

IMPACT OF FAMILY CHILD ABDUCTION

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Vanished Children's Alliance

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We see their faces smiling at us, pictures of missing children in our mail, on our television, and on posters in store windows and community bulletin boards. We have come to realize that many children are missing but we rarely learn what happens to them. On those few occasions when we do, headline news stories tell about a murdered child and a suspect being sought. Other times we rejoice when a child is found alive and is reunited with his or her family. In such cases we see, or imagine, visions of tearful reunions with hugs and kisses.

While we might wish for happy endings with reunited families living happily ever after, the truth is that the lives of abducted children and their families are forever changed.

Families where abduction has occurred may have experienced pre-stressors. Pre-stressors refer to the stress in these people's lives before their children were abducted. When a child is abducted, the incredibly severe stress is then added to past stresses. Some typical pre-stressors might include: domestic violence, separation, divorce, child abuse, neglect, loss of a job or housing and financial insecurities. Couple the pre-stressors with the trauma of child abduction and you have parents and children in distress.

Let us look at one specific type of abduction, family abduction, which is generally perpetrated by one of the parents.

Family abduction lacks society's recognition of its devastating and long-term impact. The public's reaction to family abduction declares that the child is "fine." This is because he or she is with the other parent. They may believe the left behind parent must have deserved to have the child removed or that the matter is "just" a custody dispute between two battling parents. The public's view of abducted children is defined by "stranger" abductions like Adam Walsh, Polly Klaas or Amber Swartz. Evidence clearly shows that the majority of abducted children are taken by family members.

Why do family members take children? Is it for love? Usually not, the typical motivation for family abduction is power, control, and revenge. These characteristics are also prevalent in domestic violence cases. In fact, family abduction is really a form of family violence. Some abductors may believe they are rescuing the child, but rarely do they resort to legal approaches for resolution. Some abductors are so narcissistic they do not have the ability to view their children as separate entities from themselves. These abductors believe since they hate the other parent, the child should as well. Sometimes abductors feel disenfranchised and have a culturally different perspective regarding child rearing and parenting. They may miss and want to return to their country of origin with the child.

Child victims are mostly between two and eleven years old; about 75% are six years old or younger. Two-thirds of the cases involve one child. The most common times for the abduction, detention,

or concealment are January and August—thus coinciding with children’s vacations and holidays¹. Most child development experts agree that personality is formed prior to the age of six. Therefore, the abduction of a young child will have significant influence on whom he or she becomes. During the child’s upbringing, hopes, wishes, fears and attitudes of the significant people around the child will more or less be adopted. The abductor influences a child’s attitude toward themselves, other people, and the world in general.

Abducted children whose identities are changed may be told that the left-behind parent is dead or did not want them. Moving from place to place to avoid discovery, they are compelled to live like fugitives. They receive little or no medical care or schooling. These children are at risk, and society’s perception must be changed to recognize that the majority of family abduction victims live in dangerous and undesirable conditions.

The impact on child victims will differ. Each child is an individual with different reactions to the circumstance and with different coping styles. The impact will be affected by the pre-stressors in the child’s life, the relationship the child has to the abductor as well as the relationship the child had with the left behind family and community. The child’s age, character, how they were taken, length of time missing, what they were told, and their individual and cumulative experiences while abducted will also effect the child.

The left-behind family members, which include the parent(s), siblings, stepparents, step and half siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and others, will suffer as well.

Initially the left-behind family might experience shock and disbelief. They may have a rude awaking when the criminal justice response to a reported missing child is not all they might have expected when, from their point of view their child is “kidnaped.” The family may have a support system or the family may consist of a left-behind parent with little support to cope with the emotions of fear, grief and loss. If the child is not returned quickly, the family is faced with a multitude of choices. Will they return to work? If not, how will they pay the bills? Should they hire a private investigator or psychic? Are they reliable? Could they get ripped off? They are emotionally distraught. They see their child’s toys, clothing, room, playmates, or a child in the grocery store—all reminders of their missing child and fear of the unknown. They wonder when, if ever, they will see their child again. Convincing the authorities that the child might be in danger when taken by a family member is sometimes impossible, and usually leads to more anger, much of it turned inward, which contributes to depression. Some parents engage in their own investigations, which can be dangerous. Others try to get publicity. Some people turn to a religious belief while others feel abandoned and blame “God” for allowing their child’s disappearance. Many people react with physical symptoms, which include sleep and eating disorders, headaches, and stomach aches. Many try to avoid their pain through the abuse of legal and illegal substances.

Time does not heal the wounds when the family remains in a state of limbo and left with uncertainty

¹Finkelhor, D., Hotaling G.T., and Sedlak, A. 1990. *Missing Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children in American: First Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

of what has happened to their child. Today we still hear about families who are searching for resolution to what happened to their loved ones who were considered missing in action in Vietnam some thirty years ago. Families need answers. Most searching families will, at some point learn the fate of their abducted children but the journey is grueling and often with no end in sight. Until the child's whereabouts are known and reunification has occurred, families cannot experience one of life's greatest gifts—joy. How can a parent ever be happy when he or she does not know the well being or the location of their child. Is the child dead or alive? Are they abused, hungry, cold or sick?

