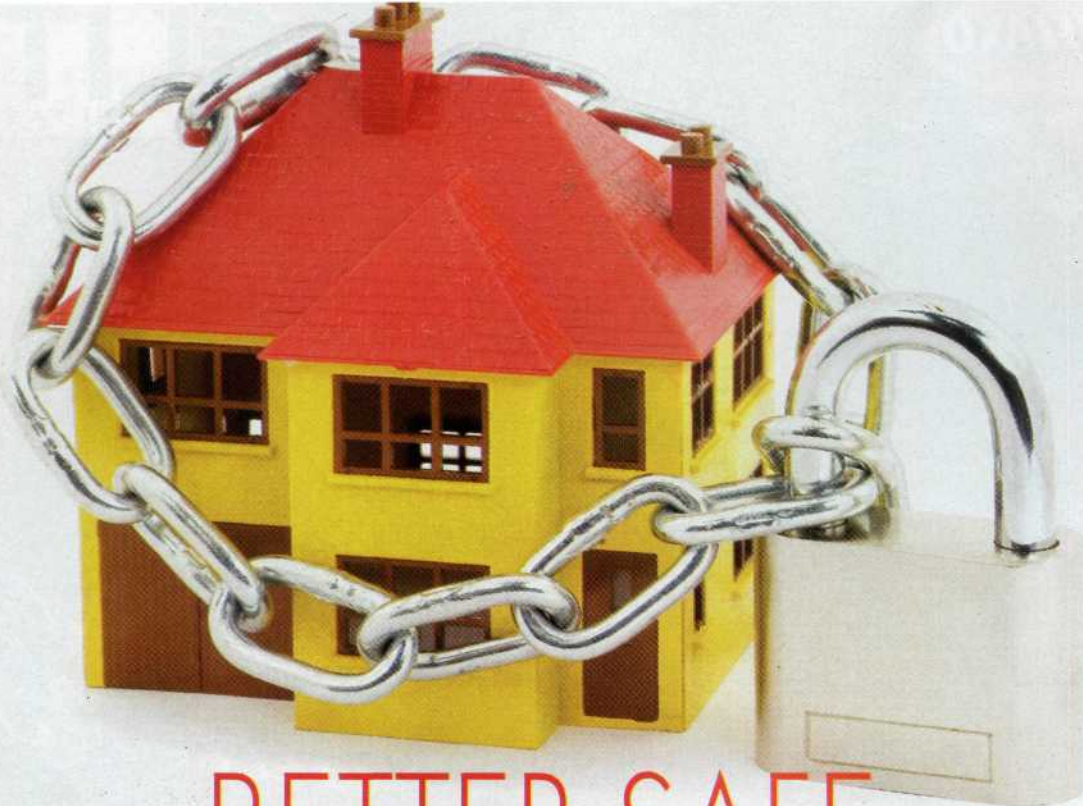




BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY

How to secure your home against trouble.

By Annam Suresh

Just the other day the 14-year-old daughter of working parents was raped by the delivery boy of a mineral water company in an upper middle-class set of apartments in Delhi. A little bit of caution could have prevented this needless tragedy. Of late, one has come across nearly a dozen such reports of rape. During school vacations, many working parents will be compelled to leave their children alone at home, or with domestic help, for long stretches of the day. It is important that such children – in fact all children and adults too – practise basic rules of caution.

With families going nuclear and often both parents out of the house for the better part of day, children are either under the care of paid help or on their own. Hence it is essential that basic rules of caution are drilled into them as soon as they can understand instructions, to be updated as they grow up.

According to a senior police officer, at least 70 per cent of crimes that happen within homes or involve the vulnerable like women and children could have been prevented had the victims or their families practised caution almost as a matter of habit. "For example, despite several instances of attacks and even murder by domestic help, most

people are still reluctant to either do without them or have them registered with the local police station. For a small comfort, people are willing to turn a blind eye to the possible disaster consequences," he said. People in Delhi have begun to register their servants after the series of murders by newly appointed servants without any investigation into their past but people in other parts of the country are still playing ostrich.

