

Safe and amused during the holidays

Many parents, although excited about the soccer World Cup, are worried about the safety of their children and keeping them busy during the extended school holidays. Concerns have further been fuelled by email campaigns and tales about an increase in child abduction and human trafficking during this time. Although this tournament and the associated school holidays may pose challenges, keeping your children safe and positively engaged when not at school should always be a priority.

Keeping them safe

One of the biggest concerns for many parents is affordable childcare during the holidays. If possible, don't leave your children unattended. Many schools, non-government organisations, and other institutions are offering holiday programmes for children of all ages. Check local papers (free publications include Cape Town's Child, Joburg's Child and Durban's Child), or ask your school, church or community centre for details.

Should you ask someone to take care of them, make sure it's someone you know very well and can trust (bear in mind that children are more likely to be harmed by someone they know than a stranger). If you're hiring a minder or au pair, do an adequate background check, which includes phoning previous employers and obtaining a police clearance certificate. Make sure this person knows the family safety rules (such as keeping doors locked and windows closed, not letting strangers into the house, etc.), where to reach you and what to do in case of an emergency.

Because it's not possible to be with your children every second of every day, there are steps you should take to help ensure their safety:

- Talk to your child about safety and use what-if scenarios to teach them safety rules. You don't want to scare or create the impression that the world is a scary and unsafe place, so rather emphasise the things we can do to keep ourselves safe.



- Have your children practice saying “no” in a loud voice.
- Emphasise that they should not talk to strangers, even if you are with them (they shouldn’t feel the need to be polite). Make sure your children understand what the term “stranger” means. Their definition may differ from yours and they may trust someone who calls them by their name after reading it on their bags or clothing items. Make it clear, however, that it is okay to get help from a stranger if they are in an emergency and don’t know anyone around them.
- Teach your child never to accept money, gifts, sweets, or lifts from strangers or even familiar people who don’t know your family’s safety code word (a word that only people who are allowed to pick up or look after your children should know).
- Teach your children how to run away, make a noise or find help when approached by strangers, for example how to identify security guards.
- Encourage your children to avoid walking alone or being alone in public places - teach them to stay in a group.
- Don’t leave your children unattended in public places or the car. Go with them even if they need the toilet or take them with you even if you’re just “running in”.
- If separated from you or their group of friends in a public place, smaller children should stand in one place and not walk around to look for you and bigger children can be taught to go to a specific place (the left corner in the back of the shop, the information desk, etc).
- Make sure your children know their names, your cell number and address in case they get lost, but teach them not to give out this information to strangers. Some experts advise you to write your cell number on their forearms when you go to busy places, in case you are separated.
- Teach your children to dial the emergency numbers (10111 from a landline and 112 from a cell phone) and make sure they understand when to use it.
- Tell your children to trust their instincts - when a situation feels wrong, it usually is. They should tell you about it.
- Make it a family rule not to keep secrets. If anyone asks your children to keep a secret or if anything bothers them, they should tell you, your partner/spouse, or another trusted family member.
- Teach your child about setting boundaries, with strangers and people they know.
- Make sure you know where your children are at all times and encourage them to tell you of their whereabouts or contact you if they are going to be late. Make sure their cell phone batteries are charged and airtime is sufficient.

Keeping them busy

Almost as worrying for some parents, is finding activities to keep children occupied constructively. While this is important to keep kids off the street and out of mischief, it’s important that children also spend some unstructured time to just potter around and let their imaginations run free. This is how they learn to entertain themselves and consolidate things that they have learnt. Bear this in mind when you schedule your daily or weekly activities. Here are some ideas for keeping the children busy:

- Find out whether schools, community centres or organisations are offering workshops or classes that your children may be interested in. Local papers and childcare magazines may list providers that offer art classes, sport clinics, acting classes, or other skills that your children may want to learn.
- Decide on a “holiday project” that can be completed throughout. Tailor this to your children’s interests - one may want to create a scrapbook, while the other may want to build a match stick town.
- Keep art and craft supplies handy. Think beading, sewing, bubble art, finger painting, potato prints, macaroni jewellery, and so on.
- Have a box of sports equipment (such as balls, skipping ropes, roller skates, and so on) at their disposal. Consider creating a family challenge (doesn’t necessarily have to be done together, but will be more fun if it is) with these and write the achievements on your white board/notice board or stick them up on the refrigerator.
- Visit the library. Reading is an invaluable pastime. Encourage your child to read different types of books and set a good example by reading too.
- Check local listings for exhibitions and museums - often they have special holiday programmes.
- Get out the board games and puzzles. There are sure to be some games or puzzles that the children haven’t played or completed in a while.
- Hide things in the garden or house, draw up a treasure map and little hint notes and have your children go on a treasure hunt. This is also a good way of reminding them that you are thinking about them even if you are at work.
- Arrange play dates with friends. Maybe another mother is off when you are not and you can return the favour when you are.
- Be part of the soccer experience. Even if you didn’t manage to get tickets for the matches, try to go along to a fan park (remember, don’t leave your child unattended and consider going to a fan fest with child-friendly spaces) or watch on television. Choose favourite teams, learn about countries and cultures, try to introduce them to foods from various countries, and so on.

