



C A L I F O R N I A C h i l d A b d u c t i o n T A S K F O R C E

Suggestions for Parents

How to Help Your Child Heal from Child Abduction Trauma

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*“Parents cannot always prevent harm to a child, but they can always help a child cope with and master that harm.”
–Cynthia Monahan, Children and Trauma*

Recovery from the trauma of child abduction is a long, bumpy, and sometimes bewildering journey for parents and their children. As one recovering parent recently shared, “It doesn’t end when they come back...that’s just the beginning! One chapter in the book closes...and another one opens up.” It will help if you understand what to expect, what your child needs from you, and what you can do to help your child (and yourself) to recover.

Find Help and Support: Don’t Do It Alone!

Outside Help Is a Necessity – Not A Luxury!

- Counseling (even brief) is Critical – for your child and yourself
- Don’t Isolate!! Find ongoing support (friends, family, support groups, recovery groups, counseling).
- Educate yourself about trauma and its effects on children (read books, go on the Internet)

Model to Your Child That Asking for Help Is OK

- This sends a healthy message to kids: “I can’t do it all. I need help...and that’s OK...”
- It gives them hope, and gives them permission to ask for help, too.

Kids Are Less Anxious When Parents Seek Help

- They are relieved that someone else will tend to your needs – and they can relax their vigilance about your safety!

Kids Need a Safe Place of Their Own to Process Their Trauma

- Child victims of any trauma need to process their experience without fear of hurting those they love.
- Counseling gives a child the freedom to explore a range of emotions with a neutral person.
- Play therapy allows a child to use play (his natural medium) to master his feelings and experience.

Remember That Healing Can Take a Long Time for Everyone!

- Some children show no immediate signs of trauma but can have delayed reactions later.
- The “Time Bomb Effect” often occurs when children are not given a safe place to process their abduction experience or it has a secret aspect to it that involve shame, self-blame, and/or loss.

What A Child Needs Most from You After Reunification

Keep in Mind That...

- Kids know more than you think...but often don't have the words or courage to say it.
- Kids are taking in a lot of details and information...even if they don't look like it.
- Kids can read and FEEL your emotions...even when you think you're hiding them.
- Kids are "great perceivers but poor interpreters" ...so they often misunderstand what they hear.
- There is more going on with kids than what you see on the surface.

Minimize Change

- Avoid unnecessary changes in your family life.
- Less is better. Don't flood your child with too many new people, experiences, or challenges.

Keep Consistent, Comforting Routines

- Consistency builds trust in children: Keep life as predictable as possible.
- Trust the deep, comforting value of regular routines and family rituals.
- Keep contact with friends, family, and community who are a part of the child's world.

Expect Regression

- Baby talk, helplessness, separation fears, thumb-sucking, toileting accidents, tantrums, sleep difficulties, losing a skill already mastered.

Expect Difficult Behaviors – Maybe for A Long While

- Children have a limited number of ways they can express their inner distress, so it often comes out in disguised symptoms.
- Any of these behaviors can be considered "normal."

Be on the look-out for:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acting strong, adult-like, protective• Hyper vigilant, alert, watchful of you• Worry, specific or pervasive fears• Avoidance of painful subjects• Separation anxiety, mistrust of others• Anger, blaming others• Acting out, victimizing others• Numb, lack of feelings, emotions• Difficulty getting along with friends and family• Aches and Pains (they may channel their worries into bodily complaints) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Denial, pretending nothing happened• Sudden panic or distress• Nightmares• Overly fragile• Unwanted thoughts and images• Post-traumatic play (repetitive and driven)• Overly aggressive, daring, fearlessness of others (often this is denial of fear)• Testing the limits, uncooperative• Sad, depressed• Sensory triggers• Withdrawn, self-protective |
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Be A “Compassionate Witness”

- Children need someone to legitimize their feelings/experience by being a “witness” to it.
- Crying into a pillow doesn’t accomplish the healing – sharing it with someone does.
- This is life–saving trauma for victims

Understand That Your Child’s Deepest Fear Is Losing You Again

- All your child’s thoughts and actions will be directed towards minimizing this possibility.
- They will do everything they can to avoid the terror of abandonment (real or imagined) by you!
- Children will even try to take care of their parents emotionally in order to keep things “safe.”

Believe That “Talking Helps Ease the Hurting”

- Banish your fear that talking about what’s happened is harmful for a child.

Banish The “We Don’t Talk About It” Rule in Your Family”

- Secrets are deadly in families
- Kids know more than you think – they can FEEL your emotions.
- Children pick up the unspoken cues and they fear more what isn’t spoken about!

Here’s The Problem:

- Children worry more about not knowing!!
When we don’t speak to them directly, they are left to suffer alone and to make their own questionable assumptions about what the truth really is!

Become an “Askable” Parent: Give Permission to Talk About “The Hard Stuff”

- Learn how to open doors and create an environment for talk.
- This is done with your words, body behavior, tone, emotion, and receptivity.
- Your child will take his clues from you – if you look anxious or upset, your child will NOT risk talking!

Always Speak the Truth: Give Basic Facts in Simple Words

- Children need to get the facts straight – it will help them feel more in control.
- They also need to know that what they see, feel, or sense is true – that they’re NOT crazy!
- It helps them put energy into coping, not hiding.
- Be real – the truth has to come from inside you.
- Use short simple words and sentences – and stay concrete, literal, and down–to–earth.
- Use the correct language – trying to soften it only gets you into trouble.
- Give the true reality – not the fantasy of how you wish it could be!
- Always acknowledge feelings (your child’s and yours) as you speak the truth.
- Give the message: “I’m taking care of it and I’m taking care of you!”

