Stranger Danger

Teaching stranger danger is undoubtedly a top priority for any parent / carer. Most parents / carers will tell us that teaching an autistic person about this subject can come with extra challenges due to potential social and communication differences. Stranger danger is something that should be consistently addressed, discussed, and revisited as social expectations consistently evolve and as a person ages; with this can come more community involvement, therefore more exposure to many different types of people.

Considerations when teaching a person about stranger danger:

- Define different types of relationships, interactions and intentions involved with different people: A great resource to use when doing this is Relationship Circles (Please see information sheet on relationship circles). Relationship circles give a visual representation of the boundaries between different relationships as well as teaching how to understand different social interactions. You may also want to consider using relationship familiarity rules alongside the relationship circles. When making these with the person you will need to ensure you are clear and concise, outlining what behaviours and responses are appropriate in different scenarios. Please note the effectiveness of resources is variable from person to person, and what may work for one person, may not work for another.

- Teach 'safe' strangers: Daily life puts on us the need to talk to strangers from ordering food at a restaurant to buying a train ticket. Being able to communicate with 'safe' strangers is something a person may need more and more as they get older and become more independent. Because some autistic people can be very rule-based and literal, teaching them not to talk to strangers may result in them refusing to communicate with anybody outside of their family or friendship circle. When out in public identify 'safe' strangers to the person. Once the person becomes familiar with where to expect 'safe' strangers they will be better equipped to know who to go to for help if needed as well as able to anticipate the people who might talk to them such as a cashier.

- Teach and model social skills and boundaries: Something else to consider is the person becoming familiar with strangers and not interacting in a safe way. For example, hugging people they have never met before. In this situation it can help to teach social skills in natural settings.

One way you could do this is through role playing, using different scenarios and contexts so the person can relate. In everyday life you may also consider labelling which social skills you are using and when to the person.

- Talk about others having different beliefs, interests, and intentions: An example of a way to help develop an understanding of this is through a photo comparison activity in which you use a photo of the person and compare them to other people such as family members, schoolteachers, police officers and strangers. Talk about the differences between the two. It's best depending on the person's level of understanding to start off with small differences such as physical and work your way up to more abstract differences. This activity can also be a good opportunity to talk to the person about what to do in the instance of them being lost, talk about appropriate people to go to for help e.g., police officers.