

# Missing Children: Kidnapped and Abducted Children and Resources Available to Parents and the Community<sup>1</sup>

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This is the second in a two-part series focusing on missing children. This final installment considers children who have been abducted. Both the number of incidences and the characteristics of these crimes will be addressed. This paper also provides information on some of the resources available for aid.

youths were runaways or were forced out of their homes by a parent or guardian. The second largest group was made up of children who were missing for benign reasons, such as a communication mix-up with a caregiver. Fewer than 200,000 children were actually abducted, lost, or injured.

## Introduction

For parents, there is nothing more frightening than a missing child. We fear that they are lost, hurt, hungry, or scared and alone. Worst of all is the fear that they have been kidnapped or abducted and may never come home. A child who is missing may be in serious danger, and it is always best to report a missing child immediately. However, most missing children do come home, and most are not victims of abduction or kidnapping.

Although you might not know it from what we see and hear in the media, very few children are ever abducted. In fact, missing children are rare. According to a national study conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice, between 1,131,000 and 1,500,000 children went missing during 1999 (a rate of about 18.8 children per 1,000). Half of these

Abduction is the least common reason for a child to become missing. In 1999, an estimated 150,000 children were abducted. The vast majority of these children were taken by family members, not strangers. This number can be further reduced through education and prevention. The purpose of this article is to inform the reader about the issue of child abduction and offer resources to help solve this problem.

## Family Abduction

The term "family abduction" is often used interchangeably with the term "custodial interference." The two concepts are similar, but family abduction is the term we will use here. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention defines family abduction as when a member of the child's family, or someone acting on

1. This document is FCS2256, one of a series of the Family, Youth, and Community Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date October 2006. Reviewed: January 2009. Visit the EDIS Web Site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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their behalf, takes or fails to return a child to the caretaker of custodial rights. The perpetrator may try to hide the child or take him or her out of state with the intent of keeping the child indefinitely.

In 1999 there were an estimated 117,200 cases of family abduction. This accounted for 9% of all missing children that year. Family abductions are usually carried out by parents who are involved in a dispute over custody of the child. They take or keep the child for themselves, ignoring the rights of the other parent. Noncustodial fathers are more likely to commit this type of crime, but in 43% of the cases from 1999, the perpetrator was female. Usually the child is taken by an adult, but in 2% of the 1999 cases the perpetrator was another juvenile, most likely an older sibling. Most of the children abducted were at or below the age of six.

Some people might ask how much harm family abduction can do. After all, the child is with family, not a stranger. It seems unlikely that he or she would come to harm. Family abductions do harm children. The children are forced to live their lives on the run. Being cut off from family and friends makes things worse. It is not surprising, then, that a national study from 1988 found that approximately 16% of children (56,000 cases) who were victims of family abduction experienced serious mental harm. Four percent (14,000 children) were seriously injured, another 4% percent of cases involved physical abuse, and in 3,500 cases, the child was sexually abused. While family abduction leads to fewer deaths than other forms of kidnapping, it is definitely not harmless.

## **Nonfamily Abduction**

When a nonfamily member takes a child by force or threat of harm, or detains the child for at least one hour in an isolated place, this is called a nonfamily abduction. When a nonfamily member takes a child who is under fifteen or who is incompetent, intending to ransom that child or keep him or her permanently, this is also a nonfamily abduction. Some nonfamily abductions are stereotypical kidnappings, which are even more serious. A nonfamily abduction is called a kidnapping when the child is gone at least overnight and taken at least fifty miles away.

Nonfamily abductions are rare. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that in 1999, 33,000 children (a rate of .47 per 1,000) were victims of nonfamily abduction. The perpetrator is often a stranger, is more likely to be male, and more often victimizes females. Teenagers are at higher risk for this form of abduction, mostly because these attacks take place when the child is alone and in some type of public area. Most victims of nonfamily abductions are between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, but twelve- to fourteen-year-olds are more likely to be victims of stereotypical kidnappings. Sometimes the perpetrator, or perpetrators, asks for a ransom, but more often the motive in these attacks is sexual. Just less than half of all victims of nonfamily abduction are sexually assaulted. In a very few cases the victims die. A 1997 study by the State of Washington's Office of the Attorney General calls the murder of an abducted child "a rare event." They concluded that about 100 such incidents occur each year in America. This is less than one-half of one percent of the total number of murders committed each year. However, they warn that 74% of abducted children who are murdered are dead within three hours of the abduction.

## **Resources for Families, Community Leaders, and Extension Agents**

There are a variety of services available for victims of abduction, their families, and community leaders who want to help solve the problem. In fact, a Yahoo search on the topic yielded no fewer than eighty-eight results. Below are some, but by no means all, of the resources available.

