***

Several parents discussed some of the difficulties in talking to children about sensitive and potentially frightening subjects. Some mentioned their desire to protect their child’s innocence, to stop them from growing up too quickly or simply not to scare them.

As their children grew older, parents recognised that they would probably start to cover difficult subjects at school anyway – if not with their teachers, then amongst other pupils. Talking to children was expressed as a means of keeping ‘in step’ with teachers, to challenge rumour and misinformation spread between children, and also to build trust and openness between parents and children.

Several parents recognised that the very high media profile of some child abductions provides an opportunity to answer children’s questions and to start a conversation about personal safety. Not that having such a conversation was always easy:

*I told my daughter... most grown-ups are really nice, but there are a few people who aren’t. She asked if I meant kidnappers and I think I responded ‘yes, kind of’. She didn’t seem overly bothered by what I said, but I feel I could have perhaps explained it better!*

Some parents also said that their own limited understanding of child abduction made them cautious about starting a conversation with their children. The same parents welcomed the idea of a website, leaflet or other resource that could provide clear information.

## **Schools**

A total of 25 primary schools in two different areas were contacted and invited to participate in the research. A response was received from 10 schools.

Four schools indicated that pupils received formal lessons on staying safe from strangers and/or abduction (each referred to as ‘stranger danger’ lessons) delivered annually or, in one case, twice a year.

- One school targeted lessons at 6 and 7 year-olds, focusing on distinguishing safe strangers from non-safe strangers using a recent television programme as part of the lesson. Details of the lesson plan made available from this school are shown in Annex A.

- In another school lessons were given by a class teacher to each year group with a strong emphasis on recognising the difference between a stranger and a non-stranger.
- In one school pupils aged between 5 and 7 were given annual 'stranger danger' lesson by teachers and local police representatives. These lessons were focused on helping children to understand they should only go with someone 'that Mummy knows'.
- In the fourth school, 10 and 11 year-olds were taught about 'stranger danger' as part of a 40 minute Personal Social Health and Economic Education (PSHE) lesson which examined what to do if a child gets lost and how to stay safe on the roads.

Four other schools indicated that personal safety lessons or sessions (for example in assemblies) were given if a local incident or prominent media coverage raised concerns temporarily. One school described how all pupils had been warned about 'stranger danger' after three recent suspicious incidents nearby, stressing the point that pupils should not talk to someone they did not know. In a different school children were spoken to about staying safe and interacting with strangers before school holidays.

Two schools responded to the research invitation with a clear statement that they offered pupils no lessons or advice on staying safe from abduction or 'stranger danger'.

### ***Awareness***

This research did not aim to test teachers' awareness of the scale and nature of child abduction and so information of this type was not collected in a structured manner. However, respondents in several schools were surprised when researchers highlighted key findings from *Taken*, including the number of offences of child abduction by a stranger recorded by police in the UK. One staff member commented that she thought '*stranger danger was a thing of the past*'. A Deputy Head Teacher of another school reported being motivated to examine how pupil's safety could be improved in this area as a result of participating in the research.

### ***Internet safety is the priority***

Six of the ten responding schools indicated that considerably more focus is given to keeping children safe when online than when outside. Many provided leaflets, teaching resources and lesson plans and referred to a range of external teaching resources and sources of information. A Head Teacher in one school was vocal in his belief that virtual strangers pose more risk to children today than strangers 'outside the school gates'. Other respondents indicated that schools need to address popular concerns and reflected that stories of internet danger are more prevalent than on-street danger in the media today.

### ***Teaching resources***

A lack of teaching resources was widely acknowledged to hinder the delivery of 'stranger danger' lessons. One Head Teacher described the difficulties of running lessons on safety topics when staff lack sufficient 'facts and figures' and the problems caused by not being able to answer pupils' questions.

Another staff member, from a school outside our research sample, joined the online parents' discussion (see above), and commented:

*I work in a primary school. We have recently had good reason to speak to all of the children about stranger danger but struggled to find helpful support materials which balanced getting the message across without scaring them all. Would really appreciate a good resource.*

### **Teachers or external delivery**

Respondents in five schools held the view that 'stranger danger' lessons would be more effectively delivered by police or external agencies than by teachers. A number of reasons were given. First, that children's attention was held more easily by someone other than their teacher, particularly someone in uniform. Second, that police or external providers had a better understanding of the broader issues and 'facts and figures', and third, that they would have access to better teaching resources.

The Devon Child Assault Prevention Project provides a good example of lessons delivered in school by an external agency that specialises in child safety (see below).

### **Involving parents**

The Deputy Head Teacher of one school described efforts to involve parents wherever possible in sensitive PSHE-type activities, and the benefits this brings to reinforcing the message to children. In the past, the school had arranged meetings and training sessions for parents, though these had been poorly attended.

