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## HOW TO HELP PREVENT A FAMILY ABDUCTION

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The impact of family abduction can be devastating and long lasting for both the children involved and their family members left behind. Historically, the response of the professional community has been more reactive than pro-active or preventive. In recent years, however, the issue of missing and abducted children has captured the nation's attention through the media's depiction of high profile child abduction cases. Public concern has resulted in the development of numerous prevention education programs focusing on "stranger danger," or the prevention of an abduction by someone unknown to the victim child and/or family. Although no one can dispute the horror and significance of a child abducted by a stranger, this is the least likely type of abduction to occur. The child is more likely to be abducted by someone they know and trust. The abductor is most likely to be a parent, family member or an individual once involved in a romantic relationship with the parent.

Although not every family abduction is preventable, steps can be taken to help reduce the possibility. This paper will include some practical preventive approaches for professionals, parents, and guardians.

### WHAT A CONCERNED PARENT SHOULD DO

#### *TAKE THREATS OF ABDUCTION SERIOUSLY*

It is not unusual for a parent considering abduction to threaten to take the child(ren) prior to doing so. These threats are often made to the child's other parent. To prevent witnesses from hearing or viewing threats, they may not be made in the presence of other people. The threat may be stated as a lone comment or as a method to coerce the other parent's behavior. Examples of threatening comments include "I'm taking my son and you will never see him again," "If you leave me . . . don't give me the assets during the divorce. . . if you get involved with so and so . . . , I will take the child" or "No court is going to tell me that I cannot see my child when I want to. I'll just leave."

It may be difficult to convince a court that such comments could be construed as serious threats. This is especially true if these comments are only heard by the other parent. It becomes a situation of one person's word against the other. Parental rights and parental access are held in high esteem and are not generally restricted by the court based on unsubstantiated comments. It is imperative that the threatened parent takes these threats seriously, even if the courts do not. (S)he should try to obtain legal custody of the child with very specific requirements regarding contact and removal from the area. If the parent hasn't already done so, develop a file containing pertinent information about the child and the other parent in case the child is taken. This way, up-to-date information will be readily available.

### *INFORM THE CHILD'S SCHOOL, DAY CARE CENTER, OR CHILD CARE PROVIDER OF CONCERNS*

A concerned parent should contact their child's school, day care center or child care provider and alert them of his or her concerns of a possible abduction attempt by the child's other parent. Verbal notification must be followed by written instructions and formal documentation. Written instructions should include the name(s) of those adults allowed to pick up the child and under what circumstances this can be done. Any changes to these instructions must always be made both verbally and documented in writing to teachers and care-givers. Know the physical environment surrounding the school or day care center. Is it safe? Is there easy access for an unauthorized person to enter the premises? Could a child be easily grabbed out of the sight of staff? What are the policies regarding outsiders entering the facility? Assess all school, day care or home security and suggest possible precautions that could be implemented if the current system appears negligent.

It is imperative to provide certified copies of the custody decree as well as photographs of the potential abductor. Instruct child care personnel what should be done if the potential abductor is seen near, or on, the premises. Caution school personnel and care givers that falsified or no-longer-valid custody orders are sometimes used by an abducting parent. Because custody orders are often changed or modified, it may be difficult for school personnel to decipher the current and enforceable order. If there are any questions or concerns on the part of school personnel, it is important that they call their local law enforcement agency before releasing a child from the school or day-care center as a response to papers provided by the other parent. Law enforcement can take the child into protective custody if it appears a parent might abduct or conceal a child and the child custody decrees are in dispute.

### *OBTAIN CUSTODY*

Ending relationships cause hurt and anger. If a parent is concerned about a potential abduction, (s)he should not delay in attempting to obtain legal custody. Some states require parents to attend mediation in contested child custody cases. All effective methods to negotiate and mediate child custody are encouraged. Court-mandated mediation helps deal with the custody issues, rather than the emotional components of the relationship. The most important factors are the child's welfare and safety.

To deal with the emotional issues surrounding a relationship breakup it may be helpful for parents to find a support system. A therapist or self-help group can be useful. Although friends and family may wish to help by giving support, care should be taken as many of these supporters have personal biases. Sometimes receiving assistance from those not directly involved provides a more helpful, objective perspective.

