

Think your child would never go with a stranger? This chilling experiment proves you are WRONG

Investigation showed fake 'predator' approaching children in the park while their mothers - who had agreed to take part - were distracted

Seven out of nine agreed to go with him thanks to his friendly manner

Parents are urged to remind children that all strangers could pose a threat

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Smiling eagerly up at the stranger he had met in his local play park just a minute earlier, five-year-old Jack bounced from one foot to the other, gleefully.

'Do you want to help me find my lost dog?' said the man. 'His name's Maxie.'

Obligingly, Jack nodded happily. He loved dogs, and so he began to shout at the top of his voice: 'Maxie, Maxie! Crouching down beside the excited Jack, the man started to tell him all about his pet. 'He's called Maxie. He's a little white doggy and he's lost,' he said, as he took a photo of a cute puppy from his pocket.

Then, offering a tennis ball to Jack, he suggested, 'We can try and get Maxie back by throwing his favourite ball. You'll help me, won't you?'

Jack beamed with delight at the thought of helping this lovely man with the smiley face find his lost dog.

Maybe the man would even let him stroke the dog if they found him together.

And so, without a second's hesitation, Jack ran off across the park with this total stranger.

In the time it had taken for Jack's mother to take her eyes off her son and answer an urgent work call on her mobile phone, the stranger had managed to befriend her little boy and tempt him to leave her.

I was watching all this from afar. So why didn't I stop it? Because, thankfully, Jack was never in danger.

His 'abduction' was all part of an experiment I conducted for ITV's Daybreak, where we decided to see if a 'stranger' — in this case, a carefully vetted security guard with children of his own — could lure children away from their parents, while they played in a park in broad daylight.

Being a dad himself, the 'stranger' knew exactly how to play into children's psychology.

As we filmed him, on a sunny afternoon ten days ago, he told the children he needed their help — either to find his little dog, Maxie, or to help hunt for his daughter who was playing hide and seek.

The mothers — all regular users of the park in a leafy London suburb — were all fully aware of what was happening and agreed to pretend they had to answer an urgent phone call on their mobile, and wandered off out of earshot.

Every single mother was confident that she had educated her child about 'stranger danger'.

And every single one was confident that her child would refuse to go anywhere with someone they didn't know.

Yet of the nine children our 'stranger' approached aged between five and 11, seven agreed to go with him. Only two — an eight-year-old boy and an eight-year-old girl — were suspicious enough to refuse.

Our stranger managed to lure one child away in just 33 seconds — that's barely the time it takes

to say hello. The longest time it took for him to convince a child to accompany him was three minutes.

It's been a hugely revealing experiment — and a salutary one.

For we are all so consumed with anxiety about the dangers of the internet and social networking that we risk losing sight of the fact that last year 273 children in Britain were the victims of physical abduction.

But while it's been worthwhile, our experiment has also been hugely distressing. Most of the mothers who took part wept afterwards, shaken by what they had witnessed.

One confessed yesterday that she had barely slept since the experiment.

I, too, was seriously shaken. And I defy any other mother not to feel the same. As I watched Jack wander off, I thought of my own five-year-old son, Daniel, and my daughter, Milly, seven.

I thought of all the times I'd been distracted and taken my eyes off them in a public place, confident that I had taught them enough to keep them safe — and I felt sick.

Would my son be just as trusting? Would he be just as eager to help a man who seemed so friendly?

I thought I'd done all in my power to warn him about the danger of going off with a stranger. But, looking at Jack's actions, I'm not so sure.

My film crew and I were horrified to see little Jack run off so gleefully. But it was even more terrifying for his mother, Natasha, 40, who runs an IT business with her husband, Daniel, 40, and has a younger son, Oscar, three.

She says: 'I've barely slept since this happened. There's no way I will let Jack out of my sight again. It's taught me you simply can't trust a child not to be tricked by a cunning stranger.

'I honestly believed I had done all I could to keep him safe. Jack is a super-aware little boy. He knows all about Madeleine McCann going missing and about little April Jones, who was abducted last year.

WHAT TO TELL YOUR CHILDREN

Here are five simple, yet effective, rules you can use to keep your children safe.

1. Who's who? It's dangerous for your child to think that 'stranger' means someone who looks scary or sinister. They should be taught that a stranger can look nice, too. Play a game with your child and ask them to draw a stranger. Try to reinforce that a stranger can look like anyone.
2. Tell your child never to take risks. They should never talk to a stranger, accept gifts or sweets, and never walk off with someone they don't know. Your child is most vulnerable between ages five and eight, but nine to 11 is also dangerous, as they begin to spend more time alone.
3. 'Don't go, say no.' Teaching your child this simple slogan can help keep them safe. If a stranger approaches, they should say 'No' loudly to draw others' attention.
4. Give them a plan for what to do if you are ever late picking them up from school — such as only ever sending a particular friend's parent to collect them if you can't. Your child should always carry a copy of your home, work and mobile numbers.
5. Practise. Imagine different scenarios with your child and play a game called 'What If?' Only then will they be truly prepared for any eventuality.

