

## HOW TO MAKE KIDS CRIME-CONSCIOUS

by Beth Cooper

THANDIWE Koba\* will never forget the morning that her eight-year-old daughter saw a murdered man lying in the street outside their home. Neighbourhood children were crowded around the victim, who had been stabbed sometime during the night.

“Nobahle didn’t cry or scream. She just stared, saying nothing,” says the Eastern Cape administrative assistant. “Afterwards, she kept asking me about knives and bad people. I didn’t know what to say to her. What do you say?”

We live in a violent society. Everyone knows somebody who has been affected. As parents, how do we protect our children from “bad people” and events? What can we do to lessen their chances of becoming a victim - and how do we heal youngsters whose lives have already been damaged by crime?

While most of us would prefer not to think about our children ever having to deal with negative incidents or individuals, the fact remains that we should take proactive steps to empower them.

“Prevention is key,” says Johannesburg educational psychologist Sheryl Cohen, a mother of four.

“Stranger danger and safety awareness are life skills for both children and adults living in South Africa. This needs to be done as positively as possible, starting with pre-school and primary school children.

“Discuss with your children questions such as : what can we do to keep ourselves safe? How can we keep our bodies safe, our things and our friends? These answers might include closing the swimming pool gate, for example, or getting in and out of the car quickly.

“The bottom line is to focus on solutions and positive actions that can be taken.”

### **Off to a good start**

It’s important to recognise that even babies possess intuitive knowledge and a basic understanding of perceived danger, which manifests from around nine months. This is the basis of a balanced development, resulting in children and teens being informed and confident enough to recognise good and bad situations.

From this age, explains Sheryl, babies become aware of familiar and unfamiliar people. This is commonly known as separation anxiety.

“As parents, we need to allow our children to trust their inner feelings about who feels safe to be with and who does not. Often, parents encourage children to go against their intuition in order to be socialised or civilised.

“This, of course, could leave them in vulnerable situations. If your child has a ‘funny feeling’ about sleeping at a friend’s house, for example, don’t force it, even if he can’t articulate why he feels that way.”

Once we have established respect for a baby’s feelings, we need to continue with the next step : teaching our children to be as crime-proof as possible without causing them too much anxiety or confusion.

Liezl King of the Parent Centre says that children associate the family home with the one place that will keep them safe. The reality, however, is that break-ins and attacks at home happen every day, so your children are potential victims.

As your child grows, establish how much she knows about violence and danger and how she interprets media messages. If she has seen something on television, for example – or, as Nobahle was, been eye witness to a violent event – don’t lie by saying that it won’t happen to your family or downplay it.

Instead, be honest and reassure your child that, while bad things do happen, you will do everything in your power to protect the family.

Implementing safety in the home should be the first step and must be discussed with your child at the level of her understanding, explains Liezl.

Make rules clear from a young age and as your child grows, involve her in the rule-making process.

Some appropriate rules might include :

- Do not open the door to strangers
- Do not talk to strangers on the telephone – call a parent or caregiver
- Do not give out your telephone number, name or address to anybody without asking a parent or caregiver first
- Do not leave the house or garden without a parent’s permission

Sheryl cautions parents not to point out consequences too harshly, as this is likely to increase anxiety.

“If a small amount of anxiety is what you or your child needs, then you can do this (appropriately). For example : if you run across the road you can get hit by a car and it will be very, very sore.

“However, if you have an anxious child who will have nightmares after this information, you’ll need to set certain limits and expectations, but in a more matter of fact kind of way. For example, you will say : the rule is that when you get out of the car, you touch it until mom is ready to hold your hand. Alternatively, say that the rule is to get in and out of the car quickly.”

While crime awareness is your goal, it’s vital to keep an eye on children for signs of anxiety, says Liezl. Symptoms manifest as thoughts (a particular danger or threat), physical problems (stomach aches, headaches, diarrhoea, tiredness or vomiting)

and behaviour (shaking, crying, clinging, pacing, fidgeting and forms of avoidance such as refusing to sleep alone).

### **Safety tips**

The South African police and Kids Health website [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org) offer sound advice to parents. Print out and keep these tips to hand :

- Never go anywhere without a parent's permission – even with someone you know
- Mom or dad must know where you are at all times
- Don't accept gifts from anybody without parental permission
- Never go somewhere alone, especially if you've never been there before.
- Know your home phone number, parents' cell phone and work numbers and home address
- Make sure mom and dad have a clear, recent photo of you.
- Tell your parents if something bad has happened – even if it makes you feel uncomfortable or scared
- Tell your parents if someone offers you a job or asks you for help
- Run away and scream loudly if somebody tries to follow you or get you into a car
- Don't go out wearing clothes on which your name is written so big that people can see it and call to you. Remember – even if someone knows your name, he or she is not your friend unless mom or dad says so.

