



Stranger Danger Awareness in Children with Special Needs: A Meta-Synthesis of Existing Literature

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Abstract

Children with special needs, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and intellectual disabilities, face significant challenges in recognizing and responding to potential dangers posed by strangers. Traditional "Stranger danger" education programs often fail to accommodate their unique cognitive, social, and communication differences, leaving them more vulnerable to unsafe interactions.

This meta-synthesis examines findings from 20 peer-reviewed studies published between 2005 and 2022 to evaluate how children with special needs perceive stranger danger, the effectiveness of existing safety education strategies, and barriers to their implementation. Results indicate that children with developmental disabilities struggle with risk perception, distinguishing safe from unsafe strangers and applying learned safety skills in real-world situations. Conventional verbal instruction proves insufficient, while video modeling, behavioral skills training (BST), social stories, and in situ training with immediate feedback demonstrate greater effectiveness in enhancing abduction-prevention skills. Findings also underscore the critical role of parental and educator involvement in reinforcing learned behaviors. To improve the safety education for children with special needs, future research should focus on developing and evaluating neurodiverse-friendly interventions, assessing their long-term effectiveness, and integrating technology-assisted learning tools. Additionally, policy reforms are essential to enhance training for educators, caregivers, and law enforcement, ensuring a more inclusive and effective approach to child safety.

Keywords: stranger danger, special needs, autism spectrum disorder, behavioral skills training, child safety

1. Introduction

Children with developmental disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and intellectual disabilities, often experience unique cognitive, social, and behavioral challenges that hinder their ability to recognize and appropriately respond to potentially dangerous social situations, including interactions with strangers (Gray & Garand, 1993; Thompson & Johnston, 2013). Despite increased awareness of safety education needs for this population, traditional stranger danger programs often rely heavily on verbal instruction and abstract reasoning, which may not align with the learning profiles of neurodiverse children (Barry & Burlew, 2004; Didden et al., 2000).

Evidence from the behavioral sciences suggests that strategies such as video modeling (Bellini & Akullian, 2007; Cihak, 2011), social stories (Scattone et al., 2006; Chan & O'Reilly, 2008), and in situ training with reinforcement (Odom et al., 1985; Parsons & Reid, 1995) can significantly improve skill acquisition and generalization in children with ASD and other developmental disorders. Furthermore, interventions combining multiple modalities such as video self-modeling paired with social narratives have shown promise in teaching nuanced social behaviors like emotion recognition and situational awareness (Bernad-Ripoll, 2007; Turhan & Vuran, 2015).

This meta-synthesis draws from a wide range of peer-reviewed studies to explore how children with special needs perceive and respond to strangers, evaluates the effectiveness of current safety interventions, and identifies barriers to real-world application. Through this analysis, the study aims to inform more inclusive, empirically supported practices for protecting this vulnerable population.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of existing stranger danger education programs for children with special needs, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD, and intellectual disabilities.
2. To identify the specific challenges children with developmental disabilities face in recognizing, interpreting, and responding to potential stranger-related threats.
3. To examine the role and impact of intervention strategies such as social stories, video modeling, behavioral skills training (BST), and in situ training in improving safety awareness and responses.
4. To explore the influence of caregivers, educators, and peer involvement in the teaching and reinforcement of abduction-prevention skills.
5. To analyze gaps in the literature regarding long-term effectiveness, generalization of skills, and cultural or contextual differences in safety education.
6. To recommend evidence-based, neurodiverse-friendly practices and policy reforms for enhancing the safety and independence of children with special needs in real-world social environments.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to systematically analyze and integrate findings from peer-reviewed research articles on stranger danger awareness and safety interventions for children with special needs. Unlike traditional meta-analysis, which quantifies effect sizes, meta-synthesis is interpretive in nature and focuses on constructing new understandings by identifying and synthesizing patterns, themes, and conceptual insights across a body of qualitative and mixed-method research.

2.1 Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using academic databases including PsycINFO, ERIC, PubMed, and Google Scholar. The search employed Boolean operators to combine relevant keywords and phrases such as “stranger danger,” “autism,” “special needs,” “child safety,” “video modeling,” “social stories,” “behavioral skills training,” and “abduction prevention.” Only peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2022 were considered to ensure both relevance and a contemporary perspective on intervention practices.

2.2 Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

- Focused on children or adolescents (ages 3–18) with developmental disabilities such as ASD, ADHD, or intellectual disabilities.
- Evaluated or discussed interventions aimed at improving safety awareness or stranger danger responses.
- Utilized qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method research designs.
- Were published in English.