'I had told him there are people who will tell lies to try and get him away from his mummy.

Even on our way to the park for the experiment, I reminded him: "Don't talk to any strangers." So I was convinced he would not go off with the stranger — I really thought he'd got the message.

'But as soon as he saw the photo of the missing dog, Jack completely melted. All parents should be aware of how easy it was to sway him.

"When I asked him afterwards why he'd done it, he simply said: "But he isn't a stranger, Mummy. He has a dog."

'We have a dog and Jack is used to greeting strangers who have dogs with me when we take him for walks.

'Adults realise that saying hello to someone on a dog walk doesn't make them a friend. But children don't understand that.

'The whole experience has been an eye-opener.' And, as I said, Jack certainly wasn't the only child who fell for the kindly dog-loving stranger act.

As an experienced mother with five children aged between two and 16, you might imagine that Naomi Clucas, 41, would know exactly what to say to keep her children safe.

But her son Ben, seven, still agreed to go off with our stranger to hunt for his dog.

Naomi, a caterer who lives in Edgware, Middlesex, with husband Rick, 44, a product manager, says: 'Watching Ben waltz off with a total stranger was one of the worst moments of my life. I was pretending to talk on my phone out of eyesight, willing him to stay put, but he didn't.

'I have told him repeatedly not to talk to strangers, so I was utterly flabbergasted. I could see him trying to catch my attention as I pretended to chat away. But when he couldn't catch my eye, he simply walked off with the man.

'The most chilling part was that he honestly didn't think he'd done anything wrong. He told me afterwards: "Mum, the man showed me a photo of his missing dog. He needed my help."

'The man was nice and friendly so Ben didn't see him as a stranger. It's been a huge wake-up call. Like most working mothers, I'm always trying to do 100 things at once, but it's taught me that however grown-up Ben seems, I can't take my eyes off him.'

Another mother we filmed, who preferred not to be identified, admits she made the mistake of only warning her child what to do if a stranger tried to physically abduct him.

'I told him to shout out, kick and scream,' she says. 'But it had never occurred to her to warn her son of the scenario we enacted, one more likely to be used to trick him into walking off voluntarily with a stranger.

Sarah Farrell, 31, from Watford, Herts, was equally confident that her daughter Paige, 11, would refuse to go off with a stranger.

'I've warned Paige and her brother Bobby, eight, not to talk to strangers or accept presents from them, so I was completely confident she would see straight through these lies,' she says

'Even so, just because the man looked nice and had a sob story, she left the play area with him. When I asked her why, she said she didn't want to appear rude.

'I feel terribly guilty. I've obviously failed to get the message across. We've all got so caught up in the dangers posed online that we've forgotten the danger posed on our doorsteps.

'To be fair, Paige did eventually realise her mistake and, as the man took off across the park supposedly to hunt for his missing dog, she ran over to me instead. But it opened my eyes — and hers. She was very upset for letting me down, but I'm the one feeling bad.

'I don't want my children to be rude to strangers, but if it means keeping them safe that's the way it's got to be.'

In a further experiment, which will be broadcast on Daybreak today, it becomes even clearer how inadequate the 'stranger danger' message is.

We showed a group of 11 children, aged between five and 11, a handful of photos of people they had never met before and then asked them which were strangers.

Although all the people were strangers to them, most of the children completely bypassed a photo of a young man who looked as though he could have walked straight out of a boy band. 'He's a teenager. He's not a stranger,' one little boy told me.

Peter Bradley, director of children's charity Kidscape, admitted; 'This scenario is every parent's worst nightmare. It's chilling to see that children think strangers have to be sinister and scary looking. We need to talk to them, tease out how they see things and challenge their views.'

My own children started back at school yesterday. When I picked them up, I listened attentively to all their news. Then I did what I should have done a long time ago. I told them that strangers come in all different shapes and sizes.

They can be smiley and friendly and seem to need our help. But they are still strangers. We

practised the simple advice offered by Kidscape: 'Don't go. Say no.'

The images of all those trusting children willingly being led off by a stranger will haunt me. But I hope by talking to my children I have helped keep them safe.

After all, as much as we'd love never to take our eyes off our children, there's going to be a moment when we're distracted, be it by an unexpected telephone call from your boss, or a chat with a friend.

And when that moment comes, we can only hope that our children know what to do when faced with a friendly man who seems to have lost his beloved dog.