

# SPOTTING DANGER

before it spots  
your kids

*Teaching situational awareness to keep children safe*



**GARY QUESENBERRY**

FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL (RET.)

Foreword by Loren W. Christensen

## As the world changes, we need to take the time to prepare our children.

**"If there is a child in your life that you care about, please read this book."** —Craig Sawyer, founder, Veterans for Child Rescue

**"[This book helps] ensure that our children are able to navigate through the uncertainties of the modern world."** —Joseph Koury, 30-year Special Operations soldier

**"Comprehensive and relatable step-by-step guide for building situational awareness skills in children."** —Kelly Sayre, founder and president, The Diamond Arrow Group

**"This book is not designed to instill fear. In fact, it will help the entire family to sleep better at night."** —Billy Williams, Counter-terror and explosives specialist, Department of Homeland Security

**"A guidebook for the secure family"** —Kelly D. Venden, Army Special Operations, retired

**"A brief, practical manual for parents and caregivers who want to help children identify and safely respond to dangerous situations."** —Kirkus Reviews

Things change. As the world becomes more challenging, we need to take the time to prepare our children. Not in a threatening or scary way, but in a way that is fun, engaging, and will give them the best possible chance of ensuring their own wellbeing.

### Spotting danger before it happens is a skill that children can learn.

This is a book about presenting the concepts of situational awareness to children in a way that will keep them engaged and help them take an active role in their own personal security. We will show you how to use fun, interactive games to build situational awareness skills such as:

- How children can identify and understand normal environmental behaviors.
- How children can spot abnormal behaviors within their given environment.
- How to give children a plan and a means of avoidance or escape should a dangerous situation present itself.

What you impart upon children will have a lasting impact on the way they live their lives. Nowhere is this more important than in the area of personal safety.

***"Your child's future success will depend on their ability to interact with their surroundings and make sound decisions based on what they see. That's the foundation of situational awareness."***



**Gary Quesenberry** is a US Army veteran, a retired Federal Air Marshal, and CEO of Quesenberry Personal Defense Training LLC. Gary has devoted his life to studying violence and predatory behavior. He has been featured on the History Channel's hit series *Top Shot - Season 3* and *Top Shot All-Stars*. Gary has an extensive background in domestic and foreign counter-terror training and has worked tirelessly educating others on the importance of situational awareness and personal safety. Gary resides in Carroll County, Virginia.

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YMAA Publication Center  
1-800-669-8892  
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## Praise for *Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Kids* . . .

Gary's latest book, *Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Kids*, is an amazing piece of work that can prepare your children for the unexpected dangers they may one-day face. Given that there is an epidemic of child sex trafficking right here in the United States, our children need to be educated about the importance of situational awareness, but parents and caregivers need to provide that education in a manner that won't completely terrify them. This book does an incredible job of giving adults the tools they need to do just that. Gary sets forth lessons that instill the basics of situational awareness in a way that is fun and engaging for both adults and kids. If there is a child in your life who you care about, please read this book.

—Craig Sawyer, founder of “Veterans for Child Rescue,”  
former Navy SEAL, DEVGRU sniper

Many parents today believe that protecting their children from the dangers inherent in our society means avoiding sensitive issues and keeping their children locked away in a protective bubble. *Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Kids* breaks you out of this mindset and shows you what children need to know if they are to navigate the uncertainties of the modern world. This book is a must-read for all new parents and young adults going off to high school or away to college.

—Joseph Koury, thirty-year veteran,  
Special Operations soldier

When parents, especially mothers, attend my trainings, the number-one question I get asked is, “How do I teach my kids situational awareness without scaring them?” After reading Gary's book, I now have a resource I can recommend with complete confidence. Gary has taken all his knowledge and years of experience with the Federal Air Marshals and created a comprehensive and relatable step-by-step guide for building situational awareness skills in children. He shares stories of his own children's quick thinking, as well as heroic tales of children who knew what to do in an emergency situation; these stories offer parents positive examples of the importance of building these skills. Gary expertly identifies age-appropriate games that can be played by anyone and explains how they build lifesaving skills in children. This book is a must-read for every parent!

—Kelly Sayre, founder and president of The Diamond  
Arrow Group, expert instructor in Situational Awareness  
Training for Women, EAP consultant

*Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Kids* is a must for all parents. Not only does Gary give you everything you need to keep your family safe, he imparts years' worth of instructional experience. Gary shows you the tricks of the instructional trade and helps you relay this extremely important information. This book is not designed to instill fear. In fact, it will probably help the entire family to sleep better at night.

—Billy Williams, U.S. Department of Homeland Security supervisor, Counterterrorism and Explosives Training Section

As a former homicide and juvenile crimes detective sergeant, I can attest to the horrific dangers in the world we live in today. I know that if the victims of the crimes I investigated had had the tools contained in this book, they might still be alive. As a senior executive in law enforcement, I can confirm that there are grave dangers all around us. Most people are unaware of and often ill-equipped to survive these dangers. Gary is an expert in this field and teaches essential life-saving principles that are easy to learn and implement.

—Dana Chong Tim, government executive, former homicide and juvenile crimes detective-sergeant

In this book, Gary applies his expertise on situational awareness to issues unique to children, and does it in a completely entertaining way. This will be your go-to guidebook for creating real security for your family.