### **Rapport, confidence and fear**

The Head Teacher of one school expressed clear concerns about teaching 'stranger danger' because of the potential for raising children's fears. The Head Teacher reasoned that advice should be imparted through informal chat and through building rapport with pupils to give them the confidence to recognise a dangerous situation. Similarly, a respondent from a different school emphasised that pupils should be taught to trust their instincts, to recognise when they are not comfortable and to run away and shout when they feel threatened, rather than stopping and thinking about a situation.

### **Writing to parents following a local incident**

In addition to the 25 schools approached to participate in this research, PACT monitored local media reports of (mainly attempted) child abductions and the response from schools and the police. In some cases, schools wrote to parents warning them about the incidents. Some contained detailed suggestions on how to keep children safe (see examples given in Annex A). Others offered more general advice, for example, one school wrote '*Please can you make sure that your children are extra vigilant and if they see anything suspicious, or if they are approached, that they contact the Police immediately.*'

## Police and Police Community Support Officers

Contact was made with police officers and/or Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) in three police force areas.

In the first area, interviews were held with a police constable specialising in schools liaison and youth engagement and two PCSOs. In the second police force, an interview was held with a police constable who had, in preparation, consulted with PCSOs. In the third area, a police constable (who used to be a PCSO) sent a written reply to questions, after consulting with PCSOs in the same area.

An online search shows that police forces across the country still undertake activity aimed at keeping children safe from strangers. In the immediate aftermath of a local incident (of attempted abduction or a suspicious incident) police often release a press statement, usually warning parents to be vigilant and sometimes specifically suggesting they remind their children about 'stranger danger'.

At least one police force hosts its own online advice leaflet on stranger danger (see Annex A). Minutes found online from Neighbourhood Policing Teams and Local Policing Teams in four different forces documented ongoing local priorities to deliver stranger danger education initiatives.

Interviews with police and PCSOs highlighted the issues of school liaison and training and resources.

### *Police school liaison*

Representatives from two police force areas described how the police school liaison role had reduced considerably over the last decade or so. Attending schools to deliver crime prevention or safety classes had become a role for PCSOs if local priorities permitted. The representative of the third force area was more adamant that PCSOs, and sometimes police, attend every school each year to deliver 'stranger danger' lessons. This may be part of a wider programme (e.g. 'people who help us' or 'good citizen' programmes) or in response to a local incident raising concerns.

Schools have to be willing partners in the delivery of safety classes. PCSOs in one force reported that some schools requested inputs from PCSOs in classes or assemblies as a matter of course, whilst other schools showed no inclination to involve PCSOs in this manner. However, attending schools to remind children about staying safe in the immediate aftermath of a local incident was still relatively normal.

Police representatives in two forces highlighted concerns over the quality of safety classes/inputs in schools. One was keen to examine how police could work with schools to develop a programme of safety classes so that key messages can be repeated and refined as children get older. The other police officer spoke about the need to involve voluntary sector partners in the provision of advice and to improve the quality of police/PCSO school inputs.



### **Training and resources**

Representatives from two forces indicated that PCSOs receive no formal training in delivering safety advice on child abduction. This was contrasted with the higher levels of preparation made for delivering classes on internet safety or child exploitation. One respondent commented:

*There is no package on abduction safety or 'stranger danger' – you just sort of make it up as you go along. I suppose it's common sense.*

All three forces described a traditional 'stranger danger' approach, focusing on recognising strangers and safe strangers, and not going with, talking to, or taking things from, strangers.

A lack of teaching resources, lessons plans and information to leave with children and parents was raised in two police forces. Again, this is in marked contrast to the materials available on different subjects, e.g. internet safety.

### **Voluntary sector**

Local, regional and national charities produce a range of child safety resources for parents and children themselves. Books, leaflets and articles from many different countries are available (some free, some to buy) online. Many of these reiterate a simple 'stranger danger' message, focusing on a) the recognition of a stranger, b) avoidance behaviours (don't talk to, don't go with, don't take anything from – a stranger) and c) what to do when in danger (e.g. 'yell, run, tell').

Three charities (Kidscape, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust and the Devon Child Assault Prevention Project) which participated in this research, offered a broader approach to child safety.

#### **Kidscape**

Kidscape works UK-wide to provide individuals and organisations with practical skills and resources necessary to keep children safe from harm (see [www.kidscape.org.uk](http://www.kidscape.org.uk)).

Kidscape has produced a variety of information booklets over the last decade. Some have a specific focus, for example '*Protect Children from Paedophiles, Advice and Information for Parents*'. This explains who paedophiles are (including strangers and people known to families), what parents can do and say to their children, and what actions children should take to keep themselves safe and if they feel threatened.

