

SPOTTING DANGER

before it spots
your teens

Teaching situational awareness to keep teenagers safe



GARY QUESENBERRY

FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL (RET.)

Advance Praise for *Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Teens*

Once again, Gary Quesenberry has hit the nail on the head with his most recent book in his *Spotting Danger* series. Never before have teens been so vulnerable to violence as they are today. Gary, who has raised three children to adulthood, knows all too well the difficulty and dangers that teens face online, in school, in their cars, in malls, and on the street. Gary crams this book with ten chapters that address such issues as the teen's mind, situational awareness, the power of intuition, visualization, driver safety, and much, much more. Gary's previous books prove he knows his stuff. As a long-time student of violence and predatory mindset and with a long career as a federal air marshal, the man brings a wealth of experience to his writing. Get this one.

—Loren W. Christensen, author, retired police officer,
Vietnam veteran, 10th dan American Freestyle Karate,
and inductee into the Martial Arts Masters Hall of Fame

Every parent of a teen needs to read this book! Gary has so artfully presented the material in a way that is relevant to today's teens and their parents. This is the kind of book you can read with your kids or have them read . . . and they'll even enjoy reading it too (even if they roll their eyes [at first]!).

Gary includes information on how your teen's brain works in this stage of development and how it might make them more vulnerable, which is a crucial part of understanding how to keep them safe. This book is a mix of proven research, Gary's lifelong experience as a former federal air marshal, and lessons he's learned as a dad of three.

Today's world is more complicated and confusing than it's ever been, and *Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Teens* is a vital tool for every parent of a teen to have in their toolbox. As a parent of two teens, it's in mine.

—Robbin McManne parenting expert, author, founder of Parenting for Connection, podcast host of *Parenting Our Future*

This is the third in a series of situational awareness books by Gary Quesenberry (retired federal air marshal) and is my favorite one. I wish I'd had this available to me in the past.

I like to make notes and highlight interesting and useful parts in a book, so if you're like me, this book will not disappoint. Gary shares what he has learned from his professional and family life, and this book really does have it all, a blueprint for parents and teens.

Each chapter is well written, is easy to read, provides real-life examples and practical exercises, and finishes with the key points (which I love). This book has helped me, my family, my clients, and my clients' families and can help you become a better protector and parent.

—Nigel Wright, security and family management
consultant—French Riviera

This book is unlike anything on the market regarding safety for not just families but specifically for that critical time when your child is transitioning into a young adult. So much is happening, and as parents it can be hard to have conversations that impact them. Gary does an amazing job of providing a detailed roadmap to help parents ensure they are passing on knowledge that will impart lifesaving skills to their teenagers.

Gary's book breaks down fundamental [situational awareness] skills to surviving and overcoming threats both in person and online. It provides parents with conversation starters for their family and covers how to explain the concepts in an engaging way through scenario-based training for teens.

Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Teens is a must-read for any parent or for those who are involved with kids who want to help them develop their situational awareness skills.

As both a family safety expert and a parent to young children, I highly recommend this as a must-read for anybody involved with teenagers. We are all vulnerable at times, but being able to recognize those vulnerabilities and being confident in your ability to spot the danger and have a plan is vital.

—Ashley Glinka, former Federal Air Marshal, family safety expert, founder and creator of Child and Parent Empowerment Program (C.A.P.E), co-founder and trainer at CT3.US

Gary is doing some of the most important fundamental work for living a life of ease for both parents and kids. He's a total pro, a loving father, and an authority who communicates from a place of experience and deep caring. His words are not theoretical. This work is about more than just spotting danger; it's about learning to steer in the direction of opportunity and growth. These skills are fundamental for all ages, especially for the teen years when kids are testing their freedom and learning about the world and themselves. Give yourself some relief, knowing that your loved ones are able to make good decisions and that they can be out in the world safely and responsibly.

—Matt Lucas, martial artist, stunt performer, owner of Yama Systems LLC, trainer and bodyworker for AMC's *Into the Badlands* and *Matrix 4*, lead stunt performer for *Into the Badlands Season 3*

Situational awareness is the most important mental self-defense skill in the world, and one of the most difficult to teach. Mr. Quesenberry manages it by distilling decades of real-world experience into a set of knowledge and techniques the layperson can understand. In this third book of his series, he approaches with laser-like focus the challenges of raising safe teens. Every parent of a teen needs this book today. Every parent of a younger child should read it now so they have more time to get ready.