### ***National Center for Missing and Exploited Children***

The NCMEC is the leader in the fight against missing children. They give general information about the issue and can also aid in finding a specific child. The NCMEC is a nonprofit organization, but one with strong ties to the government. They manage a database for all of the reported missing children cases in the nation. They are also the ones responsible for putting pictures of missing children in stores and on postcards. They also have a 24-hour hotline for reporting missing children and for sightings

(1-800-THE-LOST). More information is provided at their Web site: <http://www.missingkids.com>.

### ***The Nation's Missing Children Organization***

This nonprofit specializes in advocacy, search assistance, and distribution of information. They are also involved in a variety of programs, most notably the Kids I.D. program. The Nation's Missing Children Organization is an offshoot of the Nation's Center for Missing Adults. More information is available at their Web site: <http://www.theyaremissd.org/ncma/nmco.php>.

### ***State-Operated Missing Children Clearinghouses***

Almost every state operates a clearinghouse of information regarding missing children. They do not locate the youths themselves, but act as a third party in all affairs. The state of Florida's clearinghouse can be reached at (800) 342-0821. A directory for all participating states, including phone numbers and Web sites, can be found at <http://www.klaaskids.org/pg-mc-stmisschildclearing.htm>.

## **Advice for Parents**

### ***Communication is Key***

Remember to tell your children that you love them, and that you always want to see them. Sometimes noncustodial parents will try to convince children that they are no longer wanted at home before staging a nonfamily abduction.

Teach younger children how to use the telephone. Help them memorize your home phone number and your cell phone number if you have one, as well as the city's area code. A good way to help young children memorize numbers is to quiz them on the information every few days.

For older children and teenagers, stress the importance of communication. Always know where they are going and what time they plan to be back. Explain to your children that you are not violating their privacy, but keeping them safe. Buy older children cell phones or pagers if you can.

Finally, make your home a place of trust and support. That way, your children will feel safe talking to you about any situation that made them afraid.

### ***Keep Updated Pictures***

Take color photographs of your child every six months. Head and shoulder portraits from different angles, such as those taken by school photographers, are best. Keep these pictures handy, but do not store them in a place where they will be folded, creased, or otherwise damaged.

### ***Report Immediately***

Even though kidnapping is rare, when it does happen, a quick response is very important. The first thing to do when a small child goes missing is to check the house thoroughly. Look under beds and in closets and check other places he or she might have crawled into. If the missing child is older or a teenager, try to contact the child first. There might have been an activity he forgot to mention. She may have lost track of the time, or simply be running late. If you still cannot find your child, then call the police right away.

If your child becomes missing at a store or shopping mall, let the store supervisor or security guard know right away. They should have an action plan to mobilize employees to look for the child and make sure that no one can leave the store with him or her.

## **Community Education**

### ***School-Based Educational Programs***

If you are a community leader, you may be the one to decide on an educational program for local elementary schools. When choosing a program, make sure to find one that works well. Research has shown that many programs, including the popular "stranger danger" programs, are ineffective.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children suggests that a school-based educational program should:

- be based on accepted educational theories;

- be appropriate for the age, educational, and developmental levels of the child;
- offer concepts that will help children build self-confidence in order to better handle and protect themselves in all types of situations;
- have multiple program components that are repeated several years in a row; and
- utilize qualified presenters who use role-playing, behavioral rehearsal, feedback, and active participation.

More resources, including a checklist, are available from NCMEC for free at their Web site at [http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/ResourceServlet?LanguageCountry=en\\_US&PageId=763](http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/ResourceServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=763).

### **Community-Wide Activities**

Design a daylong public event to increase awareness about abduction and other safety issues. Usually these events are called "fairs" or "festivals" to emphasize the fun parts of the events, such as face-painting or characters in costumes.

These events are often done with the help of the local fire and police departments, community businesses, and dozens of volunteers. You will have to work with many different people and groups. Even if your event is small, you will want to find other organizations that are willing to present a quick educational program. Planning such an event will take at least two to three months.

How do you decide whom to include in your event? It depends on what safety needs you want to address, the resources available to you (including budget size), and how much time you have. There are nonprofit organizations that specialize in planning these kinds of events. KLAAS Kids Foundation, based out of Sausalito, California, is one of them. They help arrange "print-a-thons," daylong festivals that offer digital finger printing, digital photos, and even DNA collection kits, along with free entertainment. KLAAS Kids Foundation can be contacted at [klaaskids@pacbell.net](mailto:klaaskids@pacbell.net) or (415) 331-6867.

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# KNOW THE RULES...

# ABDUCTION and KIDNAPPING

## Prevention Tips for Parents and Guardians



**H**igh-profile abductions, although rare occurrences, may leave some families frightened and unsure about how to best protect their children. According to a study, conducted by the Washington State Attorney General's Office for the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, **40.3 percent** of those who experienced one of the most serious forms of child abduction were victims of opportunity.<sup>1</sup>

To help minimize the opportunity, children should be supervised by you or another trusted adult and taught how to recognize and avoid potentially dangerous situations. This is better than expecting your children to rely on their judgment only about people.