*'Feeling happy, feeling safe: A safety guide for young children'* (Elliott, 2000) presents a series of short stories (on feeling safe, getting lost, saying no, bullies, someone you don't know, touching and secrets) for children to read with their parents. The booklet explores child safety across a range of scenarios, fostering the idea that children's bodies belong to them, and giving practical tips on action to take in specific circumstances. Questions at the end of each section reinforce the positive safety messages in the stories.

Kidscape also produces child safety teaching resources for primary schools. For example, the '*Under Five's Programme*' offers sets of questions and answers, teaching points, role-plays, stories, and activities such as colouring sheets to equip children with skills to keep themselves safe from bullies, strangers and from people they know (Elliott, 1999).

**Kidscape comments:**

'The best protection is to encourage children to talk about issues that worry them and suggest a choice of potential solutions before anything happens. "Mum, Dad, what would you do if...?"

We need to let the child choose the response that they think is workable for them, in order to build their confidence, then practise it over and over until it is secure in the brain's library of ready answers. The child is far more likely to make a confident response if s/he has already thought out the answer.

Every child worries. It's a part of making sense of the world and becoming independent. Learning to cope with challenges builds confidence & self-esteem. Kidscape aims to help children to recognise and deal with a variety of potentially dangerous situations including coping with strangers or known adults who might try to harm them.

Kidscape believes that just as we teach children to cross the road safely we need to talk to them about 'stranger danger' in relation to the maturity and sensitivity of the individual child. The best gifts that we can give them are the skills and assurance that will send them safely into the world.'

First published at PACT (2013) online.

**Suzy Lamplugh Trust**

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust aims to raise awareness of the importance of personal safety and to help people to avoid violence and aggression and live safer, more confident lives (see [www.suzylamplugh.org](http://www.suzylamplugh.org)).

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust has produced many materials which aim to teach children how to ensure their safety in different situations, for example when at home alone, when on the street alone, when on public transport, when with friends or family, when walking home from school, and when online (see '*Think Personal, Think Safety, Think You: Growing Up Safely*').

Some safety strategies cut across different, potentially dangerous, situations, for example teaching children to trust their instincts when something does not feel right, to shout for help and make noise, to be aware of their surroundings, to plan ahead to avoid dangerous environments, and to look confident. These are complimented with practical safety tips, for example keeping belongings safe and out of sight, travelling in groups, avoid wearing earphones when outside, not getting into anyone's car unless there is a prior arrangement to do so, travelling in well-lit areas etc.

The charity also produces school quizzes and materials for teachers and professionals.

**Suzy Lamplugh Trust comments:**

'Suzy Lamplugh Trust believes that it is not helpful to promote the "stranger danger" message to children because a) it implies that all those who are not strangers are therefore safe, which is misleading and b) it puts the onus on the child to decide if someone is a stranger or not.

Whilst the danger can come from a complete stranger, many child abductors are "known" to the victim in some capacity – whether that's someone who lives in their street/a father of a school friend/ someone who works in the local shop/garage etc. We therefore feel that promoting the message to children that 'they should never go anywhere with anyone unless a parent/carer/or their school knows about it' is far clearer and easier to follow for the child.

This message covers all options but takes the onus off the child to decide who is and who isn't safe and also prevents scaring them.'

First published at PACT (2013) online.

***Devon Child Assault Prevention Project***

Devon Child Assault Prevention Project (CAP) is a schools-based project that works with the whole school community towards reducing children's vulnerability to abuse (see [www.devoncap.org.uk](http://www.devoncap.org.uk)).

Devon CAP runs a three year rolling programme of workshops revisiting schools to build on the initial workshops with whole school assemblies. A special needs programme is also available.

The programme includes staff training and workshops to inform parents about the children's workshops and how they can support children to be safe.

Children's workshops provide children with the ability to recognize unsafe situations and the confidence to act on them, so that they can stay safe, strong and free. Practical strategies based on assertiveness, peer support and finding trusted adults are used to tackle different issues including bullying, stranger assault and abuse from familiar adults.

The workshops deliberately steer clear of the traditional 'stranger danger' approach. Staff asserted that teaching children not to talk to strangers is unrealistic, confusing and disempowering as it hinders their ability to interact with people both in safe and unsafe situations.

**Devon Child Assault Prevention Project comments:**

'CAP takes a fresh approach to assault prevention, aiming to reduce fear by focusing on what children can do, rather than on what they can't.

When we teach a child how to cross a road, we focus on how they should cross a road safely, not on the graphic details of a road accident. When we teach children how to swim, we do not focus on drowning. In the same way, the CAP project takes a fresh approach to actual or potential assault situations by focusing on a child's rights and the positive action they can take in unsafe situations.

