

Reunification - a Professional Perspective

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Years ago, it was very difficult to convince professionals in many fields that searching for—and recovering—a family-abducted child was an important matter. Times have since changed for the better, and today in the United States (and internationally) there is much more recognition that children abducted by family members are potentially endangered children, subject to various forms of psychological (and often physical) abuses.

Effective training programs, practical experience and new laws have led to a statewide professional understanding that finding family-abducted children in a timely manner is of critical importance. Once these children are found, we discover that the children do not come back the same way they left. Children and families lose unreplacable weeks, months and/or years together. This loss is traumatic and long-lasting for both victim children and left-behind family members. Abducted children are typically told lies, such as that their left-behind parent(s) are dead, are monsters or that they had deserted them. Many abducted children live their lives as fugitives with changed identities, moving constantly to avoid discovery while being deprived of adequate schooling, medical care and social development.

When finally located, many children come home consumed with anger, confusion and rage. Others, while appearing all right initially, carry those unresolved feelings until they manifest into antisocial and destructive behaviors in adolescence or adulthood. Without help to resolve these intense emotions, many recovered children take their anger and rage out on their recovering families, and when older, on their intimate relationships or society at large.

Many abducted and subsequently recovered children have now grown up, giving us a clearer picture of what ultimately happens to them. One tragic result is that a substantial number of these children become dysfunctional adults when no immediate or long-term intervention was provided to them. For today's newly-recovered children, more help and awareness affords them better chances for productive lives.

Thus as responsible professionals and caring adults we must offer these children and their families effective, immediate and short-term responses. We must implement better planned recoveries and reunions in ways that reduce traumatic responses as well as long-term impact. While we cannot be all things to all people, we can make important and appropriate referrals to families so that they may avail themselves of credible and valuable resources.

In the ideal world, communities would have developed multi-disciplinary reunification teams responding with strategically developed policies, procedures, protocols and identified resources. Of course, most communities do not currently have reunification teams, and while this can (and should) be a long term goal, sensitive and compassionate assistance still can—and indeed must—be provided. The pages in this section of vca.org contain information that can be used by investigators and parents. In addition, some exciting new state victim compensation laws exist to help victims of family abduction. In September 1998, then-Governor Pete Wilson signed into law AB1803, effectively expanding California's definition of child abuse to include child

abduction. This important change allowed victims of family abduction access to the Crime Victim Compensation Fund, providing dollars for much-needed therapy and services. A law such as this, obviously, has potential to be replicated in other states and on the Federal level.

Taking a little extra time to ensure that children are recovered in a manner that does not intensify trauma, and by empowering families to become whole again by providing resources, we help families and ultimately bring up healthier children. Our actions have tremendous implications for breaking the cycle of violence, for family abduction is truly another form of family violence and child abuse.

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