The old adage applies, “(s)he who angers you controls you.” A parent should not give his/her personal power away by becoming angry or overly emotional. Mediation serves as an opportunity to focus on the child’s needs and best interests. The parent who keeps this focus will be viewed in a more positive light by both the mediator and the court than the parent who reacts inappropriately. All too often, anger between parents is perceived by many professionals as taking precedence over the best interest of the child.

The custody decree should outline child visitation or supervised visitation dates, times, and locations. Well-defined court orders often limits and restricts a child’s removal from the city, county, state or country. Avoid court orders using ambiguous phrases such as “reasonable visitation.” Some parents have had success through the courts by requiring the potentially abducting parent to post a bond or turn over the child’s passport to the court or a specific third party. Sometimes court orders even address the criminal consequences of child abduction. If not a deterrent, these court orders provide additional legal remedies and resources should the child be taken.

#### *PREVIOUS ABDUCTIONS OR SIGNIFICANT DELAYS IN RETURNING THE CHILD SHOULD BE CONSIDERED*

Does the parent have a history of abducting this child or other children from a previous relationship? Does this person constantly violate the court orders or agreements concerning the return of the child? Reasonable unforeseen delays in returning a child home can happen, but a person planning to commit an abduction often develops an established pattern of behavior that needs to be addressed as soon as possible. These patterns or behaviors can become more pronounced and serious with time if no boundaries or consequences are established. Sometimes this means returning to court. The parent going to court must demonstrate the egregious nature of the matter. Concerned parents must avoid using the court to address minor incidents.

Individuals who have been caught for previously abducting a child have learned some things from their mistakes. They are likely to be more sophisticated at hiding both the child and themselves. Locating them in subsequent abductions can therefore prove more difficult.

#### *DETERMINE IF THE POTENTIAL ABDUCTOR HAS DIFFICULTY IN SEPARATING HIS/HER NEEDS FROM THOSE OF THE CHILD*

Be aware if the potentially abducting parent is narcissistic and has difficulty seeing his or her child as a separate person with unique and differing needs. Through the eyes of many abducting parents, the child is viewed as an object or the property of that parent. Statements

such as, “I carried my daughter for nine months, why should her father have any rights?” or “He’s my son. He carries my family name. You can leave but not with my son because he’s mine,” address the needs of the parent, but not the needs of the child.

### *THE POTENTIAL ABDUCTOR MAKES CONTINUOUS ALLEGATIONS*

Allegations of inappropriate activities in high conflict divorces, custody and child abduction cases are all too common. Accusations of abuse, neglect, being an unfit parent, substance abuse, violence, or mental illness are frequent. The allegations may sometimes be true (and are certainly serious in nature), but it is not always easy for professionals to separate the truth from a lie. A concerned parent should document all statements or behaviors that fall into this category. Documentation should include the date, time, specific behavior or statement, to whom it was directed, who was present, and responses or actions taken by those present. When possible and appropriate, the parent should photograph or videotape any physical injury or damage that result from this type of behavior. The concerned parent should not hesitate to obtain immediate medical, legal, law enforcement or social service interventions if there were any physical altercations directed toward the child, parent, property, or others involved.

It may be difficult to convince the court that a parent’s allegations are true. This is why clearly-kept logs, documentation, photographs, and witness testimonies are so important. Usually, untrue allegations are conveyed to others without any proof in order to solicit their support when a future abduction or concealment is being planned.

### *DEFUSE THE POTENTIAL ABDUCTOR’S HOSTILITY*

Both parents’ coping styles when under significant stress should be identified by the concerned parent. Ended relationships, loss of a loved one, financial concerns, changed living arrangements, child safety and security issues, and health issues are each major life stresses. The combination of several will intensify the stress reactions. Each person reacts differently to different situations. However, each person also tends to have preferred coping approaches. Under stress, some people become dependent and must be cared for. Others fight or demonstrate aggression or anger and attack those perceived to have caused the pain. Still others practice avoidance and flee the situation. Some are passive-aggressive and acquire power through behavior that is unassertive. During times of high stress these behaviors are likely to repeat themselves. Understanding the potential stress responses can assist the concerned parent to de-escalate the conflict.

A parent should refrain from becoming involved in a power struggle. No one ever wins, least of all the child. The focus must be kept on the child’s needs. Issues of child support and visitation should be kept separate. In some circumstances it is helpful to develop neutral child exchange locations or obtain supervised visitations through the courts.