2.3 Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

- Focused solely on typically developing children.
- Did not include a behavioral or educational intervention component.
- Were review articles, editorials, or theoretical papers lacking empirical data.

2.4 Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis

Data extracted from each selected study included: publication year, participant characteristics (age, diagnosis), study design, intervention type, setting, outcome measures, and key findings. A thematic synthesis approach, based on the framework by Thomas and Harden (2008), was employed in three stages:

1. Line-by-line coding of relevant text from the results and discussion sections of each study.
2. Development of descriptive themes that captured patterns across studies (e.g., effectiveness of video modeling, challenges with generalization).
3. Generation of analytical themes that offered interpretive insights, such as the importance of ecological validity and stakeholder involvement in program success.

Studies were further coded and categorized by intervention type (e.g., social stories, video modeling), implementation setting (e.g., home, school, community), and observed outcomes related to skill generalization and maintenance. The thematic synthesis enabled the identification of cross-cutting concepts and practical recommendations grounded in empirical evidence.

2.5 Quality Appraisal

To assess methodological rigor, each study was evaluated using a modified version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) checklist, tailored to accommodate both qualitative and mixed-method research. Criteria included clarity of research aims, appropriateness of design, recruitment strategy, data collection methods, and transparency of findings. Studies with limited methodological detail or low rigor were noted and discussed but given reduced weight in the final synthesis to preserve the validity of overarching conclusions.

3. Result

The reviewed studies examined a variety of interventions aimed at improving safety and social skills in individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), with a particular focus on teaching abduction-prevention and related safety skills. The interventions included video modelling, social stories, behavioral skills training (BST), and a combination of these approaches. The studies consistently found that these interventions were effective in teaching targeted safety behaviors, with video modelling and social stories being prominent strategies across multiple studies.

1. **Video Modelling:** Several studies (Abadir et al., 2021; Bergstrom & Najdowski, 2021; Godish, Miltenberger, & Sanchez, 2017; Miltenberger & Gross, 2022) reported that video modelling was a highly effective intervention for teaching abduction-prevention skills. This method involved presenting video demonstrations of appropriate responses to abduction attempts or lures, which participants then practiced. The results showed that participants, including children with autism, significantly improved their ability to respond appropriately to stranger lures or potential abduction situations after video modelling interventions.
2. **Social Stories:** Social stories, a technique developed to provide individuals with autism with clear, structured information about social situations, were also shown to be effective in teaching abduction-prevention skills (Akmanoğlu & Tekin-Iftar, 2011; Barry & Burlew, 2004; Kurt & Kutlu, 2019). These stories, tailored to each participant, helped children understand the steps to take when confronted with strangers or dangerous situations, resulting in improved social responses and increased safety awareness.
3. **Behavioral Skills Training (BST):** BST, which combines instruction, modelling, rehearsal, and feedback, was another frequently used and effective strategy for teaching safety skills (Gunby, Carr, & LeBlanc, 2010; Gunby & Rapp, 2014; Ledbetter-Cho et al., 2016). Studies found that BST significantly increased the participants' ability to perform safety skills such as recognizing and responding to lures or potential abduction scenarios. In addition, the inclusion of in situ feedback, which allowed trainers to provide real-time guidance, further enhanced the effectiveness of BST interventions.
4. **Combined Approaches:** Some studies combined video modelling with other strategies like least-to-most prompting (Murzynski & Bourret, 2007) or BST within situ feedback (Gunby & Rapp, 2014). These combinations were shown to have a synergistic effect, improving the efficiency of skill acquisition and generalization of safety behaviours to real-world situations.
5. **Meta-analysis:** A meta-analysis by Bellini and Akullian (2007) synthesized the findings of multiple studies involving video modelling and video self-modelling. The analysis

revealed that these techniques were effective in promoting social skills, including safety-related behaviors, in children and adolescents with ASD. This meta-analysis further confirmed the overall efficacy of video-based interventions.

In addition to the safety-related interventions, other studies (Delfs et al., 2014; Summers et al., 2011) demonstrated that teaching children with autism to perform household safety behaviours, such as recognizing dangerous situations in the home environment, could be achieved through these methods. These findings underscore the versatility and broad applicability of these interventions across various safety domains.

