

# Protecting Your Kids at School

A parent's worst fear is for one of their children being in harm's way and not being there to protect them. But parents are in potential situations like these every day their kids are sent off to school. There, they could face anything from bullying, to a bus wreck, to sexual abuse, or even an active shooter. In this blog post, we will look at keeping our kids safe while traveling to and from school and how to protect them while they are engaged in their school day.

## Bullying

One study found that 19% of elementary students in the U.S. are bullied. Bullying comes in all shapes and sizes and can be emotionally scarring. Some bullies may use fists, other may use words. It can be the classic "give me your lunch money" or something more modern, like a hurtful social media post. The first step in preventing bullying is recognizing the signs. Then, you can take the appropriate steps with your child to put an end to it.

**Younger kids:** In younger kids, it may only be apparent through the way they act. Perhaps they cry when they leave for school, maybe they are quieter than usual and don't talk about their day. Maybe they aren't eating dinner or seem stressed. Young children may not understand they are being bullied or may be too embarrassed or ashamed to bring it up. Try to get them to open-up and then listen to what they are telling you. Teach them to use the "buddy system" and/or walk away from bullies. Tell your child to always find a teacher if they are being bullied. You should speak to their teacher(s) frequently to ensure that consistent communication is present to stop the bullying.

**Older kids:** With older children, the same signs apply, but also watch for unexplainable bruises or cuts. Always make sure your child understands it's not their fault, and it is NOT okay to be bullied. Ask them if they would like to speak to a teacher or counselor or if they would like you to speak on their behalf. Reiterate the "buddy system". If your child feels truly physically threatened, teach them how to stand up for themselves and what that means. Make sure they understand violence is never the answer, but they should certainly defend themselves if the need arises.

## School Bus

Across the U.S. each weekday, 23 million students depend on buses for school travel. Overall, sending your child to school on a bus is much safer than driving them yourself. But bus stops can pose a real danger.

**Younger kids:** While on the bus, make sure your child understands they are in a moving vehicle and should remain seated. If they have a seat belt, have them buckle up. Explain to them the bus driver is working hard to keep them safe and must focus on his or her driving, therefore ask them to speak in a quiet voice. Children should know the bus driver is the adult in charge while they are riding the bus. While waiting for the bus, stand with them if possible. Make sure they get there early and stand 6 feet back. Instruct them to never walk behind a bus and always make eye contact with the driver before walking in front of it.

**Older kids:** The same steps above apply, but if your child is a teen driver, they need to learn the laws concerning busses. Make sure they know the flashing yellow lights and the red lights/stop sign on the bus mean the same thing as traffic lights. Have them be alert for children crossing the street and never move until the bus does.

## Sexual Abuse –

It's astonishing to know that 75% of all sexual abuse is committed by someone you and your child know and trust, like a family member or close friend. Sexual abuse is not rare... some research shows that 1 out of 4 girls and 1 out of 6 boys will go through some sort of sexual abuse before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Another scary statistic: 23% of cases of sexual assault that are reported are committed by those under 18 years of age. These shocking statistics make it necessary to recognize the early signs of sexual abuse in children.

**Younger kids:** Start preparing them at a young age by teaching them where their private areas are and that NO ONE has permission touch them there. Teach them what kind of touches are "okay" and "not okay". Help them understand what are "good" secrets, like surprises or Christmas gifts, and what are "bad" secrets, like a secret the child may be asked or threatened to keep forever. Instruct them that if someone does try to break their "body rules", they have the right to say "NO!" to that person. If anything happens with another person that makes them uncomfortable, they need to tell a trusted adult immediately, something little kids can certainly understand. Watch for nightmares, anxiety or anger, and unwillingness to be alone with a certain person.

**Older kids:** Instill in both boys and girls that "no means no". If someone tries to push or threaten them into a situation they aren't comfortable with, leave or cause a scene. Tell them just because they *think* it may be trivial or "happens to everyone", it doesn't make it ok. Even slightly older kids may be afraid to report it because of threats from individuals like these to either themselves or their family. They may be afraid of not being believed or be ashamed. Instill in them the importance of reporting it, even if may seem trivial. Self-defense will come in handy here as well.

If you suspect a child has been sexually abused, call the Childhelp® National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4-A-Child.

## Active Shooter

Nothing is more terrifying than thinking about a gunman in your child's school. Since December 2012, when the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School took place, there have been 44 shootings on K-12 and college campuses. Many states have already implemented "active shooter" drills or "human-threat" drills. Texas is one of them.

**Younger kids:** Teach them that there are "bad guys" in the real world, but they aren't like the ones in superhero movies. (Also remind them that police officers keep us safe from the bad guys). Make sure they understand it is highly important to do what their teacher says always. If a teacher asks you to hide in the closet or run across the playground into the building, your child should know to follow instructions. Teach them how to effectively hide.

**Older kids:** Make sure they know what a gunshot sounds like. If you don't own guns yourself, you might want to take your teenage children to a firing range where they can learn about guns in a controlled environment with proper supervision. If they can see a gun, hold it, understand how it works and the damage it can do, it can serve as basis for future learning and experiences. Teach them to always be aware of their surroundings, whether at school, a mall or a restaurant. Know where the exits are. Take second looks at everyone in the room. If they are in a building with an active shooter, teach them Run, Hide, Fight. Running is always your first option. Run *away* from the gunshots and out of the building, being vigilant on the way. Hide only if you can't run and fight only if you can't hide. Explain the difference between *hiding* under a desk and *blocking* a bullet by putting a concrete post or loaded bookshelf between you and the shooter.

While it's certainly terrifying for parents to think about their children alone all day at school in any number of scary situations, gently preparing them for the worst may be some of the best education parents can give.

Please check out the links below for further resources for what to do in an active shooter situation.

<https://www.dhs.gov/private-citizen>

<http://anotherfarfromhome.com/what-every-mom-should-know-in-an-active-shooter-situation/>

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