

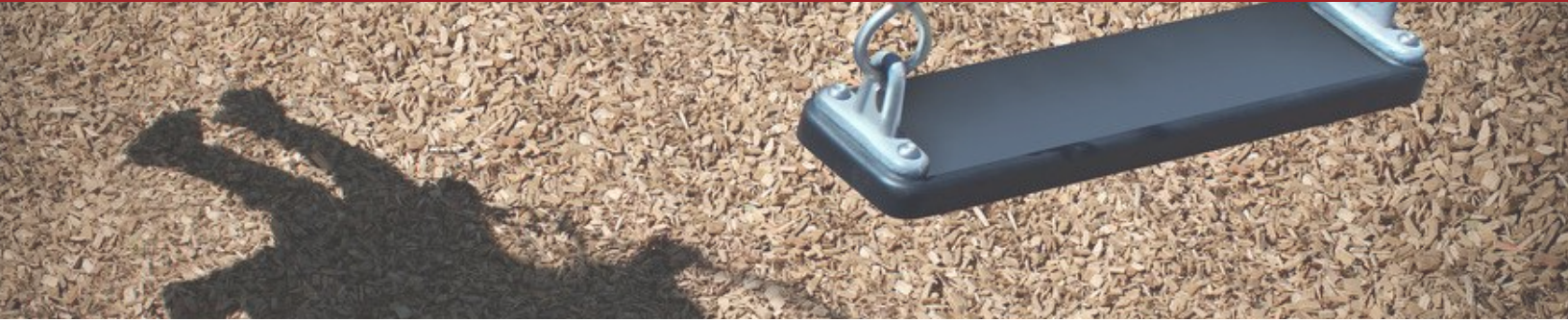


# CHILD ABDUCTION T.I.P.S. NEWSLETTER

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## **Parent Child Abduction Reunification and Reintegration**

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### **Preparation & Facilitation**

Once a child has been physically recovered, they are then reunified with the left-behind parent. Sometimes the left-behind parent is at the recovery location and other times the child will need to be transported back to the left-behind parent. When preparing for reunification, it can be very helpful to have a trained facilitator, victim advocate, or therapist to assist with the family and the child's reunion whenever possible. The facilitator explores the family's beliefs and expectations and can help them to understand what the child has been experiencing. The facilitator works through a trauma-focused lens and can provide guidance about the emotional process for the child and left-behind parent. Personal items, such as favorite toys, blankets, videos, and pictures could be shared with the child by the recovering parent, especially if a lot of time has passed since the abduction.

When possible, reunification should occur in a child-friendly and safe location. It is advisable to have the reunification occur separately from the recovery for a number of reasons: it helps law enforcement focus on their investigative role; it reduces interference from emotional parents; it minimizes trauma to the left-behind parent if the child does not want to leave the abductor; and it provides the facilitator time to meet with the abducted child privately and meet with the family prior to the actual reunification.

Reunification is a time of heightened emotions and should be a private matter. Collaborating with other agencies to assist in limiting access of outsiders, such as the media and extended family and friends, is important so as to not overwhelm the child during this critical bridge-building time. Many children may not want to have anything to do with the recovering parent or family. They may have been led to believe a multitude of lies about the recovering parent. Many abducted children have been taught to hate this parent. For the recovering parent and family, this can be very upsetting. They have lived and hoped for this reunion day. Their lives have been placed on hold for months or sometimes years. They may have the fantasy that they will all embrace and live happily ever after. This can be one of the most challenging dynamics to address in therapy due to the psychological erosion of the child's relationship with the left-behind parent. The parent and family hopes that the child will understand the pain they have endured and that will minimize the damage done from having to believe their abductor's lies. But that doesn't change how the child feels, which may include anger, confusion, fear, and worry.

### **Reintegration Challenges**

Whether the abduction is brief or extended, the process of reintegrating back into family life after abduction can be very complicated. After reunification, it is best to establish a routine, such as having the child return to school. While a child may initially be happy and compliant, they may also test limits and act out underlying feelings and needs, and/or may lack the verbal skills or emotional regulation to express their feelings. It is important to hold boundaries in a clear and loving manner to support development of a sense of security. Since these children were taken by people who have difficulty with conventional rules, it's even more important to honor boundaries. To ensure that the child has privacy with their body and personal space, parents may need to ask permission to hug, especially with older children/teens. To help the child feel safe, parents might add or reinforce security measures such as a house alarm and window/door locks, rearrange the child's bedroom, or take other measures as needed.

is common to see regression in recovered children, depending on the length of their abduction and how they were treated. They might go back to thumb sucking, bed wetting and baby-talk. This is because their emotional development was interrupted by the trauma of the abduction. These children will need to have a safe therapeutic space to regress to the age of unmet needs in order to recreate the abusive dynamic and regressive behavior, so they can make sense of it and heal; thus, eliminating the regression and restoring the child's age-appropriate behavior.