—Kelly D. Venden, retired Army Special Operations, federal law enforcement, owner of Criterion Tactical, LLC

*Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Kids: Teaching Children Situational Awareness to Stay Safe* is one of those must-have parenting books. Gary Quesenberry is one of the premier experts in threat detection and situational awareness in the world. His vast experience makes him extremely qualified to offer his insights into any topic involving safety and security. He is also a proud husband and father who has put into practice the same techniques and methods while raising his own children. They are tested and proven. This is a fun and interactive book that helps kids figure out that they can have some level of control in their own lives and, more importantly, have the confidence that comes from knowing how to be safe and secure in any environment. It's a must for every bookshelf in America.

—Matt Cubbler, U.S. Army intelligence veteran, twenty-seven-year career law enforcement officer, former Special Agent with the U.S. Federal Air Marshal Service, author, speaker, host of the “Two Dates and a Dash Podcast”

I teach situational awareness, firearms courses, and instructor-level courses. I thought I was doing a pretty good job of passing on situational awareness skills to my children and grandchildren, but after reading this book, I have learned some things to up my game.

This is an excellent resource for parents and grandparents to help kids learn to be more situationally aware, listen to their gut instinct, be wise to the mood of their environment, and plan ahead for when things don't turn out to be all rainbows and unicorns. Plan on reading this book more than once because it is packed with great information!

—Dawn Dolpp, certified firearms instructor  
and training counselor

This second book in Gary's situational awareness series is must-read primer for all parents who want to keep their children safe in the dangerous world we live in. Purchase this book, and you will learn from one of the best.

—Maureen Sangiorgio, award-winning writer,  
NRA-certified firearms instructor/RSO

This book is truly eye opening! I deeply admire Gary's openness and honesty in sharing his family's own personal security scare. His story about having someone threaten his family's safety while he was away serving our country as the tip of the spear for Homeland Security operations really connected with me as a retired law enforcement officer. It clearly illustrated the all-too-common tendency to switch on our heightened awareness when needed and inadvertently switch it off when we are home with our loved ones. This book will make every parent take a step back and see the bigger picture and how it affects their family. I was a big fan of Gary's first book in this series, and this second book should be required reading for any parent out there.

—Trampas Swanson, firearms instructor/training counselor, deputy editor of *Private Military Contractor International* magazine, retired law enforcement officer

A brief, practical manual for parents and caregivers who want to help children identify and safely respond to dangerous situations.

A detailed but mostly straightforward kids-safety guide.

—*Kirkus Reviews*



# SPOTTING DANGER BEFORE IT SPOTS YOUR KIDS

**Teaching Situational Awareness  
To Keep Children Safe**

**GARY QUESENBERRY**  
*Federal Air Marshal (Ret.)*

FOREWORD BY LOREN W. CHRISTENSEN

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When it comes to martial arts, self-defense, and related topics, no text, no matter how well written, can substitute for professional, hands-on instruction. **These materials should be used for academic study only.**



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# Foreword

by Loren W. Christensen

I JOINED THE PORTLAND (OREGON) POLICE BUREAU shortly after returning from serving a year with the military police in Vietnam. Besides my regular duties as a patrol officer in Portland, I also taught self-defense to police officers at the bureau and situational awareness to citizens.

Outside of police work, I ran a martial arts school where I taught three fighting arts and always emphasized techniques to avoid conflict. I also wrote magazine pieces on alertness and awareness and, in time, I had mastered the subjects.

Or so I thought.

From 1988 through 1993, I worked in the police bureau's Gang Enforcement Team as an intelligence officer specializing in white supremacist gangs and hate crimes. I was also the media spokesman for the gang unit concerning racist skinheads. As such, I spoke to television, radio, and newspapers virtually every week. As a result, people recognized me on the street.

At one point, we learned through informants that at least one of the many skinhead gangs had compiled a hit list with my name at the top. I was an easy pick to kill because my name and face were continually in the public eye. Also on the list was a description of my private car, the type of firearm I carried, and the name of the school my two older children attended.

One blistering hot August day, my youngest daughter and I spent several hours enjoying a farmers' market set up in a downtown park. Wilted and sun-scorched, we left in the late afternoon to head home, wanting only to shower and lounge in front of the air conditioning. Almost home, we remembered we hadn't shopped for groceries yet. We stopped at a supermarket and slogged along like zombies through the aisles with a cart.

The next day after our grocery-buying stop, one of the gang unit's detectives stopped by my desk and asked if I had been shopping the day before at Safeway on 82nd with a girl about twelve years old. When I told him I had, he said, "It's a good thing you're sitting down."

The detective's informant had called him and said she had been shopping the day before when, as she put it, "I saw that cop who is on television walk past the end of her aisle with a young girl. Two skinheads who were in my row filling their cart with beer saw him too."

She heard one of them say to the other, "Hey, Officer Christensen just walked by with a kid. Let's do him in the parking lot." She heard the other skinhead say, "That must be his daughter; we'll kill her too."

She said the gang members pushed their cart to the end of the aisle to see where I had gone. When she saw us leave with our bags and the skinheads start to follow, she deliberately rammed her grocery cart into theirs with enough force to knock theirs over onto its side, spilling and breaking several beers. My daughter and I left the store, oblivious to the incident.

I was shocked to hear about the aborted hit and forever grateful to the woman who created a distraction. That my child was with me—well, there are no words to describe my anger.

