



(TNS)

Help! I'm lost

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While walking home from synagogue with our Shabbat dinner guests, a girl about four years old went running past us.

With the realization that this child was not accompanied by any adult in sight, we ran toward her in an attempt to ensure that she was okay.

Cradled in the loving arms of one of our young guests, none of us could elicit her name, that of her parents, what synagogue she may have been at, her address, the name of her nursery-school teacher or even whether she had one. Perplexed that no adult was breathlessly in search of their missing child, 11 of us waited 90 minutes for a parent to appear (the police and social services were notified and, to their credit, came quickly).

The ending, thankfully, was a happy one and she was eventually reunited with her parents, each having thought she was with the other. The lesson, however, was an important one for all of us as we sat down to our meal much later than usual.

Truthfully, while we may not want to think about it, this could have happened to any of us, our children or grandchildren. Anyone whose child has gone missing for even moments knows that horrible feeling of panic that one experiences when their child cannot be found.

It is important to “street-proof” our children, without inadvertently sowing the seeds of fear. For those moments when our children disappear into the racks

in a clothing store, wander off in the grocery store when we think they are next to us, or attach themselves to another person without our awareness, we must try and ensure that they will be safe from harm.

The best way to accomplish this is to teach our children from an early age what to do if they become separated from us or are lost. They may feel frightened, and the last thing we want for them (or for us) is to panic. Teaching a young child the skills they need to have in order to cope with an adverse situation can turn a potentially traumatic event into one of growth and resilience.

Here are a few thoughts:

1. Review with each family member an emergency action plan: a safety plan for fires, earthquakes, responding to a Red Alert siren, or simply getting lost. This is a plan that you devise as a family for each family member. It will differ depending on the child's age and type of situation you hope to prepare for. Questions such as the following are relevant for emergencies:

- What should you do if you are in your house and there is a fire?
- Where should you go and how should you respond if there is an earthquake?
- At what designated spot outside your house would you all meet, should you have to leave home?
- Who should family members call to act as a liaison?

As we learned from our recent experience, a family plan of what to do if you inadvertently become separated in a mall, on a hike, in the grocery store, or on the street, is very important.

What do you do if you are lost? Brainstorm together, role-play the various scenarios with each child and review them frequently to ensure that each child feels empowered by just what it is they know they need to do. Children as young as three or four can already learn this.

2. Remind your children that if lost (or in any disaster situation), you or someone will always come to look for them. The best way for you to find them is for them to stop, stand still and stay as close to where they were when they last saw their parents, assuming the situation is not a dangerous one that requires them to move.

If your children are in a building, they can stand up tall and in a loud voice yell your first name (your real name, the one “big people” use to talk to you). If outside, they should hug a tree and call for you by name. Let them know that most of the time you won't be very far away at all and that by staying still and calling you, you'll be able to get to them more quickly.

Also, if they see another mommy and child (usually the safest stranger option), tell your children that you want them to tell that woman that they are lost. Inside a store, they could also tell a cashier or clerk; show them what you mean the next time you are shopping. Explain what they should say and role-play this, too.

In general, they should not move, as that will make it harder to find them. They should not get into anyone's car or leave a public area. Remind them that most people have cellphones and can call you. Let them know, too, that even if no one has a phone, the Mommy or cashier will know just what to do.

3. Teach your children from an early age their full name and that of their parents, as well as their address and phone number. Most children between three and four can master this and it is important to rehearse this with them frequently. You can definitely have fun with this. We have a video of our son at this age repeating his phone number several times, as in a commercial, attempting to sell the pictures he drew to a make-believe audience.

4. Put your last name and phone number in the inside of your children's shoe or on a shirt tag, or both, and let them know that it is there in case they – or the article of clothing – should ever get lost. This way, if a child is shy, won't speak or can't remember the information, someone can still access the important details.

5. Put identifying information only on the inside of clothing or other personal items. Don't put your child's name on the outside of a backpack or other readily seen objects, because a stranger could easily lure your children by calling their names. The conversation explaining who you'd ideally like to have your child go to is an equally important one.

6. Teach your child an identifiable code that someone other than you can use if they were to have to pick up your child unexpectedly should you be unable to be there without advance notice. Our children are all grown up now so I can reveal that, in recalling this incident, they jokingly reminisced that our secret family word was *hamentashen!* When our children got older and were out at night with friends, they could always call home, for whatever reason, no questions asked, and ask about Uncle X, an imaginary name, to alert us that they needed our help.

One hopes that they never have to use these tools, but children who are both prepared and calm will be better able to help themselves should the need arise. In these days and times, we want our children to always feel safe. ■

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