

mothers who think

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TABLE_TALK

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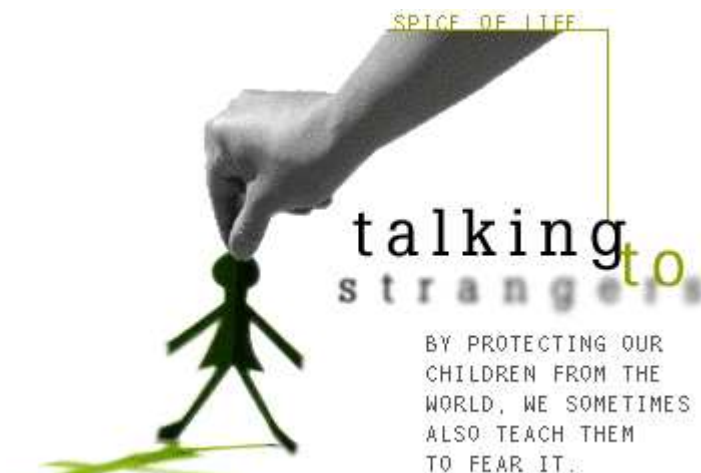
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BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI | **There's** a sign in the kiddie-play area of our local park that reads, "ALL CHILDREN MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY ADULTS, AND ALL ADULTS ACCOMPANIED BY CHILDREN." I used to think of the latter part as a joke, an unexpected example of the city fathers' sense of humor, like the street signs in New York that say "Don't Even THINK of Parking Here." But after last week, I know better.

I like taking my children to the park. It's a good place for them to be in touch with nature, get some fresh air, take out their aggressions on various pieces of play equipment, scream as loudly as they want, mingle socially or be creative individuals, chase birds and squirrels, and get tired and hungry enough that when we get home they're ready for dinner and bed. I also love the fact that at the park they leave me alone so I can slump down on one of the benches and do some children-watching.

I learn a lot from watching children (and sometimes their parents). There's a particular intensity with which they approach every task, whether it's building a sandhill or swinging upside-down from a jungle gym or climbing up the wrong end of a slide to the accompaniment of parental protests. Even the honest -- if sometimes cruel -- way they have of expressing their dislike of other children is an improvement on adult subterfuge. But best of all, I like the way they make friends.

"Want to play catch?" says one.

"Yeah," says the other.

Then they're off, shrieking with laughter as though they've

Mamafesto
Why it's time
for Mothers Who Think

known each other all their lives.

This serendipitous attitude extends itself toward adults as well. Last week I was watching a pretty little girl of maybe 2 and a half, with dark curls and in a short frilled dress. She wanted to swing from a set of monkey bars that were beyond her reach, so she turned to a man standing alone nearby, and held out her arms.

"Pick me up," she commanded.

Who could resist such charming imperiousness? The man obeyed. (I would have, too). The monkey bars were quite high up, and even after she grasped them, he kept his hands around her waist -- probably to keep her from falling. The little girl kicked her legs back and forth. Her dress rode up to her waist and I could see her white panties, printed with red ducks, her dimpled thighs, and a little bit of midriff. She yelled with infectious glee, and the man grinned a big grin.

Suddenly a woman rushed up and snatched the girl away from the man. It was the mother, and her face was splotted with red -- a mix of fear and anger and suspicion. Though she didn't say anything, we all heard the words loud and clear: Get your hands off my child. And her next thought, as she looked around to see if there were any children with him: You pervert. What are you doing here anyway? The child, interrupted and startled, began to cry. As she carried her away, I could hear the mother whisper furiously, "Haven't I told you never to ..." I didn't hear the rest, but I didn't have to. I could finish the sentence for her effortlessly: Never to talk to strangers. It's a sentence I've spoken many times to my own children, Anand and Abhay -- many times more already, though they're only 5 and 3, than my mother ever had occasion to tell me.

We live in a society that fears strangers, particularly in regard to our children. (Ironically, statistics show us that strangers aren't the ones we need to fear most -- but that's another matter.) There's good reason for this fear: the innumerable news reports of kidnapping and abuse and killings, the lost faces that look out at us from the sides of milk cartons. In Abhay's preschool the children are given instructions on what to do if a stranger offers them candy or a ride: kick, scream loudly for help, run to your house or a known adult as fast as you can. The other day Anand came home from kindergarten with a little banner that said, "I want the world drug-free, just like me." He told me we should watch out for weird-looking people on street corners or behind the school playground who might want to give us "stuff." And just last month I read on the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle that some Bay Area school districts are going to distribute maps which will warn parents of the general street locations near schools where registered sex offenders live.

I see the necessity of these measures. As a mother, I

understand completely the fierce protectiveness with which the woman in the park snatched her little girl away from a stranger's hands. Better safe than sorry, she must have thought, and often I've thought the same way.

But sometimes I regret the price we pay for safety: the lost innocence of our children, the rapid slipping away of their carefree childhoods, the way in which we're teaching them not to trust, not to reach out in friendship or need to individuals unless they've been pre-screened and certified appropriate. It's a habit, unfortunately, that once learned can continue into our adulthood, where it might manifest itself in dangerous ways: in our suspicion of those who look different from us, and our quick willingness to blame them for our ills; or in our tendency to hide behind the walls of gated communities which we believe will keep us safe from the world of strangers.

And are we teaching our adults something equally harmful? Don't take risks. Keep to yourself. Look away when someone asks for help. Making a child smile is not worth the trouble it can get you into. That day in the park, I watched the man walk away, his face flushed with anger and shame. I don't know who he was or where he came from. But I could guess quite well how he would react the next time a child he didn't know -- or even an adult -- held out her arms to him.

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