I kept asking myself how I missed it all. Were the skinheads ever in my line of sight? If so, were they wearing the usual flight jackets, black work pants, and "Doc Marten" boots? They must have been if the woman recognized them as skins. So how did I miss them and the overturned grocery cart commotion?

I could tell myself they had not been where I could see them, and the grocery cart ramming had occurred after we were through checkout, but the one thing I know for sure is this—I wasn't alert in the store that afternoon. We were hot, exhausted, and frustrated that we had to buy groceries. We just wanted to get home. Nothing else mattered. Poor excuses? Yes, they are.

How disastrous it could have been if that woman hadn't been situationally aware that day to save my daughter and the guy who taught the subject to others.

Unfortunately, as a police officer, I investigated cases where there was no one to help the young victims. I'll spare you the details, but I will say this. The material in this book would have saved lives and psychological trauma.

Many have written and taught situational awareness for cops, martial artists, women, night workers, and other people in vulnerable occupations. But Gary Quesenberry's *Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Kids* is unique because it's written for children, "our best hope for the future," as he says.

The book is also different from others because Gary has made the subject highly readable. Too many authors and instructors seem to try to present situational awareness as more complicated than it needs to be. Not Gary. His writing is immediately understandable, his analysis sound, and most importantly, his suggestions are easy to implement—right now.

Chapter One: The Parent's Role begins with the basics of situational awareness: 1) establishing a baseline of behavior within your given environment; 2) being able to spot actions that fall outside of that set baseline; and 3) developing plans for avoidance or escape based on what you see. These are the meat and potatoes of the entire program. Additionally, Gary tells parents to avoid teaching with fear. Brilliant! As a uniformed cop, I had so many parents point at me and say to their children that I would put them in jail if they didn't start behaving. Scaring kids doesn't work.

Chapter Two: How Children Learn New Tasks shows parents how their kids discover through three mediums: visual, auditory, and tactile. He offers several techniques for each one that help kids absorb and retain information.

Chapter Three: Teaching the Basics. Ask any top athlete, artist, musician, and rock climber what the essential element in their activity is, and they will answer—the basics. The same is true with personal safety.

Chapter Four: Game Night is about teaching children with games. Of the many Gary discusses, I especially liked “Drive [or walk] us home.” With this one, the child provides directions back home to the parent, whether driving or walking. Be sure to include routes that pass police stations, firehouses, and hospitals.

Chapter Five, Situational Awareness for Children, introduces the core objectives of the program. Gary does an outstanding job of breaking down the four objectives without instilling fear.

Chapter Six: Give Your Children Options. In the first five chapters, Gary teaches the key elements that keep kids safe. In this one, he teaches four response options and how each one applies to various situations.

Chapter Seven: Common Encounters looks at situations in which kids are likely to find themselves, such as separation, interaction with strangers, and school shootings.

Chapter Eight: The “What If” Game. I played this many times with my children when they were growing up. I still do it sometimes when I’m out with one of them. I even do it with my wife, who has trained in the martial arts since 1996 and has black belts in two fighting systems. Refresher questions are a good thing at any age, including quizzing yourself.

Chapter Nine: Working Together. In this last chapter, Gary Quesenberry discusses how to work with children of different ages.

*Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Kids* is, without question, the best book on the subject. It’s easy to read, information-packed, well organized, and designed for quick reference.

Get it for your family and gift it to another parent.

# Introduction

“It is not what you do for your children, but what you have taught them to do for themselves, that will make them successful human beings.”

—ANN LANDERS

LIKE ANY PARENT, I feel that children are our best hope for the future. We commit our lives to giving them everything they need so we can one day turn them loose in the world to flourish and grow. We want them to have happy and healthy lives so maybe one day they can experience the pleasure of loving and raising children of their own. Regardless of how scary the thought of one day sending your children out into the world may be, we need to prepare them in every way possible. That includes preparing them for the dangers they may one day face. Nelson Mandela once said, “History will judge us by the difference we make in the everyday lives of children.” I wholeheartedly believe that to be true and feel that the most significant thing we can do for our children is to give them a feeling of safety and security. As parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts, it’s up to us to create an environment where they will experience those feelings, but we also have to teach them how to be self-sufficient. Their future success will



depend on their ability to interact with their surroundings and make sound decisions based on what they see. These same two concepts will also be what keeps them safe and free from harm as they start to become more independent.

According to [healthychildren.org](http://healthychildren.org), children between the ages of four and six are beginning to seek their independence, form real friendships, and feel the need to perform more complex tasks on their own. At this age, it's also important for parents to start assigning more responsibility to their children. Aside from the ordinary duties of cleaning their rooms and brushing their teeth before bed, it's time to start thinking of ways we can teach them to look out for themselves. One effective way of beginning this process is by informing your children about situational awareness and the critical role it plays in their personal safety. Most adults have a basic understanding of situational awareness and what that means. My definition of situational awareness is this: the ability to identify and process environmental cues to accurately predict the actions of others. As adults, we do this daily without giving it much thought. We do it during our commutes to work, in grocery store checkout lines, and in parking lots. We are continually taking in information and using what we see to make decisions. The question is, how do we best take the basic concepts of situational awareness and present them to our children? On the surface, this may not seem like a very pressing issue. Our children's safety is our responsibility, and as parents, we try to be present and available as much as humanly possible, but what happens when we can't be there? What do our children need to know about spotting danger and keeping themselves safe?