Overall, the studies reviewed demonstrate the effectiveness of various interventions, with video modelling and social stories emerging as the most common and widely used techniques. Behavioral skills training, when combined with additional support like in situ feedback, also showed substantial success in teaching safety skills. These findings highlight the importance of using structured, evidence-based approaches to improve safety behaviors in children with autism, particularly in preventing abductions and other dangerous situations.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the 20 studies examining stranger danger education programs for children with special needs, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD, and intellectual disabilities, yielded several key findings related to the effectiveness of various intervention strategies, challenges faced by children with developmental disabilities, and the role of caregivers, educators, and peers in reinforcing safety skills. These results align with the research objectives and highlight the significance of tailored interventions to improve children's ability to recognize, interpret, and respond to potential abduction threats.

4.1 Effectiveness of Existing Stranger Danger Education Programs

Several intervention strategies were found to be effective in teaching children with developmental disabilities how to respond to potential threats. Among the most commonly used approaches were video modeling, social stories, and behavioral skills training (BST). For instance, studies such as those by Abadir et al. (2021), Bergstrom & Najdowski (2021), and Gunby et al. (2010) found that video modeling was highly effective in teaching children with autism to recognize and respond appropriately to stranger danger situations. This method was particularly useful because it provided children with clear visual demonstrations of safe behaviors and situations. The study by Bergstrom et al. (2014) also highlighted that children who were exposed to video modeling demonstrated improved responses to stranger lures, as evidenced by increased compliance with safety protocols.

Similarly, Akmanoğlu & Tekin-Iftar (2011) found that social stories were effective in teaching children with autism how to appropriately respond to the lures of strangers, emphasizing the benefits of using social stories to provide context and narrative to the situation. Social stories were also praised for helping children with developmental disabilities understand abstract concepts, like the importance of personal safety, by breaking down complex scenarios into easy-to-understand steps.

Key Finding: Programs incorporating video modeling and social stories showed significant improvements in children's responses to stranger danger. These interventions not only taught

appropriate responses but also enhanced children's understanding of safety behaviors in a structured way.

4.2 Challenges in Recognizing, Interpreting, and Responding to Threats

Children with developmental disabilities, especially those with autism and ADHD, faced particular challenges in recognizing potential threats and responding to them. Delfs et al. (2014) and Gunby & Rapp (2014) noted that children with autism often struggled to generalize learned safety behaviors to new environments and situations, particularly when the abduction scenario was ambiguous or lacked clear visual cues. Additionally, Ledbetter-Cho et al. (2016) highlighted that children with ADHD might have difficulties with impulse control and following through with safety strategies when faced with a high-pressure situation, such as interacting with a stranger.

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) were also found to have difficulties with social perception, making it harder for them to distinguish between friendly and threatening social cues. This can result in an increased likelihood of approaching strangers, as children with ASD may not always recognize behaviors or body language that signal danger. The study by Gray & Garand (1993) emphasized that children with autism, especially those who are less verbally expressive, may not understand when a stranger's approach is harmful or deceptive. Thus, they are often unable to make quick, appropriate decisions in a threatening situation.

Key Finding: The challenges children with ASD, ADHD, and intellectual disabilities face in recognizing and responding to potential threats highlight the importance of providing clear, structured training that focuses not only on the “what to do” but also on the “when to do it,” and the ability to generalize these skills to real-world contexts.

4.3 Impact of Intervention Strategies

Behavioral skills training (BST) emerged as another effective strategy for teaching abduction-prevention skills. Studies like Gunby et al. (2010) and Johnson et al. (2005) demonstrated that using BST, which combines instruction, modeling, rehearsal, and feedback, significantly improved children's ability to respond to abduction scenarios. In particular, Gunby & Rapp (2014) found that the use of in-situ training (i.e., training in real-world environments) was crucial for ensuring that children could perform the learned skills when faced with real-life situations.

The incorporation of peer or educator involvement was also seen as a key factor in the effectiveness of interventions. Ledbetter-Cho et al. (2016) showed that when peers were included in the safety training, children with ASD were more likely to generalize their skills in social environments, such as schoolyards or community spaces. Similarly, the role of caregivers in reinforcing safety behaviors at home was emphasized in several studies. This suggests that safety programs should not be isolated to formal education settings but should also be integrated into daily routines and interactions at home.

Key Finding: Intervention strategies that combine video modeling, social stories, and behavioral skills training, with active involvement from caregivers, peers, and educators, proved to be most effective in enhancing the abduction-prevention skills of children with special needs.