One of the things I particularly appreciate about Mr. Quesenberry's work is his understanding of the civilian mindset. The majority of books by safety

professionals, soldiers, and law enforcement approach the lesson from the mindset of a violence professional. They assume a level of knowledge, interest, and capacity for violence that is (thankfully) missing from civilian parents. Mr. Quesenberry's Heads Up series avoids that mistake. He meets parents where they are and provides instruction and advice for the world they live in.

—Jason Brick, 6th degree black belt, host of *Safest Family on the Block*, author of the *Safest Family on the Block* newsletter, and bestselling author of *Safe Home Blueprint*

Gary has done it again and delivered a book that should be required reading for parents. Navigating the teenage years is tough for both the parents and the teenager. It's when young adults need to start working on their own life skills in order to have a successful launch in to full adulthood. Personal safety should be at the top of their skill building priority list. This book is the bridge between children and their parent's desire to teach important safety skills, a desire that is sometimes dismissed by their own children as overcautious.

—Kelly Sayre, author, founder and president of The Diamond Arrow Group, author of *Sharp Women: Embrace Your Intuition, Build Your Situational Awareness, & Live Life Unafraid*

Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Teens should be a must-read for every teenager and every parent of teenagers. The stories of teenagers who found themselves in a dangerous situation but because of their situational awareness skills made it through safely are an immediate help and encouragement. Add to that the steps you can take right now, which are listed throughout the book, and just a few chapters in, you are acquiring and learning skills that keep you and your teenager safer.

Having read Gary's first two books on situational awareness and having Gary as a part of our congregation has made our church a harder target and safer place. Gary sharing with our security team opened our eyes to some immediate changes that had to be made in the way we view church security.

I promise you Gary's knowledge of situational awareness will keep you, your small children, your teenagers, and your organization safer. But don't take my word for it, read the book!

—Wendell Horton, senior pastor, Skyview Missionary Baptist Church, Fancy Gap, Virginia

As a father of six, *Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Teens* has significantly impacted my family in a profoundly positive way. In this especially timely book, author Gary Quesenberry delivers relevant, effective, and easy-to-use information to equip both parents *and* teenagers for success in this often volatile, rapidly evolving, dangerous world. As parents, we are not issued "owner's manuals" at the time our children are born. For so many parents, the teenage years pose

an especially challenging period when it comes to effective communication and fruitful dialogue. This book is an exceptional resource and guide to successfully addressing the most important topic for a parent, keeping our children safe—to include when we are *not* present. Gary is exceptionally qualified to speak on security-related topics given his extensive experience as a Federal Air Marshal and conducting low-profile missions globally. Success on those missions relied heavily on his behavioral detection skills to spot danger and pre-incident indicators *before* violence happened. Similarly, and as the title implies, *Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Teens* covers what to do before threats targeting your children fully develop. Keeping our kids safe is non-negotiable. Gary has written a classic book that will impact society and families in an immeasurably significant way.

—Maury Abreu, CEO/chief instructor at Omega Protective Concepts, former sergeant in the United States Marine Corps, former Federal Corrections Officer (Federal Bureau of Prisons), and former Supervisory Federal Air Marshal (Department of Homeland Security)

Quesenberry's newest book, *Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Teens*, is a comprehensive approach to safety and situational awareness crafted for the protection of your kids. The time-tested lessons presented here have been proven from middle America to the Middle East at mitigating risk and getting people home safely. This book transcends threat environments and can be guaranteed to help anyone who is willing to apply the lessons within. Gary's real-world experience in counterterrorism and as a loving father, coupled with his contagious passion for training others, shines through in this book. All parents want what's best for their child's safety and security, but many don't know where to get the right answers appropriately scaled for their family—until now.

—Peter M. Johnson, former Federal Air Marshal, veteran, small business owner, National Law Enforcement Trainer

Gary does a phenomenal job in *Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Teens* by taking readers through a journey of knowledge, understanding, and practice. He combines real-life stories and personal knowledge with research to support his approach. The book is full of relatable stories that help the reader understand Gary's perspectives and techniques. Lastly, readers learn to develop and apply an awareness plan that can prevent a tragedy and even save lives. Without a doubt, this is a book every parent should buy even if their children have not yet reached their teens.

—Gabby Franco, Olympian, firearms instructor, competitive shooter

As a twenty-five-year law enforcement veteran and parent of three, situational awareness has been massively important to me both personally and

professionally. The same skills I've developed as a law enforcement professional are equally as important in keeping my family safe when I'm off duty. Unfortunately, as a parent there comes a time when our teenagers venture out into this sometimes-dangerous world no longer under our watchful eye. One of the most valuable lessons we can instill in our children is to be aware of their surroundings and teach them practical tools to deal with potential threats.