For the past twenty-eight years, I've either been in the military or working in federal law enforcement. As a federal air marshal, it was my job to blend into my surroundings and pay close attention to what was going on around me. Situational awareness, planning, and preparation became second nature, and the process of predicting the actions

of others became almost intuitive. This isn't a superpower or some secret skill reserved only for those working in high-speed counterterrorism jobs. Awareness is something that everyone possesses to one degree or another. Some of what we know about others is instinctive; the rest is based on observable patterns of behavior and what those behaviors mean in the context of a given situation. It wasn't until a terrifying incident involving my own family that I realized how vital these skills were to everyone, especially children. (Readers of my first book will recall this story.)

The incident happened back in 2003. I was working as a federal air marshal in Las Vegas, Nevada. A man identifying himself as Gary Quesenberry called my children's elementary school and told the attendance officer he would be coming by to pick the kids up early. He said that because he worked for the government, he was being reassigned to a new office, and the children would not be returning. The caller knew my name, the names of my children, and that I worked for the government. To me, this was an apparent attempt by someone to get at my family. Luckily, my wife regularly volunteered at the school and had stopped by early that day. She knew that I was away at work that night and quickly alerted the police to the situation. No one ever showed up, and we believe the added police presence at the school scared off the would-be kidnapper. The jobs I've held over the years always left me open to predatorial targeting. Still, we've constantly cautioned our children against strangers and how they should react if someone unfamiliar approached them. Hopefully the school's system of identification would have eliminated any chance of someone removing the kids that day. I had no idea what had happened to cause this, but it was clear to me that changes had to be made, not only in the way my wife and I did things but also in what we taught our children about personal safety. It was time to get serious about hardening our defenses and the first place we started was with situational awareness.

Situational awareness consists of three parts:

1. Establishing a baseline of behavior within your given environment
2. Being able to spot actions that fall outside of that set baseline
3. Developing plans for avoidance or escape based on what you see.

We're going to get deeper into those things later, but it's important to remember that those three factors do not change depending on your age. Whether you're eight years old or eighty, those are the three elements of situational awareness that can save your life. The question becomes, how do we teach those three things to children in a way they'll appreciate and understand?

As my wife and I began teaching our kids about situational awareness, one thing became glaringly obvious: the old model of "stranger danger" just didn't work. I wanted my children to be friendly and engaging, and by teaching them that all strangers are dangerous, we were actually instilling an unnecessary amount of fear in them. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, roughly 800,000 children are reported missing each year in the United States. That's approximately 2,200 per day. Of those, there are 115 "stranger abduction" cases, which accounts for less than one percent of the annual total. The truth is, not all strangers are dangerous; they may be parents themselves, or grandparents, teachers, pastors, or nurses. Regardless of who they are, the vast majority of people are reasonable, law-abiding citizens who would go out of their way to help a child in need. Children can be entirely crippled by fear, and the last thing my wife and I wanted as parents were to be the source of that fear. We wanted our kids to be confident and outgoing, but what was the best way to allow them to retain those social traits and still teach them about the potential for danger and the importance of personal safety? That question led me to take a closer look at the federal

air marshal's program of situational awareness and how the things I'd learned over the course of my career could be adapted to, and successfully taught to, children.

To simplify the process of teaching situational awareness to children, I've broken this book down into three separate phases.

1. **What parents need to know.** It's imperative that adults have a firm grip on the fundamentals of situational awareness and how they impact personal safety. Phase one will serve as a refresher for the concepts I've detailed in *Spotting Danger Before It Spots You*, book one of the Heads Up series and will be the jumping off point for the techniques you'll pass along to your children.
2. **What kids need to know.** This is where we take a closer look at the basics of awareness from the child's perspective and start laying the groundwork for a more progressive situational awareness program.
3. **Teaching and reinforcing the specific aspects of situational awareness.** This is where the real work begins. In this phase, adults and children will work together to build upon the foundations laid in phase two. The skills that your child has developed can now be utilized in specific training points that emphasize the importance of situational awareness and ensure that your child understands their full range of options during a dangerous encounter.

In the appendix, I've included an easy-to-follow checklist. This roadmap to situational awareness will help you stay on track and monitor you and your child's progress along their journey to personal safety.

As I mentioned above, we'll be revisiting some of the concepts covered in the first book. I felt that in certain chapters it was necessary to refresh the reader's memory on some key components of situational awareness. In other cases, I worked under the assumption that the

reader may not have read the first book at all. In either case I've made an attempt to keep repetitive material brief and relevant to the topics being discussed.

The basics of situational awareness aren't overly complicated. I found early on that the fundamental elements of awareness, such as memory, comprehension, critical thinking, and decision-making, could be easily taught and reinforced through simple games. Once those skill sets are in place, it becomes much easier to advance children into the more focused aspects of awareness.