## *MAINTAIN GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE THE POTENTIAL ABDUCTOR SEES AS A SUPPORT SYSTEM*

Abductors usually do not act “in a vacuum.” They have a support system consisting of family, friends, or new intimate partners. They may also have strong connections to geographical regions inside and outside of this country.

An ended relationship need not mean that the role of friend or extended family ends as well. Though the concerned parent may not be able to maintain a good relationship with every in-law, mutual friend or those closest to the other parent, it is possible to stay friends with some of them. The parent should avoid asking people to take sides, as this may alienate them. It is better for the parent to focus on the child’s needs. Remember birthdays and special occasions celebrated by those who are now former relatives and friends, for example. If a child is abducted, it only takes one person in that system to question, disagree, and come forward with important information. This can assist in ending or preventing an abduction. A parent should work to create these links before any attempt of abduction occurs.

If family and friends of the potential abductor exhibit changed behavior such as a sudden distancing, this could be a warning sign for an upcoming abduction. A list of former relatives and friends with other related information should be developed as soon as possible and kept available.

## *AVOIDING INTERNATIONAL ABDUCTIONS*

Parents should learn all other possible places both nationally and internationally where a potential abductor might have ties or connections. The concerned parent should educate him/herself about the particular country of concern, its culture and child custody perspectives. Is this country part of the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction? If so, how effective was this country in returning abducted children in the past? In theory, those countries that are party to the Hague Convention call for the prompt return of wrongfully-removed or retained children to their countries of habitual residence. Recovering and returning children from foreign countries, especially countries not part of the Hague Convention, can be difficult and costly. If the possibility of international abduction exists, the parent should obtain or restrict issuance of a U.S. passport to the child.

To do this, the parent should send a certified copy of their custody decree along with a written request which directs the U.S. Passport Services Offices of the U.S. Department of State Passport Policy and Advisory Services to deny issuance or replacement of a passport to the child without the custodial parent’s permission. In addition, the parent should request that he or she be notified if a passport application is made by the other parent. The child’s name can be entered into the U.S. Passport Name-Check System. Once the application is received and the name of the child is listed in the system, the parent must be notified before a passport can be issued. This system also allows for a file search to

determine if a passport has already been issued or if an application is pending. Either parent can receive passport information, regardless of custodial status, unless a court has ruled otherwise.

U.S. Office of Passport Policy and Advisory Services  
U.S. Department of State  
111 19<sup>th</sup> Street, N.W., Suite 260  
Washington, D.C. 20522-1705  
202.955.0377

Office of Children's Issues  
Office of Citizen Consular Services  
U.S. Dept. of State, Room 4817  
Washington, D.C. 20520  
202.736.7000 or 202.647.1046  
<<http://travel.state.gov>>

The child may be viewed as having dual citizenship or as a national of another country. In such a case, the concerned parent should send a certified copy of the custody order to U.S. headquarters for that country's embassy and request a non-issuance of a passport for the child without the parent's permission. However, there is no assurance that the request will be honored.

Abducting parents who are originally from another country often seek support in their country of origin. Friends and family members there may have a similar value system, cultural perspective or religious orientation. The concerned parent should pay attention to derogatory remarks made by the potential abductor about the United States, its people or customs. Potential abductors who feel disenfranchised in this country will likely go elsewhere where they feel more welcome.

Locating a child who has been removed from the U.S. can be difficult, if not impossible at times, as well as very costly both financially and emotionally. Parents should observe the general rule: *To prevent an international abduction from occurring, make it as difficult as possible for an abductor to leave the United States.*

### ***LISTEN TO THE CHILD FOR CUES OF A PLANNED ABDUCTION***

The child can be a tremendous source of information about an upcoming or planned abduction. Often, we hear things from a child only to dismiss them as fantasy. Although all the information may not be accurate, there may be hints of upcoming events. Listen and pay attention to the child. (S)he may communicate directly. Sometimes communication is through play or other behaviors. A child might mention that (s)he is going on a trip or vacation with Mom or Dad. The child may mention that the other parent has quit or been fired from his/her job, has moved, said he or she will no longer pay child support, is in a new relationship, or other relevant information. The child needs to feel safe in sharing this information with his or her parent without feeling pressured to "tell secrets."