The internet is also a dangerous new stamping ground for would-be criminals and stalkers. Monitor your children's online chats.

### **Treating trauma**

Many children are victims of trauma as a result of mugging, car hijacking, burglary, rape, assault, car accidents, armed robbery or natural disasters, while others are exposed to it via the media. How we help them to deal with these events is key.

“After a traumatic experience, it's very important to seek psychological assistance to work through the frightening (event),” explains Johannesburg child therapist Orli Zaacks of the Anxiety and Trauma Clinic.

If your child has been traumatised, between 24 and 72 hours after the event is a good time to see a psychologist. Before that, debriefing is usually unproductive, since the body's natural defence mechanisms are on high alert.

“Debriefing helps survivors deal with the negative and uncomfortable, often very painful feelings and behaviour that comes to the surface after a traumatic event,” says Orli.

In Nobahle's case, for example, a comprehensive counselling session would have helped her to deal with her feelings – and given her mother information to use in future.

The first session involves “telling the story” in order to deal with its emotional impact and uses all the senses to re-connect with the images and experience, in order to be able to let it go over time.

Orli says it's common to feel a loss of control over one's life following trauma. Debriefing helps a child to regain that sense of control, integrate the profound personal experience resulting from the trauma and prevent suppression of feelings that could surface as problems later on (often as post-traumatic stress syndrome).

According to Sheryl, if your child has been exposed to trauma, you must allow him the space to express any thoughts, feelings and fantasies that emerge.

“It's also a good idea to find something that he did (or did not do) that was ‘very clever’. For example, you might say : ‘you were very clever to be quiet – that really helped because...’.

“Why is this useful? In trauma, the victim is forced to get in touch with tremendously helpless feelings. When you find a role that empowered the victim, they don't need to feel as helpless or vulnerable and this is enormously comforting.”

### **Stranger danger – the facts**

One of the most terrifying scenarios we'll ever face is the possibility of a child being abducted or kidnapped.

The three types of abduction are :

- When strangers take children away for criminal reasons (sexual assault or ransom, for example)
- A child being stolen in order to live with, and be brought up by, the abductor
- A parent removing a child from another parent's care

In South Africa, abduction becomes kidnapping when the child is taken away some distance from where she was abducted, detained and held for ransom money, or is taken to be kept permanently with the abductee.

A study conducted for the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa reported that Gauteng police deal with more than a dozen kidnappings for ransom monthly.

Studies show that in over 40% of incidents involving kidnapped children, the child dies.

The American Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention profiles a male abductor as follows : average age 27, usually unemployed, works in a low-skilled job and lives alone or with parents.

Source : [www.health24.com](http://www.health24.com)

Educate yourself about what your child needs to know. Many crime incidents are out of our control; often, we're simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, knowledge is power – and what you don't know could harm you.

### **Resources and helpful organisations**

**Sheryl Cohen**, educational psychologist and mother of four. Sheryl offers CDs for purchase on helpful parenting topics such as discipline and questions about life. To order, contact Sheryl on [sheks@icon.co.za](mailto:sheks@icon.co.za)

**The Anxiety and Trauma Clinic** provides specialised psychological treatment for anxiety disorders and trauma-related conditions in children, teenagers and adults without the use of drugs or medication.

The clinic team comprises a psychologist, hypnotherapist, child therapist, play therapist and reflexologist and is affiliated to the Morningside Medi-Clinic.

For more information, contact the clinic on 011-883 4552, visit the website [www.atclinic.co.za](http://www.atclinic.co.za) or email [info@atclinic.co.za](mailto:info@atclinic.co.za)

**TMI Child and Family Unit** (JHB) (011) 481 5103

**Family Life Centre** (011) 788 4784

**Johannesburg Parent and Child Guidance Clinic** (011) 484 1734/5/6

**The Parent Centre** : visit [www.parentcentre.org.za](http://www.parentcentre.org.za) or phone (021) 762 0116

**The Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture** : visit [www.trauma.org.za](http://www.trauma.org.za) or phone (021) 465 7373

[www.health24.com](http://www.health24.com)