What I love about Gary's most recent book, *Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Teens*, is how he communicates his deep understanding of situational awareness and gives parents practical tools to help prepare their teens to be safe, alert, and engaged with their environment. What makes this book different from other situational awareness books is that Gary first acknowledges most teens' inherent sense of invulnerability and their irresistible need for attention-grabbing digital content, then offers a system to help parents keep their teens safe in this unpredictable world.

Gary has perfectly combined the situational awareness tools developed as a Federal Air Marshal with the experience of having raised his own now-adult children to help other parents raise situationally aware teenagers. To say I recommend this book for parents and teens is an understatement.

—Joshua T. Frank, founder and president of Consequence of Habit

Gary's knowledge of and experience in situational awareness is unmatched. This third book demonstrates that yet again. I have three very special teens in my life, and I have learned over and over they have a language and lifestyle all their own. In this book, Gary tackles those challenges of communicating with teenagers and spells out wonderful and effective ways to teach them how to be aware in their specific surroundings. I love that I now have tips and tactics to make sure each of these sweet kids are safe when they are out in the world. And of course, as a bonus, I continue to build my knowledge along the way, too.

—Andrea Barkley, firearms instructor, and retired
Foreign Service Specialist

In this third book in his self-help series, Quesenberry draws on his years of professional training and personal experiences to help parents keep their teens safe.

The author is a retired air marshal who spent his working life training new recruits in situational awareness. In these pages, he shares his acquired wisdom and strategies with parents, so they can teach their teens to "identify and process environmental cues to accurately predict the actions of others" and keep safe accordingly. By revealing some of the tactics and behaviors of child predators, Quesenberry hopes to educate readers about the dangers that teens face online and out in the world. He explains "pre-incident indicators" that predators may use to manipulate a potential victim, and encourages kids to pay attention not just to their environment, but also to their intuition. Some sections lean more toward more traditional parenting advice, which isn't Quesenberry's area of

professional expertise, although he does cite experts and includes a bibliography of sources. He's clear about which strategies he's used with his own teens, including teaching self-defense techniques and driving rules. Each chapter has a section of "practical exercises," which are designed to help parents teach their teens skills to deal with dangerous situations. Many readers will likely take issue with the physical aggressiveness of a "sneak attack" game—agreed to by parents and kids in advance—in which a parent overpowers an inattentive teen, pins them to the ground, and tickles them to teach them a lesson in situational awareness. But although this sort of role-playing seems extreme, the author also stresses the reality of attacks in which kids could find themselves unable to react defensively. Each chapter concludes with a summation of key points, which may serve as a useful refresher for those consulting the book again after an initial reading.

A thorough and well-intentioned safety guide for parents.

—KIRKUS Reviews

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TEENS**

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Spotting Danger Before It Spots You

Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Kids

SPOTTING DANGER BEFORE IT SPOTS YOUR TEENS

**Teaching situational awareness
to keep teenagers safe**

GARY QUESENBERRY
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Note to Readers

Some identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals as well as the techniques and tactics employed by the Federal Air Marshal Service.

The authors and publisher of the material are NOT RESPONSIBLE in any manner whatsoever for any injury which may occur through reading or following the instructions in this manual.

The activities physical or otherwise, described in this manual may be too strenuous or dangerous for some people, and the reader(s) should consult a physician before engaging in them.

Warning: While self-defense is legal, fighting is illegal. If you don't know the difference you'll go to jail because you aren't defending yourself. You are fighting—or worse. Readers are encouraged to be aware of all appropriate local and national laws relating to self-defense, reasonable force, and the use of weaponry, and act in accordance with all applicable laws at all times. Understand that while legal definitions and interpretations are generally uniform, there are small—but very important—differences from state to state and even city to city. You need to know these differences. Neither the authors nor the publisher assumes any responsibility for the use or misuse of information contained in this book.

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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.**

For my wife
Kelly
You mean everything to me.

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Foreword

by Amber Landry

I WAS A FULL-TIME HOMESCHOOLING mom to three vivacious little adventurers when the opportunity of a lifetime fell into my lap. By education, I was a registered nurse, but I had chosen to set that career aside in exchange for a lifestyle that meant training my own children—and others—to be more self-reliant. It was in the pursuit of that passion that I became connected to the team at Fieldcraft Survival. The preparedness-based training I practiced with my own children fit naturally with their vision for a family-preparedness and women’s-development division within their company, of which I became the director. I found a way to maintain my role as home educator and mom while also writing course curriculums, teaching classes, and creating online content and courses to educate the general public. My role, as I like to think of it, is to transition the tactical components of preparedness into something practical, and to be honest, it’s something that has been gravely needed in the self-reliance community.

