

A SAFETY-FIRST COMPANION TO EVERYDAY SEND & EARLY-YEARS LEARNING

20 Safety Skills Every Young Child Can Grow Into

A practical guide for parents, teachers and SENCOs

This guide walks through the 20 skills on the safety checklist, explains what each one means in everyday life, and offers one small, practical way to build it — grounded in Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) teaching principles. There is no pass or fail here. Whatever your child can't yet do is simply the next thing to teach, one small step at a time, in the real places they live, learn and play.

How ABA principles run through this guide

Every tip below rests on the same handful of ideas: break a skill into small, teachable steps (task analysis); reinforce genuine attempts, not just perfect ones; teach and practise in real, everyday environments rather than only on paper; and prompt the skill, then gradually fade that support as the child becomes more independent. Page 5 explains these in a little more depth.

Please read this first

This guide offers general information and everyday suggestions only. It is not an individualised assessment, behaviour plan, or safety guarantee for any specific child. Every child's needs, environment and pace are different — please use this alongside, not instead of, guidance from your child's own therapist, teacher, SENCO or BCBA, who can tailor teaching to your child.

1 • Connection & Communication

The starting point for every safety skill: a child needs to connect with a trusted adult and get their needs across before any instruction can help them.

☐ Responds when their name is called

Try this: Pair their name with something pleasant — a smile, praise, a favourite item — often, in everyday moments, so responding to it is reinforced rather than only tested.

☐ Can identify a safe adult to go to

Try this: Practise naming or pointing to real, familiar safe adults — a parent, teacher, or uniformed staff member — in real settings, not only in conversation.

☐ Can ask for help, or has another way to show they need it

Try this: Any consistent way counts — a word, a sign, a card, pointing. Notice and respond warmly to every attempt to communicate need, however it looks.

☐ Can share their name or identifying information in a way that works for them

Try this: This can be spoken, written on a card in a pocket, a wearable ID, or an AAC device — build on whatever communication method already works best for your child.

2 • Following Safety Instructions

These skills work best when they're already automatic — taught and reinforced long before the moment they're actually needed.

☐ Can stop moving when an adult says “stop”

Try this: Practise “stop” during calm, fun moments — a freeze game works well — so the response is quick and automatic, not something learned for the first time in a real emergency.

☐ Understands “wait”

Try this: Practise short waits with a clear, positive ending (“wait... go!”), and gradually lengthen the wait as your child succeeds.

☐ Can pause a fun activity when safety calls for it

Try this: This is a big ask. Build it through many small, low-stakes practice moments — don't rely on it working for the first time under real pressure.

☐ Responds when a trusted adult or emergency worker asks them to stop or come along

Try this: Practise with a range of trusted adults, not only parents, so the response generalises beyond just one familiar person.

3 • Staying Safe Together

Skills about physical closeness and boundaries — built gradually, starting in low-stakes places.

☐ **Stays near a trusted adult in public places**

Try this: Reinforce staying close during short, quiet outings first, then build up gradually to busier places.

☐ **Can stay within a set safe area, like a garden or playground**

Try this: Make the boundary clear and consistent — a fence, a marked line, a verbal reminder — and notice and reinforce your child staying within it.

☐ **Moves safely through doors, gates and boundaries**

Try this: Break this into its own small steps — pausing at a gate, checking before crossing — and teach each step in turn, in the real doorway or gate it applies to.

4 • Recognising Hazards

Awareness grows through repetition in real environments — pointing things out together, every time, until it becomes automatic.

☐ **Recognises roads and driveways as places needing extra care**

Try this: Name and point out these areas together every time you pass one, so the awareness builds through repeated real-world exposure.

☐ **Knows the basics of a safe road-crossing routine**

Try this: Use the same steps every single time (stop, look, listen, cross) and walk through them together many times before expecting your child to manage it alone.

☐ **Recognises water — ponds, rivers, pools — as needing an adult nearby**

Try this: Name water hazards together across different outings and settings, so the message generalises beyond one familiar pond or pool.

☐ **Knows not to enter water without an adult**

Try this: Reinforce checking in and asking first every time, even in shallow or familiar water, so asking becomes the automatic first step.

☐ **Recognises “hot”, “sharp” and other hazard words or cues**

Try this: Pair the word with the real, safely-experienced sensation or object (a warm, not scalding, cup; a picture) so the word carries real meaning.

5 • When Things Go Wrong

Rehearsed calmly in advance, so these responses are familiar rather than brand new if they're ever needed for real.

☐ Can follow a simple emergency instruction

Try this: Rehearse one short, clear instruction (“come to me now”) during calm practice sessions, so it's familiar rather than new in a real moment.

☐ Has practised what to do if separated from a caregiver

Try this: Agree and rehearse one simple plan — such as stay put, or find a uniformed staff member — during calm, low-pressure outings first.

Building It In

Two principles that hold the whole list together.

☐ Practises these skills in real places, not only in pictures or worksheets

Why it matters: A skill taught only on paper often doesn't transfer to real life — practise it where it will actually be used.

☐ Revisits and updates these skills as they grow and explore new places

Why it matters: Safety needs change as children grow and their world gets bigger — treat this list as living, not a one-time check.

Every skill here can be taught

It's never too early — and never too late — to start. Pick one or two unchecked skills and build them into everyday moments: at the park, on the walk to nursery, at bath time. Revisit this list as your child grows.

Working with your child's team

Bring this checklist to your child's nursery, school, SENCO, or therapist as a starting point for conversation — not a report card. It can help identify one or two skills to focus on together, and where a more individualised plan may help.

Teaching strategies behind every tip

A quick reference to the ABA ideas used throughout this guide — useful shorthand when you're talking with your child's team.

Task analysis

Break a skill into its smallest teachable steps, and teach one step at a time rather than the whole skill at once.

Reinforcement

Notice and encourage genuine attempts — not only perfect performance — so the skill is more likely to happen again.

Prompting & fading

Offer just enough support to help your child succeed, then gradually reduce it as they become more independent.

Generalisation

Practise with different people, in different places, so a skill works everywhere — not only with one adult in one setting.

Natural environment teaching

Teach in the real places a skill is needed — the park, the kerb, the bath — rather than relying on pictures or worksheets alone.

Repetition & consistency

Use the same words and steps every time. Predictability helps a new skill become automatic.

A note on how to use this guide

This guide is intended as general, everyday information for any parent, teacher or carer — it does not replace an individual assessment or behaviour plan, and it isn't a guarantee of safety in any specific situation. Every child learns at their own pace and in their own way. If you have concerns about your child's safety skills or development, please speak with your child's paediatrician, SENCO, teacher, or a qualified behaviour analyst (BCBA) who can assess your child individually and tailor a teaching plan to their needs.

Behavioural Learning Works

Created by Dr Tracy Hui, PhD, BCBA · ABA parent consultancy, inclusive education & EHCP support · English – Cantonese – Mandarin
A safety-first companion to everyday SEND and early-years learning. For any parent, teacher or carer to use and share freely.