Before we begin, I'd like to make one thing clear. I'm not a child psychologist. I'm simply a parent who, through the course of a career as a federal air marshal, has learned how to observe and read people's actions without drawing undue attention to himself. What I give to you here is a simple and effective method for presenting your children with the building blocks of situational awareness—a road map to help you guide them along their journey to personal safety. As with any new skill, these things take time and practice. If you stick with it and keep the process fun and engaging, you'll start to notice a big difference in the way your child interacts with their surroundings. You'll see them begin to identify and differentiate between normal and abnormal behaviors in various settings. You'll also see how these newfound skills improve their spatial awareness and ability to think critically about their environment. Eventually, you'll feel more confident in the fact that, even when alone, your child can spot dangerous situations before they happen, act independently, and communicate effectively with those around them. These are potentially life-saving skills, but the process of learning them can also serve as a means for quality family time. As I said in the beginning, our children are our best hope for the future. We're obligated to give them everything they need to stay happy and safe. Their situational awareness plays a big role in that, so let's get started.







# PHASE ONE—What Parents Need to Know



# 1

## The Parent's Role

“It’s a great mistake, I think, to put children off with falsehoods and nonsense when their growing powers of observation and discrimination excite in them a desire to know about things.”

—ANNE SULLIVAN

AS PARENTS, WE HAVE a great responsibility. Not only are we responsible for the safety and wellbeing of our children, but we are also tasked with guiding them along the path to independence. We were all kids at some point. As adults, it becomes harder to connect with the feelings we had as children. We tend to look back at our childhood experiences with an adult perspective, and in doing so we wonder how we could have ever been so happily oblivious. What we need to remember is that the dangers young people face today are dramatically different than those we faced even a decade ago. Things change, and as the world becomes more challenging, we need to take the time to prepare our children. Not in a way that will scare them into staying locked up inside the house, but in a way that is fun, engaging, and will give them the best possible chance of ensuring their own wellbeing. This all starts by tapping into your child’s greatest resource ... their imagination.

According to child psychologist Sally Goddard Blythe, director of The Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology, the importance of imagination in childhood development cannot be overstated. “Put simply, imagination is the ability to create visual images in the mind’s eye, which allows us to explore all sorts of images and ideas without

being constrained by the limits of the physical world. This is how children begin to develop problem-solving skills, coming up with new possibilities, new ways of seeing and being, which develop important faculties in critical thinking that will help the child throughout life.” These elements of critical thinking and problem-solving are crucial to the development of situational awareness. It’s up to us parents to tap into this well of imagination and use our children’s natural curiosity to impart lessons that foster a sense of independence and security.

Adults have a unique opportunity. We can use our children’s ability to imagine and create as a way to teach them about things they may not necessarily be interested in. I know from experience that talking to kids about safety and awareness isn’t something that immediately gains their attention. Trying to broach these subjects in a way that holds your child’s interest is challenging, to say the least, but to get them fully involved, you must have a thorough understanding of the topic yourself. Children learn by example. Whether you’re aware of it or not, they watch every move you make, and they try to imitate the things they see you doing. From the way you walk, talk, and interact with others, your children are constantly evaluating you. It’s essential that you use this knowledge to set a good example, but it’s also a vital piece of the awareness puzzle. Your children’s natural curiosity and capacity for observation are what we’re going to focus on to build their situational awareness. They already have all the tools they need to develop these abilities and adapt them into their life; what’s most important right now is that you, as the parent, have the tools you need. So let’s start with the basics.

## **1.1 The Basics of Awareness**

Your personal security is about much more than just your immediate circumstances. Real safety comes from being able to predict the actions of others through observation and planning. This is the heart and soul of situational awareness and takes place well before any physical encounter with danger. If you’ve read the first book in the Heads Up

## 2

# How Children Learn New Tasks

“Tell me, and I forget. Teach me, and I remember.  
Involve me, and I learn.”

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

CHILDREN ARE LIKE LITTLE SPONGES. From the moment they take their first breath, they are learning. All five senses are fully engaged and taking in every possible detail about their new environment. You can see the amazement and curiosity on their faces as they try to make sense of it all. This process never stops. Children are continually finding new things that fascinate them. The endless stream of questions they can throw at us adults can sometimes be baffling and overwhelming. I'll admit it, I have no clue why God put a duckbill on a beaver ... Sometimes we have to prioritize the information we provide our children and help them to focus on what's most important at the moment. Crossing the street is not the time to wonder where rainbows come from; it's time to focus on the flow of traffic. When we start talking to our children about the world around them and what things are most

important to their safety, we have to have a structured way of presenting this information. Given that we all learn in different ways, what's the best method for teaching these new, possibly life-saving concepts to our children?

Everyone, including your children, generally learns through three different mediums, visual, auditory, and tactile. Visual learners, who constitute almost half the population, learn best through sight. Auditory learners, who are less common, learn best by hearing; they remember the details of conversations and classroom lectures and may have strong language skills. Tactile learners learn best by doing and prefer more of a hands-on experience. Now let's break down each medium and consider what techniques work best for each individual learner.

**Visual (Seeing):**

- Provide visual aids such as pictures, charts, graphs, maps, flow-charts, diagrams, and timelines.
- Use multimedia presentations such as computers, videos, and PowerPoint.
- Use color to highlight important points in text.
- Illustrate ideas as a picture or brainstorming bubble before writing them down.
- Write a story and illustrate it.

**Auditory (Hearing):**

- Encourage discussions, debates, or teach-backs.
- Provide an opportunity for your child to recite the main points of a lesson or story.
- Allow them to read information out loud.
- Create musical jingles to aid memorization.
- Use analogies and storytelling to demonstrate your point.
- Encourage spoken answers to questions.