In everything we taught I was determined to keep the pedagogy of preparedness focused on applicable steps and solutions. I knew that a

disparity existed between theory and practice, and I was determined to walk the line between the two and help people close the gap created by overwhelm and misunderstanding. It wasn't until I found Gary's book *Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Kids* that I found someone outside of our company whose passions and education methods aligned. Gary's clear and organized teachings, which he expounds through storytelling, exercises, and key points, render the concepts of situational awareness approachable and practical for anyone, regardless of experience level or background.

As a child raised in rural America by a mother and father whose patient and inclusive methods of parenting produced three self-sufficient and mindful children, I never saw my ability to control my own situational awareness as something atypical or outside my level of capabilities. It wasn't until I began working with teenagers through our family preparedness and self-defense courses that I began to have conversations with those teens about the root causes of their fears. The common response when asked what prompted such fears and anxieties was, "I'm just a kid, what can I do to protect myself?" The answer, as I'm sure you can guess, is "a substantial amount," and the answers are found in the well-written, clearly articulated, wisdom-inspired pages of this book. A common misconception is that broaching the subject of the very real and apparent threats that exist today in the life of teenagers will instill in them unnecessary fear, but the opposite is true. As Gary unpacks the concepts of situational awareness in a way that is tailored to fit the unique needs of teenagers living in the modern world, you will see that this education is empowering, relieving, solution oriented, and motivating on many levels.

Those with teens inclined to be independent will appreciate how Gary approaches the relationship-based nature of this book with an attitude of respect. He encourages you as the parent to completely embrace that role while also giving proper esteem to the opinions, beliefs, and personality of your teen. He recognizes as well that creating a culture of accountability within your home, where your boundaries provide a framework

in which your teen can grow and thrive, is so important. You may even find that this book relieves you of the desire to hover over your teens in that it helps you to understand that the most critical role you play during these transitional years is allowing them the space to realize their full potential while also staying safe.

John Dewey says that we do not learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience. In reflecting on the teenage mentality in today's swiftly moving world—a world that has only accelerated since my own teenage years—I have gained insight into just how trying these years can be. I believe E. E. Cummings said it best: “It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.” While teenagers may seem downright confusing and challenging at times (or much of the time . . .), it is vital to note that these transitional years demand a lot of courage from them—courage to find their own sense of belonging in a world where they are treated like children yet expected to behave like adults. Much like my own experience of walking the line between theory and practice, these brave youths are transitioning between childhood and adulthood, and in that battle (and a battle it often is) the only weapons they bear are those we place in their capable hands.

I love how Gary and his wife chose to set left and right limits in parenting, which in and of itself is the act of recognizing, acknowledging, and closing the confusing gap in as graceful and empowering a way as I've ever seen in a book or elsewhere. As Gary asks, “What actions are we willing to accept as parents, and what parental restrictions are teens willing to live with?”

Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Teens is such a critical book in Gary's Heads Up Series. Rather than instilling awareness in ourselves for our own protection, or learning how best to shield and empower the smallest children who rest safely within our protective boundaries, this book teaches us how to fully empower teenagers, who are no longer children but not yet adults, to take on the incredibly important role of safeguarding themselves through a realistic understanding of the world, good communication and a healthy relationship with their

guardians, and a strong regard for the value of life—their life. While all these qualities are vital for their understanding of situational awareness, I also value the way these concepts contain an underlying assumption that the teenager is the capable and strong individual we know them to be—qualities I think we can all agree are grievously absent in the self-concept of many young people today.

Whether your teen is headstrong, rebellious, insecure, disconnected, or easily influenced, I encourage you to see this book through. The skills and concepts Gary teaches will extend much deeper than simply online safety and school violence prevention. Your budding and growing teenagers will find security and confidence in the modeling of such behavior, and your choosing to pick up this book is the first step. Your desire to guide your teenagers to a safe independence validates their desire to be heard, their need to be respected, and their capability to walk boldly through a world where they can look danger square in the eyes and see it for what it is.

Never doubt your role as leader and protector; you are as competent as you allow yourself to be. Train accordingly, and believe unwaveringly.

Blessings on your journey.

Amber Landry BSN, RN
Director of Family Preparedness
Fieldcraft Survival

Introduction

“When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.”