Safety is a game that involves not just the police. Except for verification of a servant's background, they probably come into the picture after the crime, by which time it is too late for you anyway. A wiser move would

be for you and your family to be alert and observe certain rules as a matter of habit.

What you can do: Make your children memorise your names, telephone numbers, addresses and places of work at the earliest. This can be done even before they start school, since even pre-school children are good at memorising bits of information, often with visuals if possible. A lost two-year-old was restored to his family when he pointed to a soft drink bottle and said 'papa office'. Explain that this information is secret, that they are not to show off by reciting it to all and sundry. However, should they be lost, they should give this number to the police or safe persons help them identify safe adults) to help them reach home.

Keep them constantly alert regarding strangers. Never admonish them for considering a friend of yours a stranger – they might drop their guard the next time. Also, acquaintances and friends have known to be abusive to kids and it is better to be safe than sorry. If ever your child complains about the behaviour of your friend or relative, especially abusive acts in your absence, take it seriously and assure the child that you believe her and will ensure that it will not be repeated.

Begin by making sure your house is physically safe for both children and adults. Grown-ups are just as vulnerable to criminal invasions as children and can be easily outnumbered.

Ensure that all windows and doors can be locked securely and have strong grills fitted. Also that they can be opened easily by the child should the need to run out arise.

Fit the front door with two chains and a peephole. A single chain is anticipated and often dealt with easily. But two fitted in opposite arrangements make forcible entry more difficult. Use good strong ones – don't skimp on something so vital.

A wrought-iron gate that can be locked is a good investment, especially if the child is left alone. A

grill with criss-cross bars conveniently spaced would be better than collapsible gates because then the child can take delivery of registered letters or small items without opening the gate.

If the object is bigger then it can be accepted through the grill, it should either be left with a neighbour or the building security. If both these options are not available (of course the man at the door will explain how inconvenient that would be – but your priority is your family's safety, not his convenience) he should be asked to leave it outside the door. And, most important, remind the child not to open the door to take the package as soon as the man leaves. If his motives are suspect, that is precisely the moment he would be waiting for – just out of eyesight. Wait for at least 20 minutes. Meanwhile, if the grill is well secured, the door can be left open to keep an eye on the packet.

Keep a spare set of keys with a neighbour. However, ensure that the keys are not left with a family whose servant is alone all day.

If you live in an apartment and have any say in its security, it would be a good idea to suggest installing an intercom to screen visitors before being sent up. If a group of visitors, especially strangers, is big, it would be a good idea to ask for only one person to be sent up – after speaking to the visitor/s.

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No matter how inconvenient the drudgery of household chores is, do not risk hiring strangers whose antecedents are completely unknown. Not even if he or she has been recommended by your milkman/chowkidar/dhobi. It is possible for them to be unintentionally sending a criminal to your house simply because you kept asking them for a servant or because the servant kept asking for a job. No dhobi or chowkidar is likely to know the truth why the fellow left his previous job.

And there have been instances where the plant has not been unintentional either. Who else would know better about your movements, your approximate financial health, the size of your family and other sundry information picked up from frequent gossip sessions with other staff working in the building? There is little the cops can do after the horse has bolted with a false name, sketchy description, a non-existent address

(often not even that) and no photograph. Of what use is an arrest to you if your loss is far more valuable?

Never fix service visits for any appliance at a time when the child or you are alone. If such a visit must take place, you should ensure that either a parent or known adult (female if the child is a daughter) is present.

However, should some really crucial job turn up when the child is alone, she should be able to call up a neighbour to come over after checking the credentials of the service man. The neighbour should preferably be female if the child is a girl. However, this is only in an emergency. Not because it is inconvenient for the TV mechanic to come again. That is his job and he had better come at your convenience.

Ensure this when fixing up appointments. Also make sure that he does not bring along too many assistants. You can easily be outnumbered. If you have an intercom system, ensure that the security informs you about the number of persons in a group, especially if they are absolute strangers, and not a family group.