# 3

## Teaching the Basics

“Success is neither magical nor mysterious. Success is the natural consequence of consistently applying the basic fundamentals.”

—JIM ROHN

I SPENT THREE YEARS working as a firearms instructor at the Federal Air Marshal Services training center in Atlantic City, New Jersey. In that time, I helped to train over five hundred of the world’s finest shooters. Some of the students we received had previous experience with a handgun; others had never even held a firearm before they began their training. Regardless of their skill level, the core curriculum remained consistent. We always started out with the basics. Establishing a proper stance and grip, then slow and steady draw strokes from concealment. Then we followed up by reinforcing sight management, trigger control, and follow through. This progression was repetitive and slow. If we saw something falling apart at this stage we would immediately stop to make the proper corrections and reset the process. Once the fundamentals were understood and could be performed



properly and consistently, we started putting students on the clock. By slowly compressing the amount of time they had to complete a task, we would purposely “rush” the student to induce stress. When the fundamentals of marksmanship could be performed under these minimal levels of stress, we would find new and torturous ways to increase the stress levels until we were certain the student could execute the basics under any circumstances. Only then were they allowed to move on to the “advanced” portion of their firearms training. We did these things not to make life harder for our candidates but to instill in them one simple principle. At thirty thousand feet, pinpoint accuracy under extreme pressure was the only acceptable standard. The only way to ensure that standard was met was to continually stress the importance of the basics and to reinforce those fundamentals through training. Although much less stressful, teaching your child a new skill such as situational awareness is no different. You need to start with the basics, and then work your way slowly into the more complex aspects of situational awareness.

I generally recommend starting the conversation with your children about situational awareness between the pre-school ages of three and four. At this age, your children should be ready for a little more independence. By now, they’re developing their organizational, social, and communication skills to the point that they can make themselves understood to others, even in times of crisis. Given the fact that your child will be spending more time separated from you, it’s crucial that they can memorize and recite a few details about the adults in their lives. This will allow them to accurately relay that information to others in case of an emergency, so it’s always a great place to start. Here are the five pieces of information that I recommend focusing on first:

1. **Parents’ first and last names:** My wife used to work with small children as a nurse. Often, when she would ask a child the name of their parents, they would respond with “Mommy and Daddy.” Make sure that as your children get older, you teach

## 4

# Game Night—Building a Foundation for Awareness

“For a small child, there is no division between playing and learning; between the things he or she does ‘just for fun’ and things that are ‘educational.’ The child learns while living, and any part of living that is enjoyable is also play.”

—PENELOPE LEACH

CHILDREN ACQUIRE different intellectual skills as they meet certain developmental checkpoints. Many of these skills will be critical to the improvement of their situational awareness. You can help your child fully develop these abilities with fun, inexpensive, or even made-up games. Games spark your child’s imagination and serve as a vehicle for education. They can help to improve memory, spatial awareness, comprehension, analytical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making in a way that both the parent and the child can appreciate. More importantly, game night helps to reconnect the family. We are

living in a time where individual and solitary activity is the norm. As electronic devices become more accessible, it's no longer unusual for children to have their own TVs, computers, and iPads, which mean that families seldom see the need to be in the same room together. As time goes on, it becomes harder and harder for us to connect with one another. Make it a point to schedule a game night at least two nights a week. For one or two hours, turn off the TV, set the phones aside, and just have fun. The life lessons your child learns will come naturally and they won't feel like work. According to family therapy and parent education specialist Marie Hartwell-Walker:

- Games teach important life skills. To win a game, one has to follow the directions, take turns, be patient, and stay friendly with the others around the table. Many games require us to strategize, to read others' nonverbal cues, and to learn from our own errors. Regular game nights give kids practice in these essential skills and provide immediate feedback about what works and what doesn't.
- Games teach good sportsmanship. Kids aren't born good sports. They tend to gloat when they win and whine when they lose. Most kids try cheating at least once. Games provide opportunities for kids to learn that honest winning feels better and makes better relationships than cheating. They provide a forum for teaching children how to be gracious winners and good losers.
- Playing together fosters family communication. As kids get older, the in-between times become the times when the most important conversations occur. Kids are more likely to share their thoughts and feelings when they are doing something else. The times between turns, between hands of cards, and between games are fertile ground for casual sharing of sometimes not-so-casual information.

# 5

## Situational Awareness for Children

“An observant child should be put in the way of things worth  
observing.”

—CHARLOTTE MASON

UP TO THIS POINT, you should be familiar with the basic elements of situational awareness, the skill sets that are required to maintain that awareness, and how these skills are applied to children through play. We’ve also covered how our children can learn new skills through the EDIP principle. Now it’s time to start developing a plan to pass that information on to your child in a way that sparks their interest without inducing unreasonable fear. I say unreasonable because I feel that a little apprehension is a good thing. It fosters a natural sense of caution without triggering the anxiety caused by irrational phobias. A little fear can be managed through concentration and observation, paired with confidence in your own ability. The skills that your child has developed through gameplay can now be directed toward building that confidence. As we move through the following sections, your

child will start to understand how the abilities they've developed through play can now be applied to their everyday lives. As they progress through this journey to situational awareness, you'll see that the recognition of these new skills will promote a steady increase in their self-reliance and a willingness to learn more. But it's important to remember that our children view the concept of danger in a different light than we do.