Our workshops are designed to build children's confidence and self-esteem, and are lively and fun. Children learn through drama and discussion with trained facilitators, about their rights to safety, strength and freedom. We encourage them to be proud of these rights and to respect the rights of others. Through the workshops they learn that they have the ability to protect themselves in unsafe situations. They learn they have a right to say no, and are encouraged to talk to somebody they trust.

The workshops are delivered in a curriculum appropriate way, according to the age and understanding of the children. Very young children use puppets with more repetition and music; the older children have a chance to explore the concepts in greater depth and problem-solve the enacted situations.'

**Online resources**

Numerous websites and online organisations/communities host information on 'stranger danger' and child safety. Whilst this research did not seek to undertake a detailed review of online materials, two examples highlight some of the contrasting approaches.

Netmums ([www.netmums.com](http://www.netmums.com)) is a UK-based online parenting organisation. Netmums' hosts a page called 'Essential Safety for Kids: Stranger Danger' (see Annex A for content details). The article discusses what a stranger is and some of the difficulties that children can have with understanding this, and offers many practical tips for avoiding dangerous situations and responding when confronted with an unsafe situation.

In addition, the Netmums article begins with a section on perceptions of risk and danger and the prospect of parent's hindering their children's ability to assess risk by over-protecting them:

*It's important that children learn street awareness and road safety, that they understand the importance of their own intuition and know how to deal with potentially dangerous scenarios. But they will need your help and guidance to lead them along the road to a safe and happy independence.*

The article also explores steps to address danger from people known to a child and how to stay safe when online.

In contrast, the article ‘Stranger Danger’ hosted on the [www.mychildsafety.net](http://www.mychildsafety.net) website (see Annex A for content details) offers a more ‘traditional’ approach. The article begins:

*Unfortunately the world is a scary place and there are people out there who prey on children.*

It then goes on to stress the importance of open communication between parents and children and the need to instil confidence, not fear. Thereafter, there is a section on recognising strangers, a comprehensive list of scenarios to aid role play and practical steps to take when a child feels unsafe.

## 4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Stranger child abduction may be relatively rare compared to other forms of abuse or other threats to children's safety, but it does still occur. Whilst the media focus attention often on only the most tragic cases involving murder and/or rape, many hundreds of attempted abductions or suspicious incidents raise anxiety about child safety in local communities.

Following earlier research published by PACT and NCA-CEOP (Newiss and Traynor, 2013) this study sought to discover more about the type of safety information made available to children on stranger child abduction, who delivers or produces it, and the themes and issues raised. Thirty years ago simple 'stranger danger' messages ('don't talk to, go with, or take things from, strangers') were common-place, and even attracted government endorsement in a series of public information films. This research examined whether such an approach still has its place in the modern era.

### Abduction in the context of abuse

Some child safety materials (e.g. leaflets, online articles and some of the prevention programmes examined by US and UK academics in the 1990s) focus specifically on teaching children to recognise the danger posed by strangers and/or to resist lures. In contrast, other approaches (such as the Devon CAP programme and child safety resources produced by national charities) locate the prevention of stranger child abduction within the broader context of abuse and exploitation perpetrated by a range of offenders.

There are probable advantages to both approaches and much will depend on how, and in what format, information or prevention classes are being delivered. For example, teaching children about staying safe in a variety of contexts may provide a more balanced understanding of the actual risk of stranger child abduction compared to, for example, abuse from a family member. Some parents are already concerned that focusing solely on stranger child abduction can detract attention away from the greater risk of abuse perpetrated by someone known to the family.

In addition, the contributions made by all voluntary sector organisations stressed the common aspects of child safety, for example instilling confidence, helping children to recognise dangerous situations, taking action to resist would-be perpetrators and telling a trusted adult about unsafe situations they have experienced. These are skills that doubtless are key to keeping children safe across many different scenarios, for example when online, when with someone known to them, and when confronted by a stranger.

However, stranger child abduction presents a specific context in which generic safety skills need to be applied. Whilst there is debate about the utility of teaching children to differentiate strangers from non-strangers as a means of managing risk (see below) raising awareness of different types of lures gives children real-life examples of how to recognise a dangerous situation. It seems sensible that child safety programmes which tackle multiple forms of abuse include some of the 'scenario specific' aspects of stranger child abduction.

Finally, in practical terms, parents may opt to talk to their children about different risks at different times. Often their communication with children might be a reaction to national or

local news stories or concerns in their local area. Or it may reflect parent's appreciation of their child's maturity to learn about specific risks or aspects of child safety. Either way, it seems prudent that materials are available to help parents talk to their children about specific risks, for example stranger child abduction and strategies for dealing with them.

## Delivery and resources

Previous research would appear to indicate that children acquire and retain personal safety information through engaging in interactive training sessions. Role play, rehearsal and discussion are examples of the behavioural skills training methods advocated by academics in the 1990s and delivered currently by projects such as the Devon Child Assault Prevention Project.