Work out a password that is only known to the family. In an emergency, if the child has to be

called away from school, the password can help him or her check how genuine the emergency is, even if the one who comes to pick up the child is known. (Usually abductions are worked out through known persons like drivers and servants or father's employees/subordinates.)

Draw up a list of alternatively telephone numbers both near home and your place of work in case the regular ones are out of order or engaged. Telephone numbers of friends neighbours, doctors and others should be easily accessible to kids.

Work out safe routes and insist that the children stick to them. Should they ever be delayed beyond reasonable margins, you will know where to begin looking for them.

Call in at regular intervals or get them to call you.

Help them identify strangers and 'safe adults'. They should know that even if strangers are well dressed and elderly, they are not necessarily safe.

Do not arrange for male tutors to come when the child is alone. Don't allow him to teach in a closed room if the child is alone. Find an excuse for someone to be present unobtrusively in the room – you could either do your reading/knitting or another child could quietly study in the same room. If neither of these is possible, make

sure that the seating is such that they are easily visible while you go about your work. If she has to visit the tutor's house for classes, ensure that the classes are taken in batches and your child is not alone. If, on any day, your child happens to be the only student present, she should quickly excuse herself even if she has to lie that she is unwell.

Should there be a power cut, the child should have access to a good powerful torch or an emergency lamp. A nervous child with a candle can set off a major fire.

Do not employ a male servant if the child is female or very small. Even very young male servants are known to sexually abuse little children when alone. Also register your servant with the local police station and keep a copy of his or her name as well as that of the driver's address at your place of work.

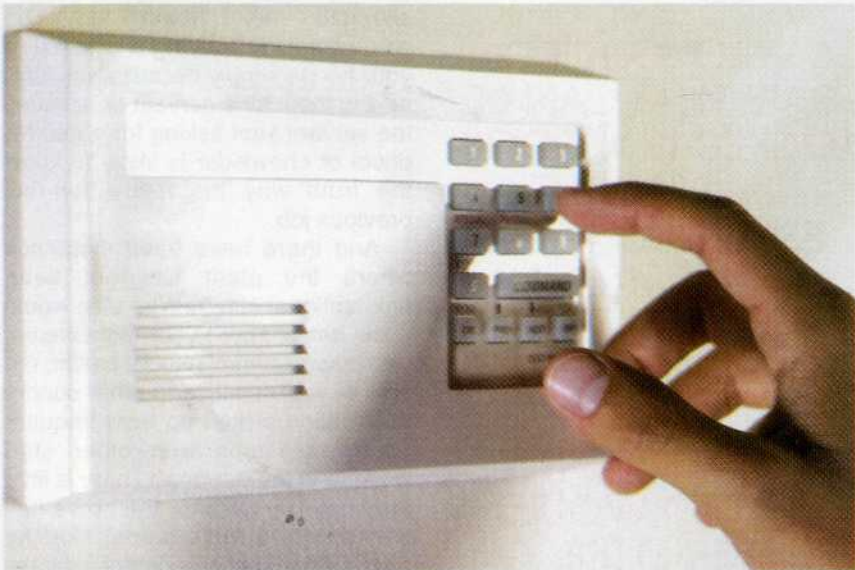
WHAT NOT TO DO

Avoid leaving the children for long hours with men servants and drivers. Most important, talk to the children every day about their day, especially if they are looked after by servants. Convince them that no matter what the servants say, you will always believe your child.

Most children are silenced by the abuser either with threats of violence to them or their family, or with the suggestion that tables would be turned on them with a more convincing and damning excuse. The most common one is to accuse the child of forcing the servant under threat of dismissal, which almost always is false.

Do not permit the servant to have visitors when alone. However, should someone land up, the servant should go out and meet her or his relatives rather than call the visitor in.

No matter how cumbersome it is, it is safer for the family to answer the door than expect the servant to do so. There have been umpteen cases of the servant opening the door to his accomplices. The children should be particularly careful about this practice when the adults are away.



