

If you're in motion, you should stay off the cell phone

By **CLAUDIA NEWCORN**

She would have been so easy to mug, it scared me.

During my daily afternoon walk, I passed a gaggle of junior high school girls — giggling and gossiping. But one of their friends, jabbering on her cell phone, had dropped about 20 feet behind. Eyes glazed, she was oblivious to the world, not even seeing my smile and nod.

If I had been a person of ill intent, I realized, she would have been the perfect victim. I doubt her friends would have even noticed something happening until it was too late.

It's not just the young girls who make themselves potentially easy targets. Adults do the same thing. Rigged with their mobile headsets, or Super Glued to a cell phone as they walk along, they are so deeply engrossed in their conversations that they are deaf and blind to what's going on around them — unless they are startled back into awareness. Children and adults alike cross streets without realizing what they're doing; only luck has prevented them from becoming hood ornaments.

From earliest childhood, I remember my parents advocating the importance of being aware of what was going on around me. It wasn't because they were acutely paranoid of me being kidnapped or mugged, as so many of today's parents are, but because simple precautions reduced my risk of being run over by a car, bike or being approached by a weirdo — even 40 years ago.

In their obsession to remain connected, people using cell phones ignore their surroundings. In our tense society, that's an invitation to trouble.

Lowered awareness is the reason for the big effort to minimize, even eliminate, cell-phone use while driving. How often have you seen a driver do something totally dumb and dangerous — then, as you pass them, you see they have a cell phone to their ear? Or they speed up and slow down on the highway, totally oblivious to traffic behind or around them? I'm not sure hands-free devices will solve this problem.

Adults should (theoretically) know better. Clearly they don't, and their children are emulating their parents' lack of cell-phone smarts. But when copycatting such behavior puts a child at risk, it's essential to say, "Parents: Teach your children smart cell phone practices."

Please — tell your child not to wander down the road talking on a cell phone; make your calls from a safe location while standing still. Remind them that no matter what, they should always be aware of what is going on around them, cell phone or not — particularly what's going on behind them.

Cell phones serve many useful purposes, such as allowing a parent to stay connected with their child. But like anything, when use crosses into abuse, the user's exposure to risk skyrockets.

Would it really be the end of the world if the cell phones were hung up for a few minutes for your own safety and your child's?

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Posted on 11/24/06 00:00:00

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