

Intellectual Disability: Safety for Children of School Age

Curiosity and exploration are fundamental to learning, growth and development for all children regardless of their abilities. However, they can also lead children into dangerous situations. Bumps, bruises, scrapes and falls are all part of growing up for an active, curious child and this is no different for a child with intellectual disability who has the same need to explore, climb, run and experiment.



It is important to use caution and carefully supervise all children around sharp objects and utensils, electric appliances, scissors, hot water and when playing with string, ribbons and balloons. Curiosity can lead children to unsafe behaviour such as:

- putting items in electric appliances
- flushing things
- touching hot surfaces
- inserting items into electrical sockets
- playing with matches, lighters or fire.

Most injuries happen in the home. Understanding the causes of childhood injuries helps you know what to look out for, how to keep your child out of harm's way and what to teach your child as he/she gets older. The most common causes for childhood injuries are:

- falls
- poisoning
- burns and scalds
- road and bicycle accidents.

By the time children are of school age, most will have some skills enabling them to solve problems and avoid some of the more basic risks.

A child with intellectual disability needs specific structures and support in place so he/she can explore and play safely. A child with intellectual disability is significantly more vulnerable to injury, which may be due to:

- limitations in thinking skills, including the ability to work things out and remember
- difficulties with attention and organising information
- trouble seeing how things or how events relate to each other
- limited ability to listen and talk.

This could mean a child with intellectual disability is more likely to:

- be mobile but lack understanding of their limits or potential dangers
- have reduced understanding of the cause and effect of their actions
- be more easily distracted
- be more spontaneous in their actions and not think ahead.

For example a child with intellectual disability may have no fear of water and may jump into deep water without knowing how to swim.

Increasing safety

Specific safety considerations and strategies for children with intellectual disabilities include a combination of being consistent, changing the environment, visual supports, teaching skills, giving clear messages, teaching consequences and redirecting.

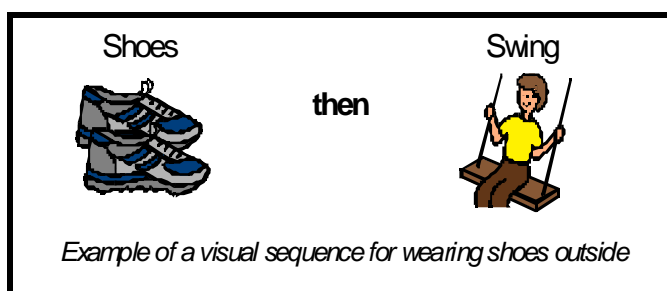
Making the environment safe

For children who are not yet able to understand and follow rules, or who cannot understand dangers and inadvertently put themselves at risk of personal injury, it will be necessary to alter commonly used and potentially dangerous areas. For example:

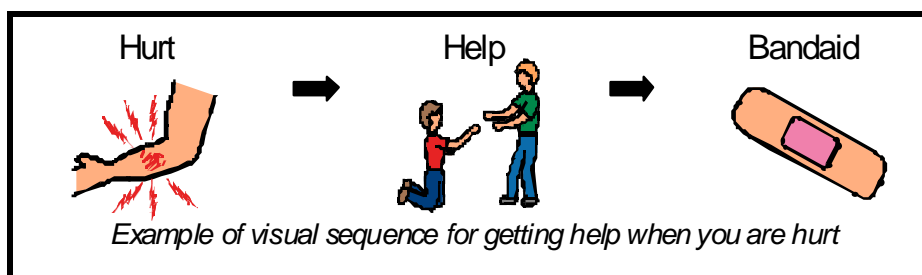
- place child locks on interior doors and cupboards where your child should not have free access
- make safe places where a child can climb
- cover or remove electrical outlets.

Visual supports

For children with intellectual disability, visual sequences make learning easier. They can be used to teach safety skills and help your child understand the steps in an activity, how to do them and what to look out for or what not to do.



A visual sequence may also help your child learn what to do when they're hurt.



Teaching skills

Teach your child each skill in the place where they will use it and model this yourself. For example, if the skill is walking (rather than running) while near the pool, teach them at the pool. Be consistent. Expect your child, other friends and family to model the same behaviour.

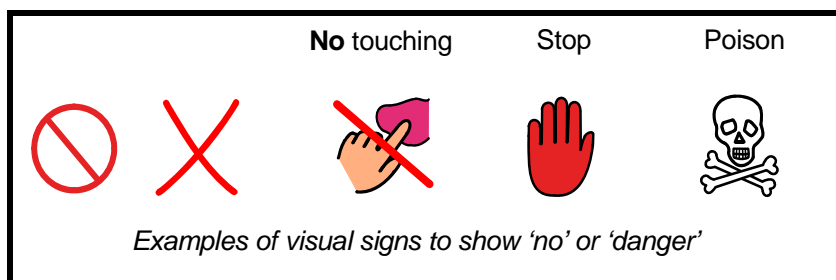
When your child demonstrates safe and appropriate behaviour, acknowledge and praise them for this. For example, "That's good stopping at the road and holding mum's hand".

Teaching consequences

Have consistent consequences for unsafe or inappropriate behaviours. Use the same technique each time, for example, no going outside without wearing shoes. If appropriate, help your child to repair any broken equipment or wipe up any spills and redirect them to something else.

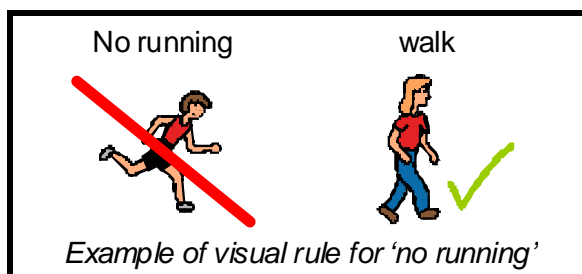
Giving clear messages

Give a clear message when unsafe behaviour occurs. When an unsafe behaviour occurs, a firm clear 'no' is much more effective than a drawn out explanation. Visual signs can also be used to help your child to recognise unsafe or dangerous situations.



Redirecting

Determine the reason for the unsafe behaviour and teach your child an alternative. For example, if your child is climbing on the bookshelf at home, redirect them and show them where they can climb. A visual 'Rule Board' provides clear messages about the rules and what behaviour is acceptable. The rules and alternatives can help your child understand what they are expected to do and what they are not supposed to do.



Support for Parents/Carers

The strategies mentioned here may give you some ideas about how to encourage safety skills in your child. However, remember that different approaches suit different families. If your child continues to have problems learning safety skills you may wish to contact your local Disability Services office for further support.

More information

Children and Safety

- Safe Kids Worldwide: Preventing Accidental Injury
www.safekids.org

Raising Children Network: an Australian parenting website

- School Age Safety: in a nutshell
http://raisingchildren.net.au/safety/school_age_safety.html
- Childhood Injuries: Common Causes
http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/common_injuries.html/context/378

Parenting SA

- Parenting SA home page
www.parenting.sa.gov.au
- Home alone (information sheet)
www.parenting.sa.gov.au/pegs/Peg32.pdf
- Growing and learning in the family (information sheet)
www.parenting.sa.gov.au/pegs/Peg51.pdf

South Australian Kidsafe Centre

Adelaide Women's and Children's Hospital
Telephone: 8161 6318
www.kidsafe.com.au

References

"Understanding Autism" by Susan M Dodd (ISBN 9781 8758 97803)

