

State Senator Robert Mayer The Mayer Memo

Senator Robert Mayer - Serving Butler, Dunklin, New Madrid, Pemiscot, Ripley, Stoddard & Wayne Counties



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Child Safety: A Priority for All of Us

While parents are the best experts on how to best keep their children and families safe, the Missouri Legislature has worked to keep our state one of the safest places for our children to live and grow up. In recent years, we passed a number of measures to protect children where they live, attend school, and play, including more buffers and protections from sexual predators and child abusers, including those who seek to sexually exploit kids online.

Another major endeavor has been the passage of Senate Bill 30 in 2003 that created the Missouri AMBER Alert System — a program that has been very successful in our state. According to the Missouri State Highway Patrol, there have been 169 AMBER Alert requests and 48 activations — with 60 children returned safely — since the program's inception. One child was tragically found deceased, and one child is still reported missing. Similarly, the state Highway Patrol has issued Endangered Person Advisories for adults and children since it initiated that program in 2007. This program has also proven to be very successful. Of 46 requests, there have been 35 activations, with 19 adults and 21 children returned safely. (One child and three adults were found deceased.)

Some recent high-profile criminal cases involving crimes against children in our state remind us of the importance of being alert and safety-conscious at all times and to talk with our children about safety. To assist parents, the Missouri Department of Public Safety and the Missouri Highway Patrol provide the following child safety tips:

When visiting densely populated areas, such as the mall, parks, amusement parks, etc.

- Keep children in your line of site.
- Take a picture of them and keep it in your phone.
- Dress them in bright clothing so you can easily spot them.
- Talk to little children about remaining close to you.
- With older children, have a plan of action in case you become separated.

When children participate in activities, through school or extracurricular, know the group leaders and other parents.

- Familiarize yourself with everyone who is involved and exchange contact information.
- Participate in events if possible.

If your children are ever home alone for an extended period of time, have set check-in times:

- Have them call when they get home from school, and again sporadically for the period of time they are alone.
- Make sure they know never to tell anyone who calls they are alone.
- Make sure they know not to let anyone in the house without an approved adult present.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children also provides the following child safety tips:

- Make sure you know where each of your children is at all times. Know your children's friends and be clear with your children about the places and homes they may visit.
- Never leave children unattended in a vehicle, whether it's running or not.
- Remind children to never hitchhike, approach a vehicle, or engage in conversation with anyone within a vehicle they do not know and trust.
- Remind children they should never go anywhere with anyone without first getting your permission.

- Listen to your children. Pay attention if they tell you they don't want to be with someone or go somewhere.
- Teach your children they have the right to say NO to any unwelcome, uncomfortable or confusing touch or actions by others and get out of those situations as quickly as possible. If avoidance is not an option, children should be taught to kick, scream and resist and say, "This person is not my father/mother/guardian."
- Be sensitive to any changes in your children's behavior or attitude. Encourage open communications and learn how to be an active listener.
- Be sure to screen babysitters and caregivers.
- Practice basic safety skills with your children (checking in with you, going to the restroom with a friend, locating adults who may be able to help if they need assistance, etc.)

It's also very important to keep current photos of your children and information, including height, weight, eye color, body type, identifying marks, list of possible locations (friends, neighbors, and schools). Fingerprinting is also recommended. Also, have a "secret word" for your child. A secret word is a word ONLY you and your child know. This will help your child verify whether someone they don't know has your permission to be around them.

Another important tip for parents is to know who lives in your community. Our state tracks sex offenders, and it's possible for you to know who they are and where they live. You can access the Missouri Sex Offender Registry at <http://www.mshp.dps.missouri.gov>. Also, pay attention to missing children flyers and notices in stores and mail-outs.

We want to keep Missouri as one of the safest places for our children to grow up, and it takes all of us to make this happen.

As always, if you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by phone at 1-877-291-5584.

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