

# What Parents Need to Know

Whenever the evening news brings the story of a kidnapped child or teen, the terrifying fear of abduction fills the minds of parents across the country. But it's important to remember that the majority of children will pass through childhood safely. One of the challenges of being a parent is to teach your children to be cautious without instilling too much fear or anxiety. Although some dangers do exist, there are steps that you can take to lessen the chances that your child will be abducted.

## **The Reality of Child Abductions**

Stranger abductions fill parents' minds with worry, but the reality is that 75% of all child abductions are perpetrated by a family member or acquaintance. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that half of all abducted children are taken by a family member, 25% are taken by an acquaintance (such as a parent's boyfriend or girlfriend), and 25% are abducted by strangers. Almost all children kidnapped by strangers are taken by men, and about two thirds of stranger abductions involve female children. But in 43% of cases family abductions involve a female parent.

Although most children who are abducted by family members are taken from home, stranger abductions often occur outside in streets, highways, parks, and other public areas. Children who are abducted by acquaintances are most often taken from home, but about 25% of acquaintance kidnappings occur in outdoor public locations. Children are rarely abducted by family members, acquaintances, or strangers at school or on school grounds.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2,100 missing-children reports are filed each day - cases that might be solved more easily if parents were able to provide a few key pieces of information: their child's height, weight, and eye color, and a clear photo that's less than 6 months old. However, 22% of parents surveyed did not know their child's height, weight, and eye color - and in households with two or more children, the percentage rose to 29%. Parents of children younger than 6 were less likely than parents of teens to be able to give an accurate physical description of their children.

## **Strategies for Preventing Abductions**

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and ADVOKIDS, Inc. (the company responsible for the "Have you seen me?" direct mail cards), parents often lack information critical to finding their children after an abduction - and many others do not provide their children with safety information that could help prevent an abduction. Use these strategies to prevent an abduction:

- Make sure custody documents are in order - parental abductions affect more than 350,000 families each year.

- Have ID-like photos taken of your children every 6 months, and have your children fingerprinted. Many local police departments sponsor fingerprinting programs - check if they're available in your town.
- Keep your children's medical and dental records up to date.
- Make [online safety](#) a priority. The Internet is a great tool, but it's also a perfect place for predators to stalk children. Be aware of your children's Internet activities and chat room "friends," and remind them never to give out personal information. Avoid posting identifying information or photos of your children online.
- Set boundaries about the places your children go. Supervise them in places like malls, movie theaters, parks, public bathrooms, or while fundraising door to door.
- Never leave children alone in a car or stroller, even for a minute.
- Choose caregivers - [babysitters](#), day care providers, and nannies - carefully and check their references. If you've arranged for someone to pick up your children from school or [child care](#), discuss the arrangements beforehand with your children and with the school or child care center.
- Avoid dressing your children in clothing with their name on it - children tend to trust adults who know their name.

### **Talking to Your Child About Strangers**

Don't neglect to talk to your children often about safety precautions. Nearly one out of every 10 parents has never discussed safety outside the home with their kids, and one out of five hasn't discussed a plan of action if someone tries to abduct them.

Give your children the basics on how to avoid and escape potentially dangerous situations. Teach them to:

- never accept candy or gifts from a stranger.
- never go anywhere with a stranger, even if it sounds like fun - predators can lure children with questions like "Can you help me find my lost puppy?" or "Do you want to see some cute kittens in my car?" Remind your children that strange adults should never ask children to help or to do things for them.
- run away and scream if someone follows them or tries to force them into a car.
- say **no** to anyone who tries to make them do something you've said is wrong or touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable.
- always tell you or another trusted adult if a stranger asks personal questions, exposes himself, or otherwise makes them feel uneasy. Reassure children that it's OK to tell you even if the person made them promise not to or threatened them in some way.
- always ask permission from a parent to leave the house, yard, or play area or to go into someone's home.

Keep these other tips in mind too:

- Make sure younger children know their names, address, phone number including area code, and who to call in case of an emergency. Review with your child how to use [911](#) or local emergency number. Discuss what to do if they get lost in a public place or store - most places have emergency procedures for handling lost children. Remind your children that they should never go to the parking lot to look for you. Instruct your children to ask a cashier for help or stand near the registers or front of the building away from the doors.
- Point out the homes of friends around the neighborhood where your children can go in case of trouble.
- Be sure your children know in whose car they may ride and in whose they may not. Teach them to move away from any car that pulls up beside them and is driven by a stranger, even if that person looks lost or confused. Develop code words for caregivers other than mom or dad, and remind your children never to tell anyone the code word. Teach your children not to ride with anyone they don't know or with anyone who doesn't know the code word.
- If your children are old enough to stay home alone, make sure they keep the door locked and never tell anyone who knocks or calls they are home alone.

### **If Your Child Has Been Abducted**

Because the first few hours are the most critical in missing-child cases, it's important to provide officials with information about your child immediately.

If your child has been abducted, contact local law enforcement immediately. They'll ask you for a recent picture of your child and will probably ask you many questions about the time and location you last saw your child and what your child was wearing. You may also request that your child be entered into National Crime and Information Center (NCIC). Other clearinghouses such as the Child Protection Education of America (1-866-USA-CHILD) and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (1-800-843-5678) can offer information and support during your search for your child.

After notifying the authorities, try to stay calm. You'll be able to remember details about your child's disappearance more easily if you remain rational and logical.

Thankfully, most families will never have to face the horror of abduction - but as with all safety precautions parents take with their children, an ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure.

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