



# Child Abduction T.I.P.S. (Training, Information, Practices & Strategy)

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## CHILD ABDUCTOR CHARACTERISTICS

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The Federal Bureau of Investigation's ("FBI") Child Abduction Response Plan ("CARP") provides step-by-step guidance to law enforcement agencies in an easy-to-follow checklist format. It also provides sample canvass and questionnaire forms, which can be tailored to meet the needs of a specific case. The CARP also includes sections that increase awareness regarding the different types of child abductions, and the motivations and common behaviors of various abductors, including an article by the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit ("BAU") on Understanding Child Abductions. One part of that article discusses Child Abductor Characteristics. Here is an excerpt from the CARP concerning Child Abductor Characteristics.

"As the vast majority of non-family child abductions are motivated by sex, a logical conclusion for investigators might be that child abductors have a history of sex crimes and/or crimes against children. However, BAU research into the criminal histories of child abduction offenders reflects that is not always an accurate assumption. A BAU study of child abductors reflects that while approximately three-fourths of offenders have some type of criminal history, most of their prior crimes were unrelated to sex or children. Approximately one-third of the abductors in the study had a prior arrest for a forcible sex offense, and approximately one-fifth had a prior arrest for a crime against a child victim. In the cases included in the BAU study, very few offenders were sex offender registrants at the time that they abducted a child.

Child abductors in the BAU study exhibited a wide range of prior crimes, including violent crimes, property crimes, and crimes against society (e.g., drug/alcohol, disorderly conduct). Among the most common crimes committed were assault, burglary, and larceny. Many of the offenders demonstrated long and varied criminal careers, as they averaged almost six prior arrests per offender, and had been engaging in criminal activity for an average of over ten years. Over 40% of the offenders had arrests in at least two states, and almost one-third had been arrested for more than three different categories of crimes. These findings suggest that many non-family child abductors are engaged in a variety of criminal behaviors and lifestyles, and may not be focused solely on the victimization of children. Previous research by BAU and others into the victim selection patterns of sexually-motivated offenders reflects that offenders who abduct children do not necessarily have an exclusive sexual preference for them. Rather, offenders often select children as victims because of their availability and their vulnerability, rather than specific age-related preferences. The overwhelming majority of non-family child abductors of school-age children are male, and most offenders abduct children consistent with their own race. In addition to commonly possessing criminal backgrounds, unpublished BAU research reflects that a significant number of child abductors also have had some type of recent negative event or stressor in their lives, such as legal problems, mental health issues, conflicts with others, and/or financial problems. Child abductors have been described as low in social competence, and as “social marginal,” who committed crimes of opportunity rather than carefully-planned offenses targeting specific individuals. Child abductors often come from the same neighborhoods or communities as their victims. Recent BAU research into child abductors who murder their victims indicated that, when the offender’s place of residence was known, over one-third lived within a half mile of the victim’s residence, and over two-thirds lived within five miles. Offenders who are family members or acquaintances to the victim are more likely to abduct the child from within, or around, the victim’s residence, while strangers are more likely to abduct the child from a street, park or other public location.”

**If you would like a copy of the FBI’s CARP please contact your local FBI Field Office.**

# Trauma Bonding

By: Cari Teran

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Trauma bonding is layered, complex and powerful. It can keep people in toxic or harmful relationships, often isolated from others. Being aware of these dynamics provides a foundation for responders to better understand the inner workings of an abusive relationship and develops empathy, which is paramount in building rapport to support informative victim interviews.

Trauma bonding occurs in a formed relationship between two individuals where there is a power differential. It describes a state of emotional attachment to an abuser. This dynamic in the relationship gradually builds during periods of shared-intense emotional experiences. Trauma bonding dynamics often include: narcissism, codependency, gas lighting and/or emotional or physical threat. Types of relationships that can include trauma bonding include child abuse, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, abduction, supervisor and subordinate, professor and student, and cults.