4.4 Role of Caregivers, Educators, and Peer Involvement

Studies consistently highlighted the importance of caregiver and educator involvement in reinforcing safety education. For example, Miltenberger & Gross (2022) found that the active participation of caregivers in the training process contributed to the long-term retention and generalization of safety behaviors in children with developmental disabilities. Similarly, Bergstrom & Najdowski (2021) observed that when caregivers participated in training sessions and were equipped with strategies to reinforce safety behaviors at home, children exhibited greater retention and consistent application of learned skills.

In the educational setting, Ledbetter-Cho et al. (2016) emphasized the positive effects of peer involvement, particularly when peers acted as models for safety behaviors. By observing peers and engaging in role-play scenarios, children with autism were more likely to practice and internalize safety skills.

Key Finding: The active engagement of caregivers, educators, and peers significantly enhances the effectiveness of stranger danger education programs. These stakeholders play a critical role in reinforcing learned safety skills and ensuring their generalization across different settings.

4.5 Gaps in Literature

Despite the positive outcomes of the reviewed studies, several gaps remain in the literature. Most of the research focused on short-term outcomes and did not assess the long-term effectiveness of these interventions. As highlighted by Drew et al. (2022), future studies should examine the sustainability of safety skills beyond the intervention period. Additionally, cultural and contextual factors that may influence the success of these programs were not extensively explored in the reviewed studies. As many of the studies were conducted in Western contexts, there is a need for further research that considers the diversity of cultural and social environments in which children with special needs live and learn.

Key Finding: There is a need for more research on the long-term effectiveness of stranger danger programs and the cultural relevance of safety training interventions.

The results of this study indicate that stranger danger education programs, when designed with the unique needs of children with autism, ADHD, and intellectual disabilities in mind, are highly effective in improving safety awareness and responses. Video modeling, social stories, and behavioral skills training emerged as particularly effective strategies, particularly when combined with caregiver, educator, and peer involvement. However, challenges remain in ensuring the long-term sustainability and generalization of learned safety behaviors, as well as addressing cultural and contextual factors in safety education programs. Further research is needed to explore these gaps and refine existing interventions to maximize their effectiveness across diverse populations.

4.6 Implications of the Study

This study presents critical implications for improving the safety and well-being of children with special needs through tailored educational practices, collaborative intervention strategies, and informed policymaking. The synthesis reveals that interventions such as video modeling, behavioral skills training (BST), social stories, and in-situ training are particularly effective when adapted to the unique cognitive and communicative needs of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD, and intellectual disabilities.

A key implication is the integration of safety education into school curricula and community programs in a structured, consistent manner. These interventions must not only be evidence-based but also designed to promote skill generalization across settings such as home, school, and public spaces and maintained over time with the support of caregivers, teachers, and peers. Multistakeholder involvement has proven essential in reinforcing safety behaviors, and therefore, training and engagement for all parties should be considered a central component of any successful implementation.

Importantly, this study emphasizes the crucial need for cultural adaptation of safety education programs. Most of the existing interventions have been developed in Western contexts and may not fully account for the diverse cultural norms, values, and expectations that influence children's understanding of authority, danger, and social interaction. For example, in some cultures, children are taught to be highly deferential to adults, which may conflict with messages that encourage children to question or avoid unfamiliar adults. In others, community-based child-rearing practices may influence who is considered a "safe" adult. Failure to account for these differences can result in interventions that are less effective or even counterproductive in non-Western or multicultural contexts.

Culturally adaptive safety programs must therefore be linguistically accessible, contextually relevant, and sensitive to the lived experiences of diverse families. This involves:

- Incorporating culturally appropriate examples and role-play scenarios.
- Using inclusive language and culturally relevant visuals.
- Consulting with community leaders, parents, and educators to co-develop materials that reflect local realities.
- Addressing disparities in access to safety resources and caregiver education.

In addition, policy reforms must prioritize inclusivity by ensuring that programs are not only effective but equitable. This includes funding for the translation of materials, community outreach initiatives, and the inclusion of marginalized populations in the design and evaluation of interventions.

Finally, the integration of technology-assisted tools such as mobile applications and virtual simulations offers an opportunity to deliver personalized, scalable, and adaptable safety education across cultural and geographic boundaries. When developed with cultural responsiveness in mind, such tools can bridge accessibility gaps and promote broader uptake among families with varying levels of literacy, technological familiarity, or educational background.

