Stranger Danger Awareness in Children with Special Needs: A Meta-Synthesis of Existing Literature

Krishnapriya Kanakkassery Satheesan
Independent Researcher / Unaffiliated Researcher

Abstract

Children with special needs, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and intellectual disabilities, often face difficulties in understanding social risks, making them more vulnerable to unsafe interactions with strangers. Traditional "stranger danger" education programs may not sufficiently address their unique cognitive, social, and communication challenges. This meta-synthesis integrates findings from 37 peer-reviewed studies published between 2013 and 2023 to explore how children with special needs perceive stranger danger, the barriers they face, and the effectiveness of current safety education strategies.The synthesis revealed several key themes: (a) cognitive and social limitations in risk perception, (b) difficulty distinguishing safe from unsafe strangers, (c) limitations of traditional stranger danger programs, and (d) the critical role of parents and educators in reinforcing safety behaviors. Children with special needs often depend on rote learning, struggle to generalize safety concepts, and may misinterpret social cues, increasing their vulnerability. Evidence suggests that alternative teaching methods such as video modeling, virtual reality training, and social narratives are more effective than traditional verbal instruction.Future research should focus on the development and evaluation of neurodiverse-friendly safety interventions, assessing the long-term effectiveness of these interventions, and investigating the role of technology-assisted learning tools in safety education. Moreover, policy reforms are needed to improve the training of educators, caregivers, and law enforcement to better address the safety needs of children with developmental disabilities.

Keywords: stranger danger, special needs, autism spectrum disorder, child safety, meta-synthesis