—MARK TWAIN

ONE SPRING MORNING IN 2017, eighteen-year-old Emily woke up feeling adventurous. After a long winter, being outside in the warm sun and fresh air was just what she needed, so without much planning, she threw her beach bag into the trunk of her red convertible and headed out for a relaxing drive to the shore. With no specific route or schedule to adhere to, Emily took the meandering back roads that led through the quaint tree-lined neighborhoods between home and the beach. As she headed south, her thoughts drifted toward the remaining events of her senior year in high school: prom, bonfire parties, and graduation. The top was down on the old mustang, the radio was up, and the world was as it should be. Unfortunately, the world doesn't always play by our preset narratives. Sometimes other people can intervene in our plans

and send things spinning in an entirely different direction, and that's exactly what Emily was about to find out.

About an hour into her drive, Emily approached a stoplight in a small town square. As she admired the old, red brick buildings and watched people strolling through the small public park, a rusted old pickup truck pulled into the left-hand turn lane beside her. She glanced at the man inside. He was alone, unsmiling, and staring back at her. Emily's intuition told her that something was wrong, something about the man just didn't feel right, but she couldn't put her finger on the reason why. Seconds at the stoplight seemed to drag on forever. Finally, the light turned green, and Emily continued along her route as the stranger in the truck turned left and disappeared from view. "That was weird," Emily thought to herself.

A few blocks further along, Emily stopped at another red light. A little disturbed by her encounter, she was now alert and much more aware of her surroundings. As she waited for the light to turn, she checked her mirrors. A sinking feeling settled in the pit of her stomach as Emily saw the man in the truck pulling up behind her. Emily immediately experienced a flood of adrenaline. Her heart began pounding heavily in her chest, her breathing sped up, and her throat went dry. She felt as if her entire world had narrowed itself into the space of her rearview mirror. Emily's mind did everything it could to rationalize the man's sudden reappearance. Was he lost? Had he made a wrong turn? Did he work in the town? Emily knew enough about the "fight or flight" response to recognize what her body and mind were experiencing. She took four long deep breaths, holding each for a few seconds before exhaling slowly. As she regained her composure, her rational self began to speak up. "Stop trying to explain this guy's presence, calm down, and start planning!" As she pulled away, the man in the truck followed closely behind. Emily knew it was time to eliminate the possibility that this could all be a coincidence. She signaled and made the next right turn. The man in the truck did the same. She took the next left, and then one more left back onto the main road. Still, the truck followed. Now

the possibility of this being a chance encounter was completely erased from her mind. “Now what?” Emily’s phone was in her glove box, and she didn’t want to make any unnecessary stops. “How do I get this guy to stop following me?” She was unfamiliar with the area and had no idea where the nearest police station could be. She saw that there were plenty of houses and people in the area, so she devised a hasty plan of action.

Emily scanned the nearby homes and spotted one with two cars in the driveway. Emily learned long ago that you could tell a lot about a family by looking at their vehicle. Stickers on the back bumper informed her that they were the proud grandparents of a local honor student. They were also dog owners, a German shepherd. “Perfect!” As Emily pulled into the driveway, the observant homeowners came outside to meet their unexpected visitor. Emily quickly explained what was happening with the man in the truck and that she felt afraid for her safety. The elderly wife embraced Emily as if she was a relative, and they invited her inside. All three stood by the large front window, watching the man in the truck intently. Knowing that he had been spotted, the stranger eventually pulled away and drove out of sight. After a sufficient amount of time had passed, Emily thanked the couple for their help and returned to her car. She immediately retrieved her cellphone from the glove box and called her dad. She told him what had happened and that she was heading straight back home. “Keep me on speaker and head directly to the interstate,” Dad told her. Less than an hour later, Emily arrived back home safe and sound. Her plans for a relaxing day at the beach had been shattered, but thanks to her situational awareness and quick thinking, her physical well-being was still intact.

If you’ve read the first two books in my “Heads Up” situational awareness series, you may have already known that Emily is my youngest daughter. Today, Emily is twenty-two years old with a very bright future ahead of her. She’s my baby, and I thank God daily that some of the lessons I had taught her about situational awareness and personal safety had actually taken hold in her teenage mind. Her plan to escape

the man in the truck wasn't perfect, but it was effective. The fact that she could fight off the effects of an adrenaline dump, devise a plan, and return home safely was good enough for me.

There are no known forces on the planet that can stop a parent from worrying about their children. Worry is as natural to us as breathing. We worry when they leave for school, we worry when they go to the movies with their friends; based on the smell emanating from their room, we even worry that they may be harboring a homeless fugitive. When children are young, it's much easier for us to manage our parental anxiety. Our kids are mostly either at home or in school. We watch them as closely as we can, communicate with teachers and other parents about their well-being, and monitor the time they spend online. We form a web of protection around our young ones, hoping that nothing will slip through our defenses. If we're diligent about this, it works. But the time comes in every child's life when that parental control starts to feel oppressive. As our young children transition into their teens, their minds and bodies go through a radical transformation. Their need for independence and social standing becomes so overpowering that it forces them away from the protective boundaries we've worked so hard to establish. What we tend to view as wanton rebellion, they regard as breaking away from a tyrannical overlord. Neither of those views is one hundred percent accurate, but a failure to reach some sort of mutual agreement about their safety can be damaging to both teens and parents.