It's doubtful that all children in the UK are receiving this standard of support. Some schools still deliver 'stranger danger' lessons, but not all. Some schools take a reactive approach, talking to children in assemblies if a local incident raises concerns. The police and Police Community Support Officers may play a role in delivering classes in some areas, though their training to do so may be limited.

Nearly all schools reported a high degree of focus on teaching children to stay safe when online. Lesson plans, teaching aids and information resources on online safety appear to be commonly available. Both teachers and police respondents told of a lack of materials for teaching children about child abduction.

Aside from safety strategies and materials, it was apparent that teachers and parents lacked clear information on the basic facts about child abduction, particularly about how often it happens. Myths about stranger child abduction persist, either that it does not really happen at all, or that it happens a lot but the public do not get to hear about it. It would appear that even a basic 'facts and figures' information resource would be helpful.

Talking to children about such difficult subjects as stranger child abduction is not easy. Parents are concerned about scaring children and about protecting their innocence. Approaches that help parents 'find the language' to talk about sensitive subjects (e.g. the NSPCC 'PANTS' campaign) may offer valuable lessons for the development of materials specifically on stranger child abduction.

## Beyond stranger danger

There can be little doubt that 'stranger danger' approaches to child safety are still common place. Some schools and police seem to quite readily translate concern about stranger child abduction into a traditional 'stranger danger' safety strategy based on differentiating strangers from non-strangers (or safe strangers) and instilling simple rules: 'don't talk to, don't go with, don't take things from – strangers'. The same approach is reproduced in a host of online articles.

In contrast, some voluntary organisations, whilst not entirely eliminating the language of strangers, non-strangers and safe-strangers from their work, certainly appear to have relegated its importance. In part this reflects broader approaches to child safety, for example through teaching children to recognise unsafe situations by trusting their instincts.

However, it also reflects very real concerns about how useful and practical the distinction between a stranger and non-stranger is. For example:

- Even older children seem to struggle to distinguish a stranger from a non-stranger; hence some child safety materials emphasise that 'nice-looking' and kind-sounding people are still strangers.
- It can be difficult to be consistent in the application of 'stranger danger' 'rules', for example parents may encourage children to talk to the 'little old lady' at the bus stop.
- Teaching children to be wary of strangers may have the effect of limiting their options for finding help, for example if they become lost or feel unsafe; hence child safety materials sometimes distinguish 'safe strangers'.
- Teaching children that strangers may be dangerous may distract them (and their parents) from the greater risk posed by people known to them.
- Resisting lures requires children to overcome socialisation processes that reward being helpful and obedient to adults. Distinguishing stranger from non-strangers may interfere with this higher priority safety task.

Whilst this study involved interviews with only a small number of parents (with no claim to any broader representation of parents in general) it was striking that many were quick to highlight these limitations. Some accepted that talking to children about strangers was a natural starting point for a conversation on staying safe, but tempered their advice with broader statements, such as 'don't go with *anyone*'. Others felt quite strongly that 'demonising' strangers was wrong, highlighting wider implications for how children – and later when they become adults – interact in society.

It's important to note that there appears to be little scientific evidence about the relative effectiveness of safety strategies that place different emphases on the stranger/non-stranger distinction. Whilst there appear to be good reasons to be cautious about a simple 'stranger danger' rules-based approach further research is needed to test the success of alternative approaches to keeping children safe.

### Content of child abduction safety advice materials

Annex A shows the content of various materials – school lesson plans, letter to parents, police web pages, and web pages of parenting organisations – produced to help parents keep their children safe from child abduction.

As well as a focus on strangers, there is, to varying extents, content on:

- avoidance behaviours: for example 'never accept sweets from a stranger', 'never get in a car with a stranger', 'never play in a dark or lonely place', etc.;
- recognising dangerous scenarios and behaviours: for example someone offering a child a lift home, someone claiming to have been sent by the child's parent, teaching children to trust their instincts, etc.;
- response when in danger: for example 'yell, run, tell', find a 'safe stranger', self-defence, etc.;



- broader measures to keep children safe: for example knowing where your child is, not keeping secrets, etc.;
- teaching and learning: for example rehearsing scenarios ‘what would you do if...’, showing children safe places, practising yelling, etc.

Previous research indicates that children more easily acquire ‘motor behaviour (the ‘run’ from ‘yell, run and tell’) than they do the ‘reporting behaviour (the ‘tell’). Given that ‘running’ (and other related motor behaviours, such as ‘not going’) secures a child’s immediate safety, it seems wise that these should play a prominent part of any future safety materials.

The written materials summarised in Annex A generally offer more content on avoidance behaviours and response when in danger, than they do on recognising dangerous scenarios and behaviours. As well as generic skills such as teaching children to trust their instincts, it’s important that children are made aware of different types of lures that perpetrators may use, and strategies for responding accordingly.