Situational awareness and preparedness are a little unique for children. They don't have the natural defenses that we adults do. Adults can hit the gym or the dojo to harden themselves up. We can legally arm ourselves, and we have a better understanding of how the world works in general. Children, on the other hand, are small and not very intimidating. They haven't developed that natural skepticism that most adults have about other people in general. Children's security comes from their ability to observe their surroundings, identify threatening situations, and communicate those threats to the adults around them. That's their best defense against danger, and it's important that we as adults give them the tools they need to properly develop those skills. That means that we adults owe it to our children to educate ourselves on the dangers out there.

Rory Miller, author of *Meditations on Violence*, points out that there are two types of predators among us: resource predators and process predators. A resource predator is looking for something valuable, like money, jewelry, or an unguarded laptop. They've decided they need some physical item and they're going to find someone to take it from. Predators in this category include your basic mugger, pickpocket, or burglar. In some cases, if a resource predator confronts you and you just give them the thing they want, they go away. The process predator, on the other hand, is much different. The process predator isn't interested in your watch or briefcase; they get off on the act of violence itself. This category of predator includes the likes of rapists and murderers. When you look at how this applies to children, the resource predator may view your child as a source of income, be it

# 6

## Give Your Children Options

“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You’re on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the one who’ll decide where to go ...”

—DR. SEUSS

IT’S BEEN SAID that having only one option is no option at all. I’m a firm believer in that. I like to have options, and being placed in a situation where there’s only one way out makes me apprehensive. Earlier, I spoke about playing counting games with your children when you’re out in public. Counting the number of exits, windows, employees, police officers—we do this to make the habit of paying attention fun for our children, but it also serves another purpose. When it comes to the planning stages of reacting to potential danger, all of this information helps your child to make a decision and gives them options. We want our kids to understand that there is always more than one way to solve a problem. By allowing them to think through their situation

and identify as many solutions as possible, we're giving them the tools they need to act in the face of danger as opposed to freezing.

There's something known as Hick's Law that describes the time it takes a person to make a decision as a result of the possible choices he or she has. Increasing the number of options also increases the time it takes to make a decision. This concept was first put forward by British psychologist William Edmond Hick and is widely taught in law enforcement circles. But there's a common misconception regarding Hick's Law that I think needs a little clarification. Most people believe that by adding multiple solutions to a problem they're significantly increasing the time it takes to react and contributing thereby to the freeze response, but the reality is much different. Having choices gives us the freedom to weigh each option and evaluate how the outcome of that option would affect our safety. We weight these decisions well in advance of being faced with danger. That's what situational awareness is all about. Once we have a good idea of what could go wrong, and what our reactions to those events would be, choosing the appropriate solution takes only milliseconds. Options give us confidence, and that's precisely what we want for our children: for them to be confident.

When it comes to situational awareness and spotting danger, children need to understand that they have multiple options that can keep them safe. Communication, avoidance, escape, and confrontation are all valid choices, but picking the most appropriate response can be tricky for younger children. The skills they've learned up to this point will assist them in identifying the key environmental elements that aid in keeping them safe. Now let's take a look at the response options I've listed above and how each one fits into the spectrum of planning and personal safety.

## **6.1 Communication**

Communication skills are one of the most important abilities your child can develop. Being a good communicator will serve them well in every aspect of their life all the way through to adulthood. When it



# 7

## Common Encounters

“The greatest gifts you can give your children are the roots of responsibility and the wings of independence.”

—DENIS WAITLEY

I'M NOT THE TYPE of parent to hover over my children and overreact to the slightest possibility of danger. There have been times I've watched my children put themselves in difficult situations and then simply waited to see how they decided to handle the problem. “Dad! Josh is in a tree and can't get down!” “Well, let's just see how this plays out ...” “Dad! Emily is stuck in the trash can again!” “She got herself in there. She can get herself out ...” Don't get me wrong, I would never let my children put themselves in a position where they could be seriously hurt, but I think it's important to let them weigh their options and work out solutions to smaller problems on their own. It's an integral part of developing their independent spirit.



Photo by author

*Emma in the trash can ... again.*

As our children start to explore their independence and create distance from Mom and Dad, they can often find themselves in situations that frighten them. These situations can range from something as simple as being separated from a parent in the supermarket to something as horrific as finding themselves in the middle of a school shooting. Some solutions are simple and others can be much more complex, but they all require you to have a conversation with your child about how they should be expected to react. Some reactions to problems are structured and systematic; others are more fluid and will require some critical thinking on your child's part. My goal here is to familiarize you with some of the encounters your child may face and how each of these differs in terms of their response. Let's start with something simple.

- **Separation:** This is probably one of the first and most common frightening events that children face. Talk to any adult, and they will tell you a story about how they were once separated from a parent and how that separation caused both anxiety and fear. I told the story of losing my eleven-year-old son in the last chapter. Crowded areas like amusement parks, festivals, supermarkets, and malls are all rife with distractions. Your child's attention can be drawn away quickly, and within seconds they can find

## 8

# The What-if Game—Putting It All Together

“If you are truly serious about preparing your child for the future,  
don’t teach him to subtract, teach him to deduct.”