I look back on the incident with Emily and try to deconstruct the process I used to teach my children about situational awareness. Something I did had worked, but given the opposing objectives between teen independence and parental control, I felt that a more structured program geared specifically toward teens was necessary. For years I had taught situational awareness to newly hired federal air marshals. These were men and women who had chosen a dangerous career. They fully understood that their lack of attention in a foreign country could quickly get them into trouble. They had a vested interest in their own

personal safety, and they took what I taught them seriously. Teens, on the other hand, are a little different. The goals and objectives of teaching situational awareness are the same, but the methods you use to get that information across changes dramatically. Teens may act as if they have everything under control and that they're perfectly capable of taking care of themselves, but I can tell you from experience that there is no set age where your children suddenly become confident, assertive, and self-sufficient. Just beneath that defiant, independent teenage spirit is a kid who's slightly confused by all the changes they're experiencing. If we allow it, that change can become one of life's greatest teachers. As parents, we need to understand that releasing some of that parental control and letting our teens experience things on their own is an important part of their identity development. As your teen begins to explore the limits of their individuality, the key to keeping them safe is to keep them tethered to reality. The world can be a very dangerous place, and we need to convey that fact, but not in a way that induces unnecessary fear. I say "unnecessary" because a little fear can be a good thing. It keeps us sharp and tests our resolve. It's the purposeful act of trying to make a child afraid that can be devastating, both mentally and physically. No parent should want their child to be crippled by fear. Personal safety isn't about being scared of what lies around the next corner. It's about confidence; confidence in the fact that if something bad were about to happen, you have the skills you need to identify the problem early, develop a plan of action, control your fear, and act upon that plan to keep yourself safe.

Before we begin, I think it's essential to have a general understanding of some of the unique threats teens face. As adults, we believe we have a good idea of what dangers await our children, but the fact of the matter is there's a vast divide between what we perceive as dangerous and what our teens are actually up against. That gap has only widened thanks to the technological advancements of the last twenty years. For instance, before the advent of the Internet and social media, teens had the opportunity to disconnect from some of the threats they

faced. Like most awkward teens in the 80s, I had my fair share of tormentors, but once I was back home and in my room, I knew I was safe. I could pop in some microwave pizza rolls, the latest Guns N' Roses cassette, and everything was as it should be. My mind had the opportunity to tune out the rest of the world for a bit, which did wonders for my mental well-being. Now fast-forward to today. According to a 2017 study conducted by Common Sense Media, American children ages five to eight spend nearly three hours on their screens daily. They spend roughly four hours and forty-four minutes a day on mobile devices between the ages of eight and twelve. Once they hit their teens, that number rises to seven hours and twenty-two minutes daily. Those numbers have only increased over the last few years as newer apps, streaming services, games, and social sites are added to the mix. What effect does this have on our teens? For one, it practically eliminates the opportunity for teens to enjoy the downtime we experienced prior to the Internet. Today, if a child is being bullied at school, that follows them home. Their tormentors can now harass and upset them electronically, making it almost impossible for them to escape. It seems easy for us as adults to approach the problem from a "just turn the phone off" perspective, but that's not as easy for someone in their teens. Aside from cyberbullies, our children also face the threat of online predators, sexual exploitation, catfishing, and bribery, to name a few. We'll get deeper into all of that later on, but it all gives rise to the question, "How do we as parents tackle these problems and keep our teens safe?" The answer to that question lies in education, educating yourself about the problems that today's adolescents face, and educating your teens about the realities of predatory behavior and how it should be handled.

I am not a child psychologist or even a parenting expert. But as a retired federal air marshal and father of three, I do know a thing or two about staying safe. This is a book about situational awareness—what it is and how to teach it to your teens. That's the goal here. The program I lay out in this book is developed specifically to set parents'

minds at ease and allow teens to confidently explore their independence, secure in the fact that they can spot dangerous situations before they happen and take the necessary steps to ensure their own well-being. Make no mistake: this is a group project, and both you and your teen have to be fully committed. It requires teamwork, communication, and accountability. Now let's get started.



PHASE ONE—The Parent’s Guide to Teens and Situational Awareness

“We cannot always build the future for our youth,
but we can build our youth for the future.”

—FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

1

Awareness Basics

WHEN YOU TAKE ON THE ROLE of parent, you take on an incredible amount of responsibility. One of those responsibilities is to thoroughly prepare your children for some of the dangers they may face as they transition into adulthood. We have no way of knowing what those specific dangers may be or at what point they might appear. Those things are outside our control, but we can control the amount of information we give our teens about predatory violence and how that material is presented. This all starts by removing some of the misconceptions we as adults have about crime and predatory behaviors in general. For now, it's time to put aside any preconceived notions you may have about who commits violent crimes and why, and focus on the basic concepts of situational awareness that will allow you and your teen to spot dangerous situations before they ever happen.

Our minds are filled with misconceptions, particularly in the realm of personal defense. Many people think that by enrolling their teen in a self-defense class or giving them a can of pepper spray to keep in their car, they're preparing them to successfully overcome any threatening situation. With the proper training, these things can certainly help keep them alive in a fight, but real personal safety starts well before a threat

ever materializes. This is where situational awareness comes into play. I define situational awareness as the ability to identify and process environmental cues to accurately predict the actions of others. Being aware of your surroundings isn't an overly complicated process, but because of the perceptions some people have, they equate it to some sort of superpower reserved only for spies and secret agents. This isn't the case at all, and as you're about to learn, there are simple steps you can take right now that will dramatically improve your teen's level of situational awareness. You can take some of these steps as soon as you finish reading this chapter.

Let's start with the basics. Criminals are creatures of opportunity, and they'll do anything to avoid being caught. That's why they prey on those they consider to be unaware or unable to react quickly enough to protect themselves. This is book three in the "Heads Up" situational awareness series and I call it that for a reason. Simply lifting your head and paying attention to your surroundings changes how you are perceived by others, especially those with predatory intentions. It changes how you walk and gives you an air of confidence you just don't have when your head is buried in a cellphone. This simple action gives you a broader view of your environment and allows you more time to react should a dangerous situation present itself. From the perspective of a criminal, you now look harder to approach, so it's much more likely that they'll pass you by in search of a more vulnerable victim. Now that you have your head up and you're ready to step out into the world, you may ask yourself, "What exactly should I be looking for?" Before I answer that question, I should explain how I'll break this information down. I present the basics of awareness in two separate segments.

- Understanding the threat
- Building your situational awareness

Each segment plays a critical role in developing a well-rounded personal defense program, and I cover each of these extensively in book one of the series, *Spotting Danger Before It Spots You*. If you've

followed the series up to this point, this information may seem familiar, but here I present things from a different perspective. Although the nuts and bolts of situational awareness remain the same, the lessons, examples, and practical exercises I put forth now are unique and geared toward the specific issues that teens routinely face.

1.1 How Predators Choose Their Victims

So, what should you be looking for? In the beginning, the more important question is, what are criminals looking for? To fully understand the process of situational awareness, we need to take a step back and evaluate ourselves, our movements, and how others perceive us. To do this, we need to understand what predators look for in their victims and why they choose the people they do.

We can divide predators into two categories: resource predators and process predators. Resource predators want something tangible from you, like your wallet, purse, watch, or anything they feel is valuable to them. Process predators on the other hand want nothing from you; they get off on the act of violence itself, and they can be much more dangerous people. One thing both types of predators have in common is that they always have their own best interests at heart. They don't want to get caught, and they don't want to draw unnecessary attention to themselves. Regardless of the factors that drive predatory violence, the result is always the same for the victim. The shock, emotional trauma, and physical damage of a violent attack can resonate with victims for years. For this reason, it's crucial that you have a good idea as to why you may be targeted. Predators tend to stick to a specific set of conditions when selecting their targets. Knowing how they think and what they look for is the first big step in achieving real situational awareness.

Just as criminals can be broken into two categories, they tend to view their potential victims in the same way. To them, you're either a hard target or a soft target. Someone is considered a hard target when there are obvious countermeasures in place that would deter a possible attack. They appear aware of their surroundings, carry themselves with

confidence, and look like they could handle themselves in a fight. On the other hand, people are soft targets when they display none of the outward signs of awareness. They look easy to approach and ill-prepared to defend themselves. Predators prefer soft targets because they pose the least amount of danger. They carefully measure risk versus reward and will almost always take the easier path.

Predators are very good at choosing their victims. So good, in fact, that the infamous serial killer Ted Bundy once said that he could select his next victim by the tilt of her head. But what does that mean, and how do you avoid being selected? Predators choose their targets using what I call the seven-second PROD. This is the process by which criminals evaluate their potential targets and choose the one that poses the least amount of risk to them. PROD stands for Perception, Risk, Observable Value, and Defenses. We're now going to take a closer look at each of these, and at the end of each section, I will give you three things you can do right now to make yourself more of a hard target.