### *NOTE BEHAVIOR OR ATTITUDE CHANGES IN THE CHILD*

In addition to listening to the child, pay attention to behavioral or attitudinal changes. Although a child's poor school performance, inability to concentrate, depression, or misbehavior may all be normal symptoms of unhappiness due to a parent's breakup, they may also be warning signs that a child is picking up a parent's anger. Anger and revenge sometimes go hand-in-hand and are typical motivations of family abductions. Some parents are actually able to brainwash their child(ren) to reject and hate the other parent. This is known as Parental Alienation Syndrome. Brainwashing is common with abducted children, especially when the child is isolated from one of the parents. It is also common in the preparation phase of abduction in order to get the child's cooperation in the crime.

Brainwashing techniques can also assist the abducting parent in justifying their behavior. (S)he has convinced the child and him or herself that the other parent is a monster and that (s)he is a hero/heroine for rescuing the child.

A concerned parent should be cautious when a child becomes overly elated about a proposed upcoming trip, especially if the parent is unaware of plans for the child to take a trip. These trips, which may be in direct violation of a court order prohibiting removal of the child from the area, do not comply with allowable visitation dates and times, or are out of character for the other parent.

### *TEACH THE CHILD WHAT TO DO AND HOW TO GET HELP IF AN ABDUCTION IS ATTEMPTED OR IN PROGRESS*

While we cannot expect young children to defend themselves from adults, children can be empowered and given important safety skills and resources. Children should be taught their name, their parents' names (beyond "mom" and "dad"), their address and phone number (including area code) at an early age. They should be taught basic telephone skills as well as how to dial "911" for help. Continued practice and reinforcement of these skills are necessary. Children, like adults, learn more by doing than by listening. These activities can be fun to learn without being frightening. For example, children could role-play what they should do if separated from their parent at a public place. Roles could then be reversed and parents could role-play the desired responses.

Parents will need to continuously reassure their children that they are loved, and that they would never intentionally leave them. The children should never believe anyone who would tell them otherwise. It is possible that abducting parents will attempt to lead their child(ren) to believe blatant lies concerning the custodial parent's health ("your mother has been injured in a car accident"), well-being ("your father has died in a fire"), or personal feelings ("your mother does not love you anymore"). Demonstrating good, responsible, loving parenting can keep children from believing negative statements made about them.

Parents can also educate their children about how to get help quickly when in a public place. Children can be taught that there are times when loud screaming of particular words or phrases or making a scene in public is appropriate. Airports, gas stations, restaurants, hotels, shopping centers, and schools are a few of the places where children might appear after an abduction. Help is readily available at these locations for children who have developed and can utilize learned skills.

### *PAY ATTENTION TO CHANGES IN THE POTENTIAL ABDUCTOR'S BEHAVIOR*

Concerned parents should take notice of any sudden or drastic change in the potential abductor's behavior. Sudden changes in behavior (from antagonistic and belligerent to friendly and cooperative, or that behavior in reverse) can indicate a plan that is being made to abduct the child. A parent previously uninterested in exercising visitation rights who demonstrates a sudden turnaround in behavior or concern should be noted. It is possible that this parent is trying to catch the other parent or child off guard prior to the abduction.

When a parent becomes interested in a new intimate relationship, the potential abductor may react with jealousy or loss of control. To regain that control, the parent may consider abduction in order to prevent the other parent from finding happiness in his or her new life. Obviously, there is little happiness for a parent whose child has been abducted. Control, in this case, has now been taken by the abducting parent. The parent of an abducted child often has difficulty in sustaining a new intimate relationship. Alternately, potential abductors in a new relationship might use that new romantic interest to validate their vindictiveness toward the former partner. The new partner may even assist in an abduction, providing the abductor an adult companion and someone to assist in the concealment of the child.

The parent should be wary if the other parent suddenly liquidates all of his/her assets or cuts off ties with their surrounding community. He or she should explore why the other parent has sold their home, closed their bank accounts, sold their car, quit their job, terminated a lease, or moved without leaving a forwarding address. These sudden, drastic changes may be hints that an abduction is about to take place. The financial resources available following these changes will make it easier to leave, while providing less of a paper-trail to track the abductor.

