

## Keeping kids safe in crowds

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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### PRINT SCRIPT

#### ANCHOR INTRO

As trick-or-treating nears, and with holiday festivals right around the corner, it's important to keep your kids' safety at the top of mind.

But you don't have to wait until you get to the event to have a safety plan in place. Dr. Kyle Boerke, a clinical psychologist with OSF HealthCare says conversations should be had before leaving the house.

"Those conversations should surround what I call the 'proximity rule' or the 'distance rule.' There are going to be different distance rules for different settings," Dr. Boerke says. "If I'm going to an event that's going to be very crowded, that proximity rule should probably be for younger aged kids to be holding their caregiver's hand."

Dr. Boerke says when it comes to kids running off and playing with their friends, it all depends on the comfort level of the parents. He adds that in some cases, it's OK to allow the proximity rule to become an "area rule."

"If I know the parents of my kid's friend fairly well, I'm more comfortable letting my kiddo go and sit in that area and play. Because I know there are going to be other responsible adults watching them," Dr. Boerke says. "If it's a family I don't know as much, I'm probably going to be more guarded and keep my child closer."

A tip Dr. Boerke shares is designating a meetup place in case you and your child get separated.

"We're going to have a specified meetup place. I would recommend it to be a large item, like a statue. Or if you're at a fair, pick a certain ride you'll meet at. Don't make it be a particular water fountain or bench, because there's probably 20 water fountains and 40 benches," Dr. Boerke adds.

Another tip? Defining "safe strangers." Decades ago, "stranger danger" was a phrase used by parents around the world. Dr. Boerke says now it's important to be able to identify what a "safe stranger" is in case of emergency.

"A safe stranger is somebody that you don't know, but because of the setting and circumstance, we can consider them safe. Some examples are firefighters or police officers. They're strangers to our kids, but they are safe strangers," Dr. Boerke says. "If we're in a department store, the individual wearing the shirt of that store with the name badge, that's a safe stranger. They work at that location and they're there to help us. If you're at a big event, a security officer or a greeter that is walking people to their seats, that's a safe stranger. When all else fails, the best safe strangers are moms with other kids. If you can find a mom with two kiddos with her, that is a great safe stranger. We want to train our children to approach those people so they can stay safe."

If your child is full of energy and tends to run off easily, Dr. Boerke says it's important to develop stricter guidelines for going out to public events.

"We need to be holding hands, at that point. If you do need to reach into your purse or get your wallet out for something, have them hang on to the belt loop on your pants or hang on to the stroller that you're with. Make sure to set those expectations as early as possible," Dr. Boerke emphasizes.

In case of emergency, you may not be in the greatest headspace and your judgment may be impaired. A way to combat this, especially if you get separated from your children, is to take a photo of them on your phone at the beginning of an event.

"It's great posterity, but more importantly you're getting a picture of what they're wearing that day. So if we do lose track of them, especially when your mindset is not thinking clearly, you might not remember what they're wearing. But if I can pull up that picture I have on my phone, it's going to help me stay calm because I was able to give a good, clear description of what my child is wearing and we just increased the chances they're going to be found," Dr. Boerke says.

As trick-or-treaters hit the streets this fall, Dr. Boerke has some guidance on how to keep your kids safe while still having fun.

"For our younger aged kids, make sure we're going with an adult. For the older aged kids, we want to make sure we have a buddy. Wear bright costumes. If you have a mask, make sure the eye holes are large enough that you can see," Dr. Boerke says. "I recommend flipping that mask up during trick-or-treating when you're not at a house or walking from house to house. That ensures you can see more clearly especially if you're crossing a street, your view won't be constricted by that mask."

Lastly, Dr. Boerke recommends making sure you're only going to houses that have lights on.