## Fear

Nearly all respondents in this research – parents, teachers, police, PCSOs and voluntary sector workers – expressed concern about children’s, and parents’, anxiety and levels of fear. Many shared a sense that whilst the impact of stranger child abduction can be devastating, it happens relatively rarely, and that measures intended to safeguard children in unusual events should not detract from children’s ability to interact with other people and their surroundings in their everyday life.

The enormous media attention given to rare, but often tragic, cases of child abduction can elevate fear and anxiety. Yet it can also provide a basis for building a dialogue with children about risk and how they can, increasingly as they get older, protect themselves. To achieve this, parents, teachers, voluntary sector workers and children themselves, need clear information about risk and practical suggestions for helping children to recognise dangerous situations and take the right action when confronted by them. As Kraizer *et al.* (1988) suggest, preparing children can serve to prevent both the fear and reality of child abduction.

## Evidence and further research

An important finding from this study is that relatively little scientific research appears to have been conducted into effective abduction prevention strategies in recent years. Important knowledge gaps exist, for example:

- How have children’s perceptions of a stranger (and more broadly of safety and danger) changed with their increasing use of social media and online applications?
- How should education strategies tackle the threat of abduction ‘on the street’ together with that instigated online?
- Are children best assisted to adapt and maintain abduction avoidance behaviours by being taught about abduction on its own, or is there greater merit in teaching children about staying safe from a broader range of abusive situations (e.g. abuse in the home)?

- Which factors (e.g. frequency of education classes, self-esteem) ensure that children maintain abduction avoidance behaviours, and what are the practical implications for education strategies?
- How can parents most effectively help their children to adapt and maintain abduction avoidance behaviours?

As new safety materials and models of delivery are developed it is imperative that they are rigorously tested to ensure that they offer real improvements to children's actual behaviour when faced with an abduction scenario.

## Education and broader prevention strategies

This study has focused on how parents, teachers and the police *educate* children about staying safe from child abduction. As the report indicates, the success of education prevention strategies rests on many factors. Children need to be exposed to the right educational content, delivered in a format and environment that enables them to gain not just knowledge but – more importantly – to acquire the right abduction avoidance behaviours, and to maintain them.

Whilst there is sufficient evidence to be sure that education plays an important part in promoting children's safety, it is not necessarily the only effective abduction prevention strategy. A broader abduction prevention framework might also include, for example, strategies to tackle offender behaviour, the role of police and criminal justice agencies, community involvement and engagement, and environmental measures such as street lighting and surveillance of public places. Consideration of these factors has been outside the scope of this study, and should form the basis of any further work to develop comprehensive abduction prevention strategies.

## Recommendations

This study offers the following five recommendations:

1. Clear information on the scale and nature of child abduction should be accessible nationally (this requirement will be progressively met by the setting up of the online Child Abduction Hub this year).
2. New safety materials to help teachers and parents talk to children about stranger child abduction should be developed, tested and made widely available.
3. These materials should consider carefully the degree to which advice to children should take account of the different types of abduction to which they may be vulnerable, e.g. stranger, non-stranger and parental.
4. Schools, police, local authorities and other agencies should review the strategies employed locally to keep children safe from stranger child abduction, in light of the findings of this study.
5. Further research as described above should be set in train without delay.

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## Annex A

### Examples of information resources from various sectors

Agency/ resource	Stranger focus?	Avoidance behaviours	Recognising dangerous scenarios and behaviours	Response when in danger	Broader measures to keep children safe	Teaching and learning
<b>SCHOOLS</b>						
Primary school in Midlands, letter to parents citing US National Crime Prevention Agency advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most strangers are nice, but not all.</li> <li>A stranger is anyone that your family doesn't know well.</li> <li>You can't tell bad strangers from good strangers by looking at them, therefore be careful around all strangers.</li> <li>Not all strangers are bad – some can be a source of help.</li> <li>Safe strangers include police officers, firefighters, teachers, librarians.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage your children to play with others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teach children to trust their instincts.</li> </ul> <p>Examples of suspicious behaviour, when an adult asks a child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to disobey their parents</li> <li>to keep a secret</li> <li>for help</li> <li>in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable.</li> </ul> <p>Examples of dangerous scenarios:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a man wants help trying to find dog in park</li> <li>a woman invites you for a snack in her house</li> <li>a stranger asks if you want a ride home</li> <li>a child thinks s/he is being followed</li> <li>a car pulls over and asks for directions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'No, Go, Yell, Tell'.</li> <li>If in a dangerous situation, kids should say no, run away, yell as loud as they can, and tell a trusted adult what happened right away.</li> <li>Teach your child to be assertive.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents should know where your child is at all times.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Help children recognise safe strangers by pointing them out when you're out in your town.</li> <li>Show children places they can go if they need help (e.g. stores, restaurants, family friends etc.).</li> <li>Practice yelling to keep safe.</li> </ul>