—FRAN LEBOWITZ

AT THIS POINT, you may be asking yourself, “Now that I have all of this knowledge regarding situational awareness training, how do I put all of the pieces together to gauge what my child has learned?” I’ve always found that the best way to evaluate children’s progress is to test them with the what-if game I mentioned earlier. After the incident at my kid’s school, I seriously stepped up the amount of time I spent with them on the subject of situational awareness. As we’ve discussed, I felt it was important to keep the topics light and make the learning fun, but I wanted to impress upon them the importance of what they were learning and why. Once in a while, when I found a news story I thought would be of particular interest to the kids, I would share it with them, and we would work through what their responses should

be if they ever found themselves in a similar situation. Due to the violent nature of some of these events, I held off on discussing them with my children until I felt they were capable of processing the information maturely. Here's an example.

On July 20, 2012, a deranged killer entered the Century 16 theatre in an Aurora, Colorado shopping mall. Within minutes he killed twelve people and injured seventy others. Back in 2012, well after the incident at the school, my three children were in their teens, and like most families with teenagers, we spent a lot of time at the mall. Given what I knew about these seemingly random acts of violence, I felt that it was necessary to inform my children about the appropriate responses to situations like active shooter events. As I mentioned in the last chapter, this can be a tough subject to broach, but it has to be discussed if you're serious about child safety. I found the best way to engage my children on this topic was to explain the event and then ask them questions about how they think they may respond in similar situations. "If we're in the food court and gunfire erupts to the left, where do we go, and what actions do we take?" "If we're entering a store and someone with a knife starts running toward us from the opposite end, what do we do?" The mental rehearsals provided by these what-if games were invaluable, and they helped us to better prepare for situations we wouldn't normally dream of finding ourselves in. My children are all grown now, but to this day they'll tell you that the what-if games I played with them when they were young have helped them to be more aware and focused in their adult lives. Experts often remind us that "the body will not go where the mind has not been." Regularly asking your children, "What would you do if ... ?" and then working through those situations is an effective way to raise their level of awareness and decrease the chances of them being caught off guard.

What-if games are an extremely effective way to increase situational awareness and decrease reactionary times in the event of a violent

# 9

## Working Together

“Children will listen to you after they feel listened to.”

—JANE NELSEN

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS takes work. I wouldn't be where I am today without the leadership and guidance of some pretty amazing mentors. The awareness techniques I've presented to my children are based on the things I've learned during my nineteen years as a federal air marshal. Here, I've taken those lessons and broken them down into manageable, age-appropriate pieces that when placed together as a whole look no different than what I've done throughout my career. As an adult, it's up to you to make sure your children are prepared for the dangers life may present them. Predatory violence, kidnapping, and human trafficking aren't subjects we tend to discuss freely with our children, but if we expect them to be confident, independent young people, we have to work together with them as opposed to sheltering them from these realities. Children are capable of picking up on things that we're sometimes unaware of, so it's vital that we pay close

attention to how we as adults engage with others. Younger children especially learn by observing others, and they hear almost everything. You may not even realize some of the things they're picking up on, but I can guarantee they're watching and listening.

Something I learned early on as a federal air marshal was how to interact with uniformed police officers in the event we made contact. I didn't wear a uniform, but I was armed pretty much all the time, both on and off duty. Undercover law enforcement officers need to understand how to communicate the fact that they're carrying a weapon in a way that doesn't cause panic or confusion during the interaction. Here's an example. Let's say I'm pulled over for speeding (it happens). I would pull safely to the side of the road, turn my hazard lights on, turn off the vehicle, turn off the radio, roll the window down, and place both hands on the steering wheel where they could be seen. Once the officer approaches, they almost always ask, "Do you have any drugs or weapons in the car?" I always answer with, "Sir (or ma'am), I have my duty weapon on me, and my credentials are in my back pocket." They usually respond with, "Who do you work for?" I tell them, and with my identity established, I'm normally sent on my way with a warning to slow down. I want to make it clear that I'm no speed demon, but I have been pulled over a few times, and as embarrassing as it may be, I've been pulled over while I've had my family in the car with me. I've never taken the time to explain to my children the intricacies of the interaction, but believe me, they were watching.

One year my wife and I decided to take the kids from Las Vegas, where I was stationed at the time, to Idaho to visit her brother's family for Thanksgiving. We left late one evening to return home. I planned on making the ten-hour drive at night while the kids were comfortably asleep in the back. As I drove through the seemingly abandoned desert, I started to let my impatience get the best of me, and I sped up ... considerably. When the blue light hit me, I looked down and saw that I was going a little over one hundred miles per hour. I figured I was getting a ticket for sure this time, so I pulled over, went through my

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## About the Author

**GARY QUESENBERRY** was born in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. His love of the outdoors and patriotic spirit led him to enlist in the United States Army where he served as an artilleryman during Operation Desert Storm. Gary later became a career Federal Air Marshal where he devoted his life to studying violence and predatory behavior. Now Gary has retired from federal service and serves as the CEO of



Photo by Mary Mcilvaine

Quesenberry Personal Defense Training LLC. There he's developed numerous basic and advanced level training courses focused on mental toughness, and defensive tactics. He has an extensive background in domestic and foreign counterterror training and has worked in both the private and corporate sectors to help educate others on the importance of situational awareness and personal safety. He once again resides in his hometown in Carroll County, Virginia.