### *IMPORTANT ITEMS FOR PARENTS TO KEEP ON FILE*

Below are listed a number of items to have in a file. It is important to keep this information in a safe, secured place that is easily and quickly accessible if needed. The potential abductor should not have access to this information. These files should be updated regularly, as information changes. Many of the items may be more difficult to obtain or update. Remember, *the more information available, the easier it will be to track the child and/or the abductor should an abduction occur.*

Items concerning the child:

1. Birth Certificate
2. Fingerprints
3. Immunization records
4. Medical and dental records
5. Several up-to-date and clear color photographs of the child(ren)
6. Videotape of the child(ren)
7. DNA sample (a cotton swab rubbed on the inside cheek of a child, or a bandage from a skinned knee, double-ziplock bagged and stored in a home freezer is an effective sample)
8. Three certified copies of the most current child custody decree
9. Passport
10. Name, address, telephone number of current school and a contact person
11. A completed Vanished Children's Alliance (VCA) I.D. Form (may be obtained by calling VCA at 408/296-1113) with descriptive information on the child(ren). This would include such things as their full name, nicknames, gender, date-of-birth, social security number, height, weight, eye color, physical marks such as birth marks, moles or scars and medical considerations. This should be completed in pencil and updated regularly or as information changes.

Items concerning the potential abductor:

1. Clear photographs (current if possible)
2. Videotape
3. Descriptive information
4. Fingerprints
5. DNA samples (i.e., follicles from a strand of hair, double-ziplock bagged and stored in a home freezer can suffice)
6. List of previously received medical, dental, social service assistance
7. List of work history, skills, training, degrees, institutions of learning, technical schools, or training facilities attended, including dates and locations
8. Professional licenses, credentials or permits
9. List of all past and current residences
10. List of all assets, accounts, credit card numbers, etc.
11. Birth certificate
12. Social Security number
13. Driver license(s). Include the number, state of issuance and expiration dates.
14. List and description of all owned or utilized vehicles, including license plate numbers, vehicle identification numbers, makes, models, registration numbers, and legal owners
15. List (in order of importance to the potential abductor) of family, friends, co-workers, and other associates including the names, addresses, telephone and fax numbers, and email addresses. Include photographs of these individuals if available
16. Proof of citizenship papers, if applicable.

17. Passport number
18. Military history
19. Any criminal or civil judgments. Include location, dates, and adjudication.
20. Pets, include descriptions, names of animals, and veterinary clinics
21. Names and descriptions of children from other marriages or relationships, their addresses, telephone numbers, and pictures - indicate if child support is paid
22. Name, address, photo or physical description of current or past spouses or partner(s) - indicate if spousal support is paid
23. A credit report or credit header
24. Log of disturbing behavior patterns

### **WHAT A CONCERNED PROFESSIONAL SHOULD DO**

Professionals working in the very serious and often difficult field of child abduction must make prevention, child location, recovery, reunification, and education the top priorities. When parents, children, and the general public gain the tools and knowledge to become pro-active in their own safety and well-being and adopt the techniques that will deter potential abductors, it is more likely the abductors will be deterred.

Different audiences need to receive education and information through different means. This might include public speaking engagements, training seminars or workshops, and media exposure. Professionals should conduct cross-training within and outside of their agency as well as develop a multi-disciplinary approach. They can also offer ongoing education to various community and professional organizations. Written literature can be disseminated by mail, in person, or by use of the Internet. It is important to identify other local, regional, state, national, and international resources that may be helpful to professionals and useful as a referral source.

The following approach will be beneficial to professionals in developing and implementing a prevention education component:

1. Identify the messages to be communicated to your audience. For example: Family abduction is a crime and must be vigorously pursued, as it causes irreparable harm to the children, and the parents and siblings left behind.
2. Identify the individuals and/or agencies who will participate in communicating the same messages to the public. Public/private sector partnerships are valuable.
3. Identify the materials and information to be used to promote the message being conveyed.
4. Implement and assess the messages, the materials, the participants, and the effectiveness of the public awareness campaign. This should be done on an ongoing basis.
5. Make changes to the public awareness campaign as needed.

Contact the **Vanished Children's Alliance (VCA)**, a national nonprofit organization, for more information on prevention, location and reunification of missing and abducted children. National training on various aspects of the issue are also available by Georgia Hilgeman, VCA's Executive Director.

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### **CONCLUSION**

Although family abduction cases cannot always be prevented, there are many safeguards that can be taken to minimize the risk. This paper includes a few. Education and the dissemination of information to the public are imperative. In addition, when potential abductors learn that their actions may have criminal, civil, and emotional consequences they become less likely to act out their negative and angry feelings. Children deserve our care and concern. It is our duty as responsible adults and caring parents and professionals to do our best to protect the most vulnerable of our citizens.

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