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## **For parents, vigilance takes many forms**

When Melissa Atkinson of Petersburg walks through a department store, she can't help but worry if someone is going to try to snatch one of her four young children.

"It's always on my mind," she said.

And Chrissanne Kinel of Monroe probably will legally carry her 9 mm once she gets a holster. In the meantime, she rearranged her daughter's bed in their house to make sure it's not in the line of fire in case she has to fire off a few rounds at an intruder.

"If I have to shoot down the hallway," she said. "It can't be in the way."

These are the kinds of things some local moms are thinking these days. Blame it on society, blame it on the media or blame it on social networking, but reports about creeps out there have parents extra vigilant.

**On Tuesday night at the Monroe County Intermediate School District, about a dozen or so young mothers met to discuss how best to keep their children safe from predators. They are part of Great Start Collaborative, a group that focuses on young children, and some parents are worried.**

"I don't want to appear paranoid," said Rachael Lebeck of Monroe. "I just think people are more aware, especially with Nevaeh (Buchanan). Parents are concerned."

Michigan State Police Trooper Sharon McDonald of the Monroe post keeps a close eye on the registered sex offenders in Monroe County. She was the guest speaker Tuesday night and told the women to remain vigilant.

"Every tip is looked into and investigated," Trooper McDonald told the women. "It doesn't matter how small."

Yet, she said, most offenders are people known to the victims. About 90 percent of cases involve a family member, a friend or someone known to the victims. Still, many parents are concerned about stranger danger.

**"Obviously, we're on red alert," said Amy Zarend, Great Start parent coordinator.**

Trooper McDonald suggested parents give their child a secret password to be shared only with a select few in case the child becomes confused.

And when instructing kids to seek help, make sure they go to a trusted adult, not just any adult. Trooper McDonald suggested that parents tell their youngsters that it's wrong for someone to touch them where they wear a bathing suit.

A main task for Trooper McDonald is making sure registered sex offenders are following the rules. She said that, including juveniles, there are 353 registered sex offenders in Monroe County.

And one of them lives near Ms. Lebeck. It concerns her so she pays extra close attention to her two children.

"I trust the people in my circle," she said. "I walk them to school. They're not allowed to play outside alone. I always pay attention."

Tricia Rumler of Lambertville also lives close to a registered sex offender. She, too, keeps a close eye on the kids.

"You just can't trust people anymore," she said.

"This is the world for us now," added Jane Wells of Monroe.

That's a big part of today's problem, many of the mothers said. Neighbors aren't as neighborly and circles of trust are much smaller.

"We never had to do this when we were younger," said Lori Smith of Erie, a mother of three. "Our kids can't run the neighborhood."

**So the women of Great Start want to do their part to help make the community safer.**

They hope others do the same and continue to report strange behavior, such as when a grown man asks a child to help look for a dog.

Like Trooper McDonald told them: "Adults should never ask a kid for help."