**The tips noted below will help families lessen the opportunity for abduction and kidnapping and better safeguard their children.**

- 1. Teach your children to run away from danger**, never toward it. Danger is anyone or anything invading their personal space. If anyone should try to grab them, tell them to make a scene; loudly yell this person is not my father/mother/guardian; and make every effort to get away by kicking, screaming, and resisting. Their safety is more important than being polite. Teach your children if they are ever followed in a vehicle to turn around and run in the other direction to you or another trusted adult.
- 2. Never let your children go places alone**, and always supervise your young children or make sure there is another trusted adult present to supervise them if you cannot. Make sure your older children always take a friend when they go anywhere.
- 3. Know where your children are and whom they are with at all times.** Remind children to never take **anything** or respond in **any way** if approached by anyone they don't know, and also remind them to never approach a vehicle without your permission. Teach them to run away as quickly as possible to you or another trusted adult.
- 4. Talk openly to your children about safety** and encourage them to tell you or a trusted adult if anyone or anything makes them feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused. Discuss safety issues with your children so they will understand the need for precautions. Advise your older children about steps they may take to help safeguard themselves. Know your children's friends and their families. Pay attention to your children and listen to them. If you don't, someone else may. And others may have ulterior motives for befriending your children.



- 5. Practice what you teach** by creating "what if" scenarios with your children to make sure they understand the safety message and are able to use it in a real situation.
- 6. Consider installing an alarm system in your home** with a monitoring feature. If you do not have an alarm system, consider purchasing less expensive wireless door and window alarms. Make sure your home is secured with

deadbolt locks, and ensure landscaping around it doesn't provide places for people to hide. Check other access points such as gates, and make sure they have been secured. Consider installing exterior lighting around your home. Make sure your home is fully secured before you go to sleep and items such as ladders have been stored inside. Prepare a plan to vacate your home in case of **any** emergency. This should include but is not limited to a fire. Have a plan if an intruder tries or gets into your home.



7. **Make your children part of securing your home.** If you have installed an alarm system, demonstrate it to your children and show them how to make sure doors and windows are locked. This will not only help calm their fears but will also help make them part of your "safety plan" at home.
8. **Have a list of family members who could be contacted in case of an emergency.** Designate a family member or close associate who would be able to fill the role of advisor in case of an emergency.
9. **Be alert to and aware of your surroundings.** Know the "escape routes" and plan what you would do in different emergencies. Practice "what if" scenarios, so **you** will be well prepared. Know the location of local hospitals and best routes to take to reach them. Know how to reach the nearest local law-enforcement agency or sub-station.
10. **Know your employees and coworkers.** Do background screening and reference checks on everyone who works at your home, particularly those individuals who care for your children. Their knowledge of your family is extensive so make sure you have an equivalent understanding of them. National access to sex-offender registries is available at [www.nsopw.gov](http://www.nsopw.gov).
11. **Consider varying your daily routines and habits.** Do not take the same routes or go at the same time on your regular errands. If you take your children to school, change that route as well.
12. **Take steps to secure personal information about yourself.** Consider getting a post office box and registering everything you may there including your vehicles and drivers' licenses. Have personal bills sent to your place of work or the post office box. Be discreet about your possessions and family's personal habits and information. Take steps to protect your identity by not revealing too much information and notifying authorities of any irregularities.
13. **Report any suspicious persons or activities to law enforcement.** If you feel anyone in your family has been targeted or is being stalked, immediately report this information to law-enforcement authorities. Do not wait.
14. **Remember you are your best resource** for better safeguarding your family. Stay alert, informed, and vigilant about personal-security issues.



<sup>1</sup> Katherine M. Brown, Robert D. Keppel, Joseph G. Weis, and Marvin E. Skeen. *CASE MANAGEMENT for Missing Children Homicide Investigation*. Olympia, Washington: Office of the Attorney General State of Washington and U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, May 2006, page 33, accessed April 15, 2009, at [http://www.atg.wa.gov/uploadedFiles/Another/Supporting\\_Law\\_Enforcement/Homicide\\_Investigation\\_Tracking\\_System\\_\(HITS\)/Child\\_Abduction\\_Murder\\_Research/CMIIIPDF.pdf](http://www.atg.wa.gov/uploadedFiles/Another/Supporting_Law_Enforcement/Homicide_Investigation_Tracking_System_(HITS)/Child_Abduction_Murder_Research/CMIIIPDF.pdf). This study is based on the analysis of 735 child-abduction murder cases occurring in the United States.

For more information about child-safety topics, please visit our website or contact us at

**1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)**

**[www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com)**

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This project was supported by Grant No. 2007-MC-CX-K001 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® and 1-800-THE-LOST® are registered service marks of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. NCMEC Order #94.