What the children should be taught to do: A very common ploy which many people fall for is the 'glass of water'. Our rules of hospitality have taught us never to refuse anyone water. So go ahead. But do it keeping your security in mind. Should the man at the door ask for water, shut the door well before going in to get it (never mind if it looks rude). The 14-year-old Delhi girl could have saved herself a lot of trauma if she had been a little less polite and a lot more cautious.

Teach the children the following exercises in cautious behaviour and you will manage to keep a substantial part of trouble away. Instill the rules of safety early on, so that they become part of their instinctive behaviour.

If the child is a girl, and she is alone, insist that she is never to let any male in, even if he is a relative or close friend of her parents. Over 70 per cent of child abuse cases are perpetrated by members close to the family. In fact, abuse by family and friends is doubly traumatic since, in many instances, the child's family is not in a position, for various reasons to make an issue of it. Hence prevention is the best option. The family could work out a way of tackling friends and relatives tactfully. This is where the lockable grill comes in handy. The child could lock it and say she doesn't have the keys.

Help children to avoid being alone with anyone they instinctively feel unsafe with – even if he happens to be a family friend. In a majority of

cases, the child's instincts in such cases are often right, never mind what adult reason perceives.

Should they suspect they are being followed, instruct them to run to the nearest well-lit and crowded place. They must avoid running into residential buildings or getting into vehicles when in trouble – they may either receive no help or get into further trouble. Crowded places like shopping centres, restaurants the lobby of a decent hotel or even the middle of the road are reasonable. Every attempt must be made to attract the attention of the passers-by.

Teach them to avoid showing off expensive toys or possessions like watches.

Be alert when helping people seeking directions – don't get distracted by the shabby illegible

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paper that you are oblivious to the trouble brewing around you. Do not go close to a vehicle whose occupants are seeking directions. It takes just a couple of seconds to drag even an adult into a vehicle.

Never unlock the door chain before checking out who the visitor is – even if they knock or ring the doorbell or even if the voice sounds familiar.

The child must never say no one's at home, even over the phone. He or she must always say mother/father/anyone is busy with guests and cannot attend the call. The child could even pretend to be talking to an 'uncle' or her 'daddy'.

No male friend should be allowed into the house unless there are at least a few girlfriends too. Even childhood friends have been known to get carried away.

Never indulge in idle chatter with strangers over the telephone simply to pass time.

Never go to isolated areas or public bathrooms alone or in small groups of twos.

Do not offer or accept rides from strangers – not even from known persons. Numbers do not necessarily ensure safety, nor does the age and appearance of the driver. It could all be a red herring and the rest of the group would probably be just out of sight to join you once you are in the car.

Should the child (or even you for that matter) have to take a cab especially if it will be going on lonely stretches or it is late in day, ensure that the driver is alone, that the doors have handles on the inside and the glass can be raised and lowered. Do not allow him to pick up anyone else on the way. If the cabby insists, raise an alarm or get off.

Don't stay alone in a car. Don't keep keys in the ignition. If keys have to be left in the car, let them be in the custody of the oldest child. In case of trouble, lean on horn till help arrives. And while you are at it, it would make sense to teach the family the basics of handling emergencies – whether it be an injury, a fire or break-in.

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**THE USUAL MISTAKES
OF WOMEN THAT
AFFECT MARRIAGES**

**ARE YOU TRAPPED
IN A LIVING
DOGMA?**

**WHICH IS OUR
LARGEST
WILDLIFE
SANCTUARY?**

**WHICH IS
WOMEN'S
LOVE DISEASE?**

**THE FRUIT THAT
FILLS YOU
WITH NUTRITION**

**WHAT IS
SPECIAL
FROM BENGAL?**

**WHEN IS
THE TIME FOR A
SABBATICAL?**

**TURNING
THE HOME INTO
OFFICE**

**WHAT IS
FASHIONISTAS' TOP
FAVOURITE GLOBALLY?**

**MOVE FROM
DEPRESSION
TO ELATION**

