

'Tis the Season for Shopping Safety

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Black Friday is here, heralding the new Holiday Shopping Season. While the safest place to do your shopping is online in your own home, most of us will venture out into the crowded shops and malls to brave the gift-giving frenzy. Unfortunately, the shopping season brings out the gift-takers as well.

The West Springfield District Police Station recently published an excellent shopping safety guide on their website: <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/police/stations/westspringfield/wir.htm>. I have completely reproduced their list below, but want to make a special note of advising your kids on holiday safety.

Middle Schoolers are searching for more independence, and what better place than letting them go off to shop by themselves at the mall? Maybe not a bad idea, if you are in the same mall with them, and the mall wasn't bursting with holiday shoppers, but during the holiday season, you may want to keep them by your side. Crimes at shopping malls are unfortunately all too common, and increase during the holiday season. Because they are young and typically not on their guard, tweens and young teens can be targeted by mall thieves, drug dealers and drug users, and even by older teens who are bored, have nothing better to do, and choose to hang out at the mall, perhaps to escape the watchful eyes of their parents. (It is the parents' responsibility to know where their children are, who they are with, and what they are doing. Parents are increasingly being held responsible, at least in part, for crimes committed by their non-adult children.) While you should base your "shop without parents" decision on your child's level of maturity, generally the age of 14 may be acceptable, provided they are not alone (allow them to invite a friend or two). Younger ages may not be able to think on their feet fast enough when presented with a challenging or potentially dangerous situation. Your child should have already demonstrated increasing levels of responsibility at home, school, and in other activities, before you allow them this increased level of independence.

Review the Holiday Safety Tips below with your child. Before they go inside, **take a photo of your child**, and any other children with them, with your cell phone camera, so you can show exactly what they look like and what they are wearing if it becomes necessary later. Keep them in your line of sight at the mall, if you can, without making them feel crowded. **Make sure they are carrying a cell phone that is 911 enabled**, so they can reach you when they need you, be able to call the police in an emergency, and have them **check in with you every 30 minutes or so**. **Activate the cell phone tracker** on their phone, so you can locate them if they fail to check in. Advise them to **make a note of any security guards** in the area, should they be needed. Give them an **exact time and location to meet you** when you are ready to leave the mall. **Consider consequences** if they fail to check in at regular intervals, or if they are excessively late in meeting you at the end of the shopping day. This goes back to demonstrating responsibility.

During this holiday season, follow these safety tips to minimize your and your children's risk, and educate your children, so the holiday season is a safe and fun one.

Holiday Safety Crime Prevention Tips from the West Springfield District Police Station

- ❖ Avoid shopping alone. Traveling in groups of two or more significantly reduces your chance of becoming a victim of crime.
- ❖ Be especially alert when leaving stores or shopping malls for your vehicle. This is a time when criminals know you are carrying cash, checkbooks, credit cards or other valuables.
- ❖ Trust your instincts. If you have an intuitive feeling something is wrong, trust your instincts. React immediately and take action. Many individuals suppress these feelings, because they fear their response will offend someone. React to your instincts and don't worry about someone else's feelings. If someone approaches you and you feel uncomfortable, move or ask for assistance.
- ❖ Stand tall and display confidence. Walk with purpose, scan the area around you and make casual eye contact with others to display confidence.
- ❖ Carry a cellular phone.
- ❖ Avoid wearing excessive jewelry. In particular, keep necklaces and bracelets inside your clothing.
- ❖ Shop before dark and always park in well-lighted areas.
- ❖ Make sure all doors and windows are locked in your vehicle.
- ❖ Do not keep packages in plain view in your vehicle.
- ❖ Don't carry large sums of cash. If you do carry cash, do not display it in public or count cash in open areas.
- ❖ Have keys in hand before returning to the vehicle. Searching through a purse or briefcase after you've reached your car means you are distracted.
- ❖ As you approach the car, check to see if anyone is hiding underneath or inside. If you are concerned for any reason, simply walk past your car and call for help.
- ❖ Lock your door immediately upon entering the vehicle. Make this your first action-even before you put the key in the ignition. And lock your door every time you get into your car-even if you are going for only a short ride.
- ❖ Check your surroundings before getting out of your car. If something or someone strikes you as out of place or threatening, drive away. If it's dark, go to a well lighted, heavily traveled area.
- ❖ **Report any suspicious activity or person immediately to the Fairfax County Police Department at 703-691-2131.**