Agency/ resource	Stranger focus?	Avoidance behaviours	Recognising dangerous scenarios and behaviours	Response when in danger	Broader measures to keep children safe	Teaching and learning
<b>SCHOOLS</b>						
Primary school in North-West England, letter to parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Phrase 'Stranger Danger' highlighted in bold.</li> <li>No definition or discussion of stranger.</li> <li>Stranger Danger is also about knowing who to trust if they need help, e.g. police officer or teacher.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Never accept gifts or sweets from a stranger.</li> <li>Never get in a car with a stranger.</li> <li>Never go anywhere with a stranger.</li> <li>Never go off on your own without telling your parents or a trusted adult.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teach children to have confidence to trust their instincts if they have a bad feeling about a place or person.</li> <li>Teach children to be aware of their surroundings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teach children to be assertive.</li> <li>Children should tell a trusted adult if they have been approached by a stranger.</li> </ul>	<p>Parents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early age sex education means children have a better idea about what is and is not appropriate.</li> <li>Encourage family members to be open with each other, to avoid children feeling obliged to keep secrets.</li> <li>Parents should be careful about the type of adults they allow in to the home.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All parents and carers should talk to their children.</li> <li>Link to netmums information.</li> </ul>
Primary school in South-East England, lesson plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesson called 'Stranger Danger'.</li> <li>What is a stranger and what do they look like, c.f. ITV Daybreak programme.</li> <li>Who is a safe stranger (police, fireman, nurse etc.) and how do we know they are safe (uniform, name badge, safe building e.g. GPs).</li> <li>Why shouldn't we talk to strangers?</li> <li>What to do if a stranger talks to us.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Never accept gifts or sweets from a stranger.</li> <li>Never accept a lift in a car from a stranger.</li> <li>Never open the door to a stranger.</li> <li>Never go anywhere with a stranger.</li> <li>Never go off on your own without telling a parent or trusted adult.</li> <li>Never play in dark or lonely places.</li> <li>Stay with your group of friends – never wander off on your own.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Yell, Run, Tell'.</li> <li>It's OK to scream.</li> <li>Run towards shops or busy places.</li> <li>If you think you're being followed go into a shop or knock on the door of a house and seek help.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of Daybreak programme.</li> <li>Whole class discussions.</li> <li>Create a stranger danger poster.</li> </ul>

Agency/ resource	Stranger focus?	Avoidance behaviours	Recognising dangerous scenarios and behaviours	Response when in danger	Broader measures to keep children safe	Teaching and learning
<b>POLICE</b>						
West-England police force, internet page	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Titled 'Stranger Danger'.</li> <li>• A stranger is someone you don't know.</li> <li>• Most strangers are nice, but some are nasty and want to hurt children.</li> <li>• You can't tell a good guy from a bad guy by just looking at them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Never go with a stranger.</li> <li>• Never take things from a stranger.</li> <li>• Never get in a car with a stranger.</li> <li>• Never go off on your own.</li> <li>• Always play with other children.</li> <li>• Make sure you tell your parents or carer where you are.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Yell, Run, Tell'.</li> <li>• If you can't go home, tell someone you trust, e.g. a police officer, a teacher, an adult you know well.</li> </ul>		