Time unfortunately provides additional triggers, reminders and pain: the child's birthday, the anniversary of the child's disappearance and the holidays. It can be an emotional roller coaster for the parent when "sightings" or "leads" are received and don't materialize into an actual location and recovery.

The abducted child's siblings become forgotten victims. They have not only lost their brother or sister but in many ways their parent(s) too. Searching parents often put their focus and energy into finding the missing children and have little focus and energy left for the other children. Sometimes the siblings parent their parents. These children experience conflicting emotions. On one hand, they love and want their brothers and sisters back, and on the other hand, they are angry and resentful of the attention their brothers and sisters receive in absentia.

Families of abducted children experience serious emotional distress. The siblings appear to be forgotten, the families' history significantly influences how they handle this crisis² and the personality of young children who are abducted will be greatly impacted.

Most families live for the moment when they will be reunited with their children. When reunification occurs certainly one nightmare will end but it is not the end of the story.

How to Better Aid These Families

In an ideal world, community based multi-disciplinary teams would exist. These teams would include law enforcement, prosecutor, mental health, medical, missing children nonprofit, victim service and school personnel. A plan which addresses the needs of these families would be developed and implemented once a child was located and recovered.

Professionals should not disclose the actual location of a child or any lead information to the parent. A parent could go to the location and an altercation could ensue. Or a parent could disclose the information to someone who communicates with the abductor. The abductor could then disappear with the child once again.

Careful consideration should be given to where and when the recovery of the child will take place.

²*Families of Missing Children, Final Report* was prepared by the Center for the Study of Trauma, University of California, San Francisco for: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Washington, DC (1992).

When possible, recovering the child in the presence of the abducting parent should be avoided. A child who is recovered at the same time and place his or her parent is arrested can make the child feel angry and responsible. Perhaps the child could be recovered at school, at the day care center, or while with a babysitter or friend. The parent should be questioned or arrested when the child is not nearby.

Throughout the recovery process, the utmost concern should be given to the safety of the child. It is recommended that a child receive a medical exam as soon as possible. This could confirm or disprove allegations which are likely to be brought up by one of the parents later.

A trained facilitator should assist with the family and child's reunion. The facilitator should speak with the parent, family and the child separately to find out what beliefs and expectations each possesses. He or she can help each party to understand what the other is experiencing and provide suggestions on how to best interact when together. Personal items, such as favorite toys, blankets, home videos and pictures could be shared with the child by the recovering parent. Reunification should occur in a child friendly and safe location. The reunification of children with their families is a very private matter and an emotional experience. Controlling outsiders, such as the media, extended family and friends, is important. The child should not be overwhelmed during this critical bridge building time.

The child may not want to have anything to do with the recovering parent or family. He or she may have been led to believe the recovering parent is a monster or dead. Many abducted children have been taught to hate this parent. For the recovering parent and family this could be very upsetting. They have lived and hoped for this reunion day. Their lives have been placed on hold. They may have the fantasy where they will all embrace and live happily ever after. The parent and family know and understand the pain they have endured, and think the child might understand and have empathy. However, the child may be very confused, angry and afraid.

After the reunification, it is best for the family to try and establish normalcy. Children will test boundaries. These boundaries should be established in a loving and caring manner which help children develop a sense of security. Most of these children were taken by people who have difficulty with conventional boundaries and rules. Recovering parents will probably wish to shower their children with gifts and fun times, but boundaries and limits should be set early on. If they are not, these children could become difficult and may grow uncontrollable. Also, the other children in the household, already resentful of the attention and gifts the recovered child is receiving, could feel there are double standards and they may start acting out.

It is common to see regression in recovered children. They might go back to thumb sucking, bed wetting and baby-talk. These kids may have some very special needs. Some have not attended school and will have difficulty being placed in the proper classroom or educational settings. Some were not allowed to play with other children and lack social and developmental skills.

There will be triggers and strong emotions felt by these children. They may feel disloyal to the abducting parent, or resentful that their recovering parent did not come and get them right away. This type of victimization often leaves children with a strong inability to trust which they may incorporate in relationships throughout their lives. As they grow and want to "fit in" with their peers,

many children feel shame. They do not want others to know they were abducted children. They do not want to be looked at or made to feel different.

The reunification of abducted children with their families is an important area of concern. Families need help and professionals need training on how to facilitate effective recoveries and reunifications.

While we have looked at the devastating effects this crime has on children and families, the resilience and strength of the human spirit should not be underestimated. With the proper help, understanding, and services that they desperately need, families and children can heal and become whole again.