Children who have not attended school will have difficulty being placed in the proper classroom or educational settings, as their academic skills may be lower than their chronological age/grade. Having a meeting with the school counselor or requesting a 504 plan or Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting can help secure access to services to support the child academically. Inform the school of any safety concerns and provide a custody order, if applicable.

Children who were not allowed to play with other children may lack social and developmental skills. Children naturally want to fit in with their peers. Things that make them stand out or seem different may cause feelings of shame. Often, children don't want others to know their abduction story because they don't want to feel different. For this reason, it is important to know whether their abduction recovery was in the news and may be public information. In addition, the recovered child may be utilizing another name if there is a high chance of re-abduction (e.g., because the abducting parent was not captured/detained, or the extended family is/was acting on behalf of the abducting parent).

Children 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 into relationships throughout their lives. The longer the child was gone and the severity of what they experienced adds to the complexity of their healing.

Special considerations should be taken when children are recovered and placed into foster care. These children may exhibit acting out behaviors, test boundaries, or display regressive behaviors inconsistent with their chronological age. Some foster caregivers have been providing care to foster youth for many years and have found that they are most successful when they are firm and unwavering in their demands or expectations. But that approach may not work well with children who need flexibility and understanding about the multiple layers of their trauma. Often, children who have been in the foster care system for many years or have had multiple placements will act out as a way of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy; children often believe that they will eventually be rejected and moved, so they subconsciously act out to control when the move will occur. They emotionally push away before they can be rejected.

For many children who have experienced trauma and are in the foster care system, a visit with their biological parent may be a trauma trigger. This can invoke fear and anxiety which overwhelms their ability to cope, and as a result they may shut down emotionally and/or present as if they feel fine. They may also act out later or have disrupted sleep. These are all considered a normal trauma response.

Understanding the many different dynamics that may be involved in a parental abduction is paramount to providing quality care for the child and family.

### What are the long-term consequences of abduction on a child?

Each child is different, each abduction is different. Some children and families experience positive reconstruction of their lives while others suffer from various psychological disorders. Children who have experienced trauma/abduction may exhibit the following:

- Self-doubt, paralysis of self-confidence, damaged self-esteem
- Overly responsible, quick to assume blame or guilt
- Doubtful of his/her own judgement, unable to trust his/her own perceptions, susceptible to later victimization
- Lying or deception can become an enduring coping style
- Difficulty forming and sustaining trusting intimate relationships
- Depression, internalized shame, never feeling "whole" or integrated
- Codependent behaviors: focus on pleasing others
- Repressed emotions manifest in physical and emotional problems later in life

To access supportive services for families impacted by parental abduction please reach out to:

- Your local District Attorney's office for victim advocacy
- National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Family Advocacy and Out reach Network

## The California Trauma-informed Academy

Healing Trauma through Science and Compassion

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CalTICA



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### More About the California Trauma-Informed Academy

The California Trauma-Informed Care Academy (CalTICA) provides comprehensive web-based training on trauma-informed approaches and brain science principles to various disciplines that handle child abuse cases or work with children who have been traumatized by abuse. The training is focused on reducing trauma to victims of child abuse and their families. Modules contain information on how trauma can affect the brain, body, and behavior, along with recommendations for working with those who have experienced trauma. CalTICA has three core modules with basic concepts about trauma and eight discipline-focused modules for multidisciplinary professionals.

Professionals who work in law enforcement and legal fields may specifically benefit from the following modules:

The **Law Enforcement Module** is designed to help police officers understand behaviors that are based on traumatic toxic stress. It provides tools and strategies to reduce re-traumatization in victims. This course meets qualifications for 1 hour of continuing education credit for LMFTs and LCSWs as required by the California Board of Behavioral Sciences (provider #128510). The cost is \$20.

The **Legal Module** is designed for judges, attorneys and other legal professionals who work with children who may have experienced trauma. Participants will be able to recognize dynamics associated with child sexual abuse and other traumatic events that may impact a victim's ability to disclose or recall events, identify at least three California statutes relevant to protection of victims who have experienced trauma, and more! This course offers 1 hour of Minimum Continuing Education (MCLE) credit. CA Accredited MCLE Provider #15175. The cost is \$45.

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