



Archdiocese of Dubuque

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Keeping Kids Safe at Amusement Parks

Alright, I have a confession: On no less than two separate occasions, I have lost a small child at a theme park. And they were both really, really little at the time—we lost my older son when he was just three; we lost the younger one when he was all of four. We did find them, I am relieved to tell you, but only after 20 minutes of mind-boggling terror.

Now you are probably asking how in the world did otherwise responsible parents (we are) who were spending a delightful day focused on their two small children (we were) manage to lose one of their children. Well, in our own defense, amusement parks are tough settings for the best of caring adults: meandering walkways, crowded with people, and a thousand attractions to keep your child—and you—from paying close attention. So if you are heading to a theme park this summer, learn from my own mistakes by considering the following.



Know where the rides end—A few years ago, we lost my older son at Sea World under the most confounding of circumstances. He crawled into a simple plastic tube-maze—the kind of contraption now at every other fast-food restaurant play-place. My husband and I, not keen ourselves about crawling through the maze, headed around to the bottom of the slide at the end and waited. And waited. It was only when our son failed to emerge after 10 minutes that we realized that there were two slides leading out of the maze. Twenty minutes later, with the help of three security guards and about a dozen compassionate parents, we found him playing happily in another part of the park all-together.

The lesson here is simple enough: Know where the rides end. Even with contained rides, such as a log flume, there is often more than one exit. Make sure you have all the bases covered or with older kids, agree to where you will meet.

Discuss the rules—Make sure you have talked with children about what to expect at the park and what to do in an emergency. For younger kids, you may want to explain that while there will be a lot to see and do, they also need to stay close with you. As part of this conversation, make sure

that your kids know what to do if you get separated. For older kids, this may be as simple as having the child call your cell or meet you at an agreed-upon spot.

Brightly-colored shirts—At any crowded place, I make my young kids wear the same shade of a bright-colored shirt—orange, aqua, etc. If possible, my husband and I wear the same color ourselves. I know, I know, it's not the coolest move in the book. But not only will it make your kids easier to spot in a crowd, a distraught young child can point to his or her own shirt to say that “mommy is wearing this color, too.” Once again, this very plan helped us connect with our lost younger son that fateful day at the theme park.

Bathroom safety—Public bathrooms make me really nervous, especially with six and eight year old boys. That said, knowing that my kids will need to use group facilities gives me the opportunity to review lessons about staying safe from sexual predators. More than being strangely paranoid—although I do hope that my fears are never founded—this is just a natural circumstance in which to talk about privacy and safety.

Any child old enough to enter a public bathroom alone should know a few basic safety rules. Your child should know to take care of business and come right out—no playing around, especially with his or her pants down. Your child should know that he or she should not talk with anyone in the bathroom. And, of course, you should have spoken with your child about basic steps to stay safe from sexual abuse—that private parts are covered for a reason and that no one should ask to see theirs, etc.

Make sure your kids can reach you—At an amusement park or any crowded place, make sure that your kids can reach you by phone or walkie-talkie. Slip a note in their pocket or backpack that has your name and the cell phone you have with you that day. With the number of phones parents have these days, even older kids may need to know which number will reach you. And, if your older child were to have a health issue or was crying very hard for some reason, he or she may not be able to provide the number.

We have given each of our boys a necklace that has our cell phone number on it. It is a simple “dog-tag” style that is easy to find on-line or at many larger pet stores. One side has our name and number and the other has a neat design that makes them cool enough to wear.

Well, I wish you a lot of fun at the amusement park, or wherever your summer takes you. Perhaps my own experiences will suggest some practices that will keep your kids safe and your travels as stress-free as possible.

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