Agency/ resource	Stranger focus?	Avoidance behaviours	Recognising dangerous scenarios and behaviours	Response when in danger	Broader measures to keep children safe	Teaching and learning
<b>ONLINE RESOURCES</b>						
<p>Netmums (online parenting organisation)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A stranger is anyone that they do not know.</li> <li>They can be male, female, young, old – it doesn't matter how smartly dressed they are or how polite and well-meaning they appear – any person unknown to your child who approaches them for no reason (unless your child is in obvious distress, has had an accident or is lost) could pose a danger.</li> <li>A safer stranger is a person who is working in a job which helps people. They are usually wearing a uniform (which is a quick and easy way for your child to identify them) and could be police officers, police community support officers, traffic wardens, shopkeepers, check-out assistants, paramedics and others.</li> <li>Safer buildings, meanwhile, could be banks, post offices, libraries, medical centres, shops, supermarkets, leisure centres and others. There will often be a reception desk and there will be someone there to help you.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Never accept gifts or sweets from a stranger.</li> <li>Never accept a lift in a car from a stranger.</li> <li>Never go anywhere with a stranger.</li> <li>Never go off on your own without telling a parent or trusted adult.</li> <li>Never go up to a car to give directions - keep away so that no one can get hold of you and you can run away.</li> <li>Never play in dark or lonely places.</li> <li>Stay with your group of friends - never wonder off on your own.</li> <li>Never agree to do a job for someone you don't know in return for money - they may be trying to trick you.</li> <li>Make sure your parents know where you are going and when you will be back. If your plans change be sure to tell your parents.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If a situation or someone is making them feel uncomfortable make sure your child understands they should always act on their instincts and get as far away from the source of their discomfort as quickly as possible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remember the Yell, Run, Tell rule - it's okay to run and scream if you find yourself in danger. Get away from the source of danger as fast as you can.</li> <li>If you find yourself in danger always run towards shops or other busy places with lots of people.</li> <li>If you think that you are being followed, go into a shop or knock on the door of a house and ask for help.</li> <li>Any person your child does not know, who approaches them or tries to offer them a lift should be ignored and your child should quickly walk or run away from them.</li> <li>Always tell a trusted adult if you have been approached by a stranger.</li> <li>Have a family code-word. Tell your child that if anyone tries to collect them from school or anywhere else - including someone they know - that person must tell them the code-word. If they don't know the code-word, your child should not get into the car.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children should always tell you if anyone - including someone they know - touches them in a confusing or frightening way. No one - including friends or family - should ever ask them to keep kisses, cuddles or touches secret.</li> <li>Trust your own instincts, too. If someone makes you uncomfortable and you don't like your children being around that person, go with your instinct, even if you feel you are being silly or untrustworthy.</li> <li>If your child seems uncomfortable around somebody you know, try to find out why.</li> <li>Section on staying safe online and self-defence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Go on 'walkabouts' with your child, looking out for safer strangers and safer buildings on the way, so that your child gets to know your locality and feels confident and at ease. Then talk to your child about how they might put the code into practice.</li> </ul>



Agency/ resource	Stranger focus?	Avoidance behaviours	Recognising dangerous scenarios and behaviours	Response when in danger	Broader measures to keep children safe	Teaching and learning
Mychildsafety.net	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Titled 'Stranger Danger'.</li> <li>• A stranger is someone you hardly know or do not know at all. People that they see frequently in your neighbourhood or community, but do not know, may be just as much a stranger as someone they have never met before or have never seen.</li> <li>• Children need to understand the difference between 'good' and 'bad' strangers.</li> <li>• Examples of 'good' strangers (who can help) are police officers, security guards, teachers, store clerks, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If a stranger approaches you, you do not have to speak to him or her.</li> <li>• Never approach a stranger in a motor vehicle. Just keep walking.</li> <li>• Do not accept candy or any other items from a stranger.</li> <li>• Never walk off with a stranger no matter what he or she tells you.</li> <li>• Use the buddy system – avoid walking anywhere alone.</li> <li>• Trust your instincts – if something is not right, seek help immediately.</li> <li>• Don't answer the doorbell when home alone.</li> <li>• Don't answer the phone when home alone.</li> </ul>	<p>Scenarios for role play:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Waiting for the school bus your child is approached by a stranger who says 'your Mum is sick and she asked me to come and pick you up and take you home'</li> <li>• Child is home alone and the doorbell rings</li> <li>• Child is home alone and the phone rings</li> <li>• Child is playing an online game and a player asks for her real name.</li> <li>• Your child is outside riding his bike when a car begins to slowly follow along</li> <li>• Your child is outside playing when a stranger driving by stops his car and asks if she has seen his lost dog (or for directions to the nearby elementary school, or for the time, etc.).</li> <li>• Your child is standing outside the local movie theatre waiting for you to pick him up. A stranger offers him a ride. He declines, but the stranger attempts to pull him towards the stranger's car.</li> <li>• Your child is at the local playground when an unfamiliar adult calls out to her by name. The adult asks her to come over to talk with him.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If approached by a 'bad' stranger who tries to lure or physically pull them away, children should get the attention of other adults by, e.g. running to the nearest home, or making enough noise to be heard by someone.</li> <li>• If someone is following you try to remember the license plate of his or her vehicle and immediately tell a trusted adult.</li> <li>• If a stranger grabs you, do everything you can to stop him or her from pulling you away or dragging you into his or her car. Drop to the ground, kick, hit, bite, and scream. Do whatever it takes to attract the attention of others who can help you. If someone is dragging you away, scream, 'this is not my dad' or 'this is not my mom'.</li> <li>• Have a code word to identify people acting on behalf of parents.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children should know their own name, address, and phone number.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addressing stranger danger requires open, ongoing communication between parents and children.</li> <li>• Instil confidence rather than fear.</li> <li>• Base lessons upon child's age and maturity.</li> <li>• Adopt conversations as your child grows as s/he is likely to encounter different situations.</li> <li>• The best way to teach stranger danger lessons is through role-playing scenarios.</li> </ul>