Within the trauma bonding relationship, the abuser's partner, who may have a history of trauma or dysfunctional family relationships, begins to feel love and security. These feelings may erode with time as the mental and/or physical abuse gains prominence in the relationship. This unique form of manipulation is characterized by repetitive behaviors, in which the abuser operates within a cycle of abuse (tension building, violence, reward), resulting in a trauma bond that is strengthened with every repeated misdeed. The victim believes that they just need to understand what they are doing wrong in order to bring back the loving part of the relationship. They hold a false sense of power because no matter what, the abuser holds the power.

If they do manage to break free, all the abuser has to do is go back to that courtship phase to win them back. This also means the victim will stay in the relationship when the abuse escalates, reinforcing a destructive cycle. According to therapist Shannon Thomas, author of *Healing from Hidden Abuse*, "Psychological abuse is insidious, and it occurs over time like an IV drip of poison entering your veins. It starts with an offhand comment here, or an insult there, but often victims brush these moments off. This is because abusers are great at pretending to be everything you're looking for in a partner, and they love bomb you with affection. Victims tend to believe this is the abuser's real self, and when the mask starts to slip more and more, they believe it's 'out of character' and it must be their own fault for making their partner angry."

There is a physiological response that reinforces the trauma bond. During times of stress our bodies unconsciously respond with increased levels of the stress hormone cortisol, to prepare our bodies to be able to fight or run away. After the abuse or violence, a reward or affection may be offered, releasing dopamine and oxytocin to support the victim in feeling good.

Victims stay in these relationships despite the physical and emotional toll, because often it isn't clear to them what the problems really are. Through gas lighting, control, and intermittent love, the abuser has their partner backed into a corner of self-blame and desperation of trying to win back the affection of the person they love.

Grooming is a collection of psychological tools that abusers utilize to coerce a potential victim into a typically sexual abusive situation. The perpetrator may entice through promises of money, toys, or love. Boundaries may be tested repeatedly as a way to wear down the victim or to test what the perpetrator can get away with. Some form of manipulation, threat or lies are told that would induce shame or physical harm on the victim, or their family, should they tell. There is immense power in coercive persuasion (e.g., brainwashing, psychological manipulation), particularly the more intense and chronic.

#### Parental Abduction and Trauma Bonding

When thinking about trauma bonding within a parental-child abduction it's important to consider what the child may have been told by the abducting parent. This will inform recovery personnel on how that child may present during a recovery. A child who has been with their parent/captor may appear compliant or eager to please. They may look to the parent before speaking or answering questions. An abducted child may corroborate their parent/captor story so it's imperative to always interview the child away from the parent.

#### Stranger Abduction

The survival instinct is primary for children or adults abducted by strangers. Victims are dependent on their captors for basic provisions, often while enduring horrific abuse and/or threats to life. Victims interpret rare or small acts of kindness in the midst of horrible conditions as good treatment. If a person is being intentionally starved, receiving a piece of bread will induce feelings of gratitude. In the case of Elizabeth Smart who was abducted by Brian Mitchell from her bedroom in the middle of the night at knife point when she was 14 years old. She was repeatedly raped, beaten, and threatened with death (hers and her family's) for 9 months until she was found. She describes having brief moments during her captivity that she could have escaped but 89 was difficult terrain coupled with the fear of death threats to her family that kept her imprisoned.

Shawn Hornsby was 11 years old when he was abducted by Michael Devlin, repeatedly sexually assaulted and then strangled. Devlin later reported that Shawn talked him out of killing him in what prosecutors called a "deal with the devil." Over the next 4 years, Devlin would record and share pornographic images and videos of Shawn with other child molesters online, creating deeper levels of shame

for Shawn, keeping him compliant. Devlin eventually abducted another boy, 13-year-old Ben Ownby, and kept him for 4 days. Authorities found them after a tip came into law enforcement about Devlin's truck being spotted speeding away from Ben's abduction.

While trauma bonding is a way to describe a dynamic between an abuser and their victim, it can also be a source of resiliency. There is purpose to having an emotional connection to an abuser that can give hope for survival. Without hope a victim can lose their will to survive. Building empathy with a captor could mean living another day.

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