

Communicating Awareness for Safety

By JoJo Tabares

There is a knock at the door and your teenager opens it to find a young man standing there asking if the old car that is parked in your driveway is for sale. Your son is home alone for an hour when the phone rings and on the other end is a wrong number. You and your young children are walking in a parking lot at night when you hear footsteps behind you . . .

Each of these scenarios can lead to disaster, but here are some things you can do and say that will communicate to a thief that you or your children are not worth the trouble.

Criminals are generally a pretty lazy bunch, or they would go out and work for their money like the rest of us! They usually pick on people they think are weak, unaware, or easy prey, because they don't want to chance getting caught or hurt. They usually rely on the element of surprise to catch their victims off-guard in order that they will be unprepared. This is their greatest asset. Knowing this is *your* greatest weapon against them.

The way you walk and how you answer the phone/door communicates how aware and savvy you are. The idea is not to give the bad guy any more information than he already has and to show that you are fully aware of all that is going on in your surroundings. If you do that, the likelihood is that Mr. Criminal will choose another victim.

Tips for communicating awareness at the door:

1. Children should avoid answering the door if at all possible—even teenagers.

This makes it appear that an adult is not at home and can give the visitor the upper hand whether it is true or not. Children are not as ready or able to deal with people they don't know and can get flustered in situations they are unfamiliar with. What is your 14-year-old going to say to this man asking about your old car?

2. Always look through the peephole or window before opening the door.

If it is a stranger, size him up. Is he carrying a clipboard? Is he wearing a uniform of some sort? Does he look menacing to you? Use your intuition and common sense.

3. Never give out any more information than the visitor already has.

He knows your address, your car, and now he knows what you look like. Don't give him any more information that he can use against you. If you tell him that you still use the car for work, he now knows how to tell when you are not at home. Do not tell him how many people live in the house because then he knows how many to watch out for. Do not tell him who the car belongs to . . . "Oh that car is my brothers, but he is away at college." Now he knows that you have a brother and that the car is probably not used. It is amazing what information you can give this man just by answering his questions. And *never* admit that you are alone or even who is not

at home. "My brother isn't home right now, but I can have him call you if he wants to sell it." Do you see all you have told him?

Many years ago, I was asked this very question about my car that I drove to college and back in. I inadvertently gave him all the information he needed to be able to tell when the house was empty. He had been watching our house for weeks and then broke in when the last person had left that day. My mother happened to forget something and found him in the house! Thankfully this man found a safe route out of the house and didn't stop to hurt my mother.

4. Just because someone asks a question doesn't mean that it's your obligation to answer!

You can simply say that you are not selling it and close the door. If he continues to ask questions, it is perfectly within your rights not to answer. You can tell him that point blank or, if you prefer, you can simply say that you have to go now (have something on the stove, have to make a phone call, whatever).

5. Be careful about letting strangers into your house.

If you have an appointment with the air conditioning repair man, fine; but unexpected strangers are a different story. I make it a policy never to let unexpected strangers into my house. I don't feel comfortable letting a man that I don't know into the house when my husband is not at home. Even if a scheduled repair man is coming into my home, I do not allow my children to be in the same room alone with him.

There was a story a few years back of a woman who let an unexpected repair man into her home and left her baby crawling around near him while she went to finish the dishes in the kitchen. He kidnapped the baby. Don't give a stranger the opportunity to hurt your family!

Tips for communicating awareness on the phone:

1. Children should not be allowed to answer the phone until they are trained in telephone safety.

It is cute to have your 4-year-old answer the phone when relatives call, but is your 4-year-old savvy enough to avoid telephone safety pitfalls? Will she remember that you told her not to say that Daddy is on a business trip for two weeks?

2. Never give out your family name or phone number to anyone you don't know.

Caller: "Is Josh there?"

You: "There is no Josh here. You have the wrong number."

Caller: "What number did I dial?"

Don't tell them what number they dialed. Ask them to tell you what number they wanted!

You: "What number did you want?"

Caller: "909-555-1212. Who is this?"

Never give out this information!

You: "I'm sorry. You have the wrong number." (And hang up—even if they don't.)

Tips for communicating awareness when walking:

1. Walk with confidence.

Hold your head up and walk with purpose from place to place—especially at night. This communicates that you are strong and have a plan about where you are going.

2. Walk with your keys in your hand.

Preferably with the key between your fingers poised to use as a weapon if needed. This shows that you are ready to get into your car or house as soon as you get there. And it gives our villain a lot less time to do any mischief.

3. Look around you.

Notice what is around you at all times. This communicates that you are aware of your surroundings. It is much more difficult for Mr. Criminal to use the element of surprise to catch you off-guard if you are aware of things that are going on around you. And it helps you to identify when you may be in danger so that you can take the necessary actions.

4. Look under and all around your car as you approach before getting in.

This tells our perpetrator that you are further aware. It also helps you identify any potential problems where you are headed and normally feel safe.

5. Train your children to follow a command.

If there is ever trouble afoot, you should have your children trained to follow a simple order you give that tells them to get into the car immediately. Have the older ones get in themselves as you put any babies or toddlers in car seats. Communicating awareness is essential for safety these days. It is imperative also that you train your children to be aware of their surroundings and to respond to a rehearsed command that you have in case the situation warrants.

Biographical Information

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