Perception

Another misconception we may have about personal safety is how others view us. You may see yourself as strong, confident, and assertive, but from the predator's point of view, your body language may tell a different story entirely. A 2019 study conducted by psychologists Brittany Blaskovits and Craig Bennell revealed that certain individuals exhibit vulnerability through their walking patterns and that observers select such individuals as those most likely to experience a violent encounter. Ironically, the findings also suggested that individuals with more vulnerable features in their movements were more likely to see themselves as a dominant personality rather than a submissive one. This shows that others, particularly predators, may view us much differently than we see ourselves. So how do we go about correcting this? In 1981 sociologists Betty Grayson and Morris Stein conducted a similar experiment. They set up cameras in Times Square and recorded people as they walked past. These recordings were later shown to local inmates

who had been convicted of violent crimes such as murder, robbery, and assault. The inmates were asked to rate the people in the video based on their perceived level of vulnerability. Movements the inmates identified as signals of weakness were:

1. Short, shuffling strides when walking
2. Not swinging the arms in proportion with the stride
3. Exaggerated side-to-side movement when walking
4. Head facing at a downward angle when walking

The pedestrians who had these traits the inmates rated between one and three, which identified them as weak and vulnerable. Pedestrians labeled a seven or above, the inmates considered too much to handle in an altercation and were to be avoided altogether. They displayed the following characteristics:

1. Medium to long stride when walking
2. Arms swinging in proportion to their stride
3. Body movement in vertical alignment, which was viewed as a strong and determined walking pattern
4. Head level and eyes visible when walking

Since you now know what physical actions signal vulnerability, you can take steps to protect yourself by merely modifying your body language. Just changing your posture and stride can make you look more like someone who would be difficult to subdue and who would likely put up a fight if attacked—in other words, a hard target.

Three things you can do right now to change the way you are perceived:

- ✓ Minimize your distractions. Put your cellphone away, and don't use headphones when you're moving around in public spaces.
- ✓ Keep your head level and your eyes visible when walking.
- ✓ Maintain good posture and take medium to long strides. This is viewed as a strong and determined walking pattern.

Now let's take a little test. Looking at things from the perspective of a predator, which of the two people below do you perceive to be a softer target? Why?



If you picked the man on the right, nice job! Based on his general posture and awareness, he can be perceived as less of a threat to an attacker.

Risk

Predators go through the process of target selection and attack planning to ensure success while minimizing risk to themselves. If they feel they can confront you with minimal danger, they are more likely to act. Some of the things criminals look for when measuring risk are simple enough: Are you with a group of friends? Do you look like the type of person who would fight back or cause a scene? Are you alert and moving with a purpose, or are you distracted? Some signals are more

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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 counterterrorism 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.

Spotting danger before it happens is a skill that teenagers must learn.

"A blueprint for parents and teens. This book has helped me, my family, and my clients."

—Nigel Wright, security and family management consultant, French Riviera

"Unlike anything on the market regarding safety. A detailed roadmap [for] imparting lifesaving skills to teenagers."

—Ashley Glinka, former Federal Air Marshal; family founder of Child and Parent Empowerment Program (C.A.P.E.)

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—Jason Brick, host of *Safest Family on the Block*; author

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—Kelly Sayre, founder of The Diamond Arrow Group; author

"A must-read for every teenager and every parent of teenagers."

—Wendell Horton, senior pastor, Skyview Missionary Baptist Church

"A thorough and well-intentioned safety guide for parents."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

The fact of the matter is there's a vast divide between what adults perceive as dangerous and what our teens are actually up against.

We like to *think* we have a good idea of what the world may have in store for our teenagers.

When it comes to situational awareness, teenagers face unique challenges exacerbated by biological changes and their need to explore their individuality and push the limits.

The key to keeping teens safe is to keep them alert and engaged with their environment. Teens need to know that real personal safety isn't about being scared of what lies ahead; it's about having the confidence that if something bad were about to happen, they have these skills:

- **Ability** to identify the problem early
- **Competence** to develop a plan of action
- **Aptitude** to implement that plan
- **Power** to control their fear

This book is designed around the principles of positive communication, trust, and teamwork. It is written specifically to set parents' minds at ease and allow teens to confidently explore their independence, secure in the knowledge that they can spot dangerous situations before they happen and take the necessary steps to ensure their own well-being.

"Your teenager'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."



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