The study underscores that effective stranger danger education must be both developmentally and culturally responsive. Without this dual focus, interventions risk excluding or miscommunicating essential safety concepts to the very children they aim to protect. Moving forward, collaboration between educators, researchers, policymakers, and communities will be essential in designing inclusive, evidence-based programs that reflect and respect the cultural diversity of children with special needs and their families.

4.7 Limitations of the Study

Despite its strengths, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

1. **Limited Generalizability:** The studies reviewed primarily focused on children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), with fewer studies involving children with ADHD or intellectual disabilities. As a result, the findings may not fully represent the unique needs and challenges faced by children with other developmental disabilities. Future research should aim to include a broader range of developmental disabilities to ensure that findings are more generalizable across different populations of children with special needs.
2. **Short-Term Outcomes:** Many of the studies reviewed focused on short-term outcomes and did not include long-term follow-up assessments. This presents a limitation in evaluating the sustainability and generalization of safety skills over time. It is unclear whether children continue to use the learned safety behaviors beyond the intervention phase, and whether the skills are effectively transferred to real-world situations. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term effectiveness and retention of these skills.
3. **Lack of Cultural Diversity:** The studies reviewed did not provide sufficient information about cultural or contextual factors that may influence the effectiveness of safety education programs. It is possible that children from different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds may respond differently to certain interventions. Future research should explore the role of cultural and environmental factors in the effectiveness of stranger danger education programs, as these factors could significantly impact the way children learn and apply safety skills.
4. **Small Sample Sizes:** Several studies included small sample sizes, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Small sample sizes may lead to sampling bias and may not capture the diversity of responses to interventions among children with special needs. Future studies with larger, more diverse samples would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of these interventions across different populations of children with developmental disabilities.
5. **Lack of Standardized Measures:** The outcome measures used in the reviewed studies varied widely, making it difficult to compare the effectiveness of different interventions. In some studies, outcome measures were based on direct observations of children's behaviors, while in others, surveys or caregiver reports were used. This inconsistency in measurement methods complicates the process of drawing firm conclusions about the relative effectiveness of different interventions. Future research would benefit from the use of standardized, reliable, and valid outcome measures to assess the effectiveness of stranger danger education programs consistently across studies.
6. **Implementation Variability:** The studies often used different implementation strategies for the interventions (e.g., video modeling vs. social stories) and varied in terms of the intensity, duration, and setting of the interventions. This variability makes it difficult to determine the optimal approach or the necessary conditions for the success of these programs. Further research is needed to standardize the implementation of these interventions and determine the best practices for maximizing their impact.

5. Conclusion

This comprehensive review of 20 empirical studies highlights the importance and effectiveness of targeted stranger danger education programs for children with developmental disabilities, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD, and intellectual disabilities. The evidence strongly supports the use of structured, evidence-based interventions, especially

video modeling, social stories, behavioral skills training (BST), and in-situ training as powerful tools in equipping these children with essential abduction-prevention and personal safety skills. Despite the progress, key challenges remain. These include difficulties with skill generalization, varying cognitive and social limitations, and the need for culturally adaptive interventions. Additionally, the active involvement of caregivers, educators, and peers plays a crucial role in the success and reinforcement of safety behaviors, underscoring the value of collaborative approaches.

Importantly, this review reveals significant gaps in literature, such as a lack of long-term follow-up data and minimal consideration of cultural contexts. Future research must address these issues to develop more sustainable, inclusive, and widely applicable safety programs.

While this study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of stranger danger education programs for children with special needs, the limitations outlined above suggest areas for improvement and further investigation. Addressing these limitations in future research could enhance the generalizability and applicability of the findings, ultimately leading to more effective and inclusive safety education programs for children with developmental disabilities. The recommendations from this study can help guide educators, policymakers, and caregivers in developing evidence-based, neurodiverse-friendly practices to ensure the safety and independence of children with special needs in a variety of social contexts.

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the effectiveness of existing stranger danger education programs for children with ASD, ADHD, and intellectual disabilities. Video modeling, social stories, and behavioral skills training (BST) were identified as the most effective intervention strategies, particularly when combined with active involvement from caregivers, educators, and peers. However, challenges remain in ensuring the long-term sustainability and generalization of safety skills, as well as addressing cultural and contextual factors. Further research is needed to explore these gaps and refine existing interventions to maximize their impact on the safety and independence of children with special needs. Ultimately, evidence-based, neurodiverse-friendly practices must be developed and implemented to enhance the safety of children with developmental disabilities in real-world social environments.

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