



Vanished Children's Alliance

991 W. Hedding St. - Ste.101 • San Jose, CA 95126 • 408/296-1113 • 1-800-VANISHED

Initial Reunification Tips for Parents

by Georgia K. Hilgeman, M.A., Agency Founder & Executive Director

A child has been missing and is about to be or has been reunited with his or her parent(s). Below are some suggestions that will assist the family with the changes that they may experience. Keep in mind this is meant to be a guide ~ no two children or families react in the same way.

What To Do When Initially Reunited with Your Abducted Child

1. Prior to the reunion, have an experienced mental health professional assist in meeting the child. Explain what has happened and what will happen next. The therapist should help prepare the child for the reunion.
2. When feasible, reunification should not occur in the presence of the abductor and/or the accomplice(s).
3. Parents and family members should remain as calm as possible and speak in a soothing voice. Loud, emotional outbursts could further frighten the child.
4. Physical contact with the child should proceed slowly and carefully, as hugs, kisses, or pats on the back might scare the child.
5. Parents should situate themselves so they are at eye level with the child. This puts the child on an equal level with the parent and is a form of empowerment for the child..
6. Do not belittle or ridicule the abductor in front of the child. Separate the deed of an abduction from the abductor. Focus on how the child is doing and how they feel about the situation.
7. Let the child know what will occur next. Maybe the child and victim parent will be going home together or law enforcement will speak with the child and the family.
8. If the child asks what is going to happen to the abductor, explain that the abductor is probably going to have to go to court and tell the judge why s/he took the child. Tell the child that right now this person is safe. Parents can then redirect the conversation by saying they are happy to see the child and they will keep the child informed about the abductor's situation as they find out new information.
9. If possible, limit the number of people at the reunification. Avoid extended family, friends, and the media at the initial reunion.
10. The child should be reassured that his/her parent understands that the child might be afraid, but everything will be okay because their parent loves the the child and will protect him or her.
11. Bring past photographs of the child pictured with his/her parent(s) and perhaps bring a past favorite toy that the

child might remember. Make both items available to the child when the time seems right.

12. Whenever possible, give the child some choices that will improve their sense of control (i.e. Would you like a soft drink? What kind? In the can or in a glass?).
13. Allow the child to express his/her feelings within certain limits; children should not be allowed to put themselves or others in danger. For example, the child may appear frozen, which usually indicates fright or numbing, or the child may demonstrate one or more of the following behaviors: crying, screaming, laughing, giggling, fighting, hitting, pulling, biting, urinating, defecation, or compliance. Remember, most of these behaviors are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.
14. The child should immediately have a physical exam.

When the Family Goes Home

1. Show the child around the house and explain where s/he will sleep and where important articles can be found.
2. Shield the child from numerous people. Try to spend some individual, special time with the child so s/he will adjust to the new situation with greater ease.
3. Parents should be careful about what they say to the child or in the presence of the child (i.e. on the phone or to someone else) about the events surrounding the abduction or the abductor.
4. When well-wishers are allowed, set boundaries and time limits for them; also establish acceptable statements that can be made in the presence of the child so s/he does not become confused or upset.
5. Parents should remember to interact positively with the other children in the family and with their partner or spouse. Unspoken jealousies can begin here.
6. Ensure the child's safety. The child may fear re-abduction so take special precautions when the child is playing in the front yard, going and/or coming home from school, and when the child sees their abductor in court.
7. Respect the child's need for physical or emotional space or child's need for security by following or clinging to the parent.



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Ongoing Reunification Tips for Parents

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After the Initial Homecoming ...

1. The child may be compliant initially, but will later need to express some independence by acting out and testing the limits.
2. Establish clear, loving boundaries.
3. Encourage the child and give him/her positive reinforcement for good behavior.
4. The consequences for inappropriate behavior should be discussed with the child in advance and should not include physical punishment. The consequences might include time out or the removal of toys/privileges for a period of time. Consequences should also be employed in a calm manner and followed through completely. The child should never feel that a parent's love is conditional or that the child's behavior could impact that love.
5. Involve the child and family members in individual or family therapy. Interview therapists and select one who has a positive track record in working with missing or abducted children, abused children, or victims of crime. Check with the local Victim Witness program or the **Vanished Children's Alliance** for referrals. Verify if the victim parent, child, or family qualifies for state victim compensation to cover some or all of the therapy costs.
6. When the child attends school, inform the school of safety concerns. Provide the school with a copy of the custody order if applicable. Determine the school's release policy, adult office check-in policy, and insure that the school has a school call-back program.
7. Ask the neighbors to advise the parent(s) or other family members of people or cars that appear to be monitoring the family's residence, the child's school, or play areas.
8. Parents should ensure that the necessary custody orders for the child(ren) are current and that several file-endorsed copies are readily available at all times.
9. Have the child photographed and fingerprinted and keep a current, completed **VCA Child Identification Sheet** (see page 17) on hand in a safe location at **HOME**.
10. It is very likely that at some point the child will have contact with the abducting parent. If it appears that this may occur, seek supervised visitation and/or require the abducting parent to post a sizeable bond.
11. Make sure the child knows his/her correct name, address, telephone number, their parent's full name and who they can go to for help when they are not in their parent's care.
12. Parents can communicate their feelings of anger about the situation in many different ways, especially through verbal communication (tone of voice) and body language. Be aware, however, that young children are naturally self-centered; they are the center of their universe, so they may feel responsible for things that happen around them. Consequently, children may assume the blame for what has happened to them; and they may also feel that they have caused their parent's/family's anger or pain.
13. Many parents live day to day hoping and dreaming of the recovery of their child(ren). This fantasy often includes a scenario where the family lives happily ever after once they are reunited. However, the reality is that most children do not come back as the same child. Just as the parent has been changed by the experience, so has the abducted child ... perhaps even more. Although the child is now home, the clock cannot be turned back. Instead, a "**new normal**" must be established.
14. It is difficult to assess the long-term ramifications of the abduction on children. Each case is different, spanning the entire spectrum of recovery scenarios. Some children and families may experience positive reconstruction of their lives, while others suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Consequently, parents are encouraged to acquire the appropriate family intervention services early in the reunification process so the likelihood of long-term negative consequences can be reduced.
15. Allow children to speak about their ordeal and encourage them to share both positive and negative experiences they had while missing. Remember, if children express a positive feeling or experience about the abductor, it's not a reflection on the reunited family. In the long run, by allowing open and honest communication, parents will serve as a catalyst to the child's healing.
16. Develop a support system for the parent and family members even after the child returns home. Parenting is a big job and no one is superhuman! It's not selfish for parents to take care of themselves. On the contrary, by modeling self-care and self-respect, the child may also develop these characteristics. If parents model victim or martyr-like behavior, children are also likely to view themselves as victims. Parents must remember they cannot change the past, but they can change how they view the situation, thus creating a brighter, more optimistic future.

For additional information, contact VCA at (408) 296-1113.

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