Four Step Process of Speaking the Truth to Children

1. Acknowledge and name what’s happening
“Your mom was really mad at me, so she took you away and didn’t tell me where you were. That’s against the law, and that’s why she had to go to jail for awhile.”
2. Take the responsibility off the child
“But you couldn’t stop it. You didn’t make Mommy go to jail! It’s not your fault any of this happened. This is a grown–up problem.”
3. Acknowledge the child’s feelings
“You must have felt scared and worried, and you’re probably feeling pretty mixed up now?”
(And share your own feelings, if appropriate)
“I was really worried, too. And I missed you SO much! I never stopped looking for you.”

4. Convey that you're in charge
"But now you're back and I'm going to take care of you and keep you safe."

Address A Child's Underlying Anger at You

- Acknowledge that most kids are angry at their parents for not protecting them from trauma: "You know, most kids feel a tiny bit mad at their mom (or dad) for not protecting them and keeping them safe. Maybe you might feel that way too?"

Tell Him He's Not at Fault

- He worries that he may have been responsible in some way for his abduction.
"Lots of kids worry that maybe it's their fault when bad things happen to them...but you didn't do anything wrong..."

Say What You Have to Say and Trust That Your Child Is Listening!

- Even if he doesn't show it – have faith that he's really taking it ALL in!
- Settle for a string of short conversations.

Say It Twice

- Children need to process things over and over again in order to master them.
- You may need to have a dialogue several times before the full message sinks in.
- Trauma also diminishes the child's capacity to take in and absorb information.

Encourage Your Child to Express His or Her Feelings

- "Feelings buried are feelings buried alive" (John Bradshaw)
- The healing is in the telling

Always Respect a Child's Silence and Don't Push for A Response

- Silence is a way of staying in control for some kids.
- Some children are introverts and don't process things as easy verbally as extroverts.

Use "Door Openers" To Help Kids Ask the Questions They Need to Ask

- Help a child get started if he needs it:
"You might be wondering what's going to happen to your dad now...?"

Understand the Brick Wall or "Everything Is Fine" Mode

- Don't buy denials or dismiss them either:
"Well I'm sure it must be pretty upsetting with all the tension around here..."

You Don't Have to "Fix It"—Learn to Just "LISTEN"

- Set your own issues aside and try to stand in your child's shoes.
- Accept your child's feelings without judgment.
- Reflect back what you hear: You sound really worried that I might leave you again."

Correct Distortions and Hidden Misperceptions

- Listen for a child's private explanations and meanings.
- Correct internalizations before they cause damage late on: "This didn't happen because you were mad at me that day! We can't ever make things happen just by thinking them!"

Stay in Charge: Be "The Grown-Up" And Keep Firm Boundaries!

- Be "psychologically bigger" than your child – it's terrifying for your child if you collapse!
- Don't flood him with adult issues (i.e. legal battles, etc.)
- He needs you to be stronger than he is, or he will become anxious and start to "parent" you!

Set Clear Rules and Consequences and Stand Firm

- Providing clear limits and enforcing consequences gives safety and predictability to all children.
- After trauma, this is even more important to renew a child's sense of security.
- Expect traumatized children to "test the limits" and challenge you, again and again!
- They challenge you because they are fearful that you will not be strong enough to protect them!

Tell Your Child in Words and Actions: "I'll Be with You..."

- Reassure your child that he is loved and that you will protect him.
- Express it out loud – he needs to HEAR it! – over and over again.
- Then, keep your promises; let him know ahead of time about upcoming changes, etc.

Respect Your Child's Fears

- A child's excessive fears can serve the purpose of being "mine detectors." (He's alert for danger!)
- They are very real to him – don't try to talk him out of them – Just LISTEN.
- Then give him the tools for dealing with them:
"I'm going to help you learn to feel safe again..."

Monitor Your Child's Exposure to Fearful Situations

- Limit TV and movies with anxiety-provoking material.
- Limit adult discussions and lots of intense emotional "drama" in front of your child.
- Watch your child carefully and take your cues from him about what he can or can't handle.

Use Physical Touch for Reassurance and Comfort

- Touch is a powerful healer and can promote parent/child bonding after trauma.
- Consider hugs, stroking the head, back rubs, feather-stroking, hair brushing, etc.

Give HOPE: Send Empowering Messages

- Your child needs to hear: "I'm with you. This is tough, but we'll get through it."
- Life can FEEL terrible – but we don't give up because it will get better!

Give Affirmation and Praise for Facing a Fear

- When your child tries something difficult, give praise that is specific and meaningful.
- Be supportive but honest, so your child will learn that you mean what you say.
"I know you were scared to try that without me, but you did it! Nice job!"

Model Emotional Expressive

- It's important for your child to see you having feelings and honestly expressing them.
- It's helpful if you:
 - Put words to what is going on inside you:
"I feel sad too. I think it will take time for all of us to adjust."
 - Take ownership of your feelings – tell your child it's not his fault:
"I'm having a bad day. It's nothing you did..."
 - Model repairing and healing mistake when you "blow it":
"I'm sorry I yelled at you. You didn't deserve that. It's not your fault."

Monitor Your Own Reactions and Contain Your Own Anxiety

- Don't overwhelm your child with your emotional "stuff" (such as your fears, anger at the other parent, worry, helplessness, etc.) – find adult support instead!

Let Him Be a Child

- Don't ask him to give you advice, help you make decisions, or deal with your pain.

Face Your Fears...But Keep Moving Ahead

- Getting stronger personally is the best way you can help your child: you are his model and guide.
- Facing your fears ultimately gives you inner strength and makes you a more resilient person.

Take Action – Don't Be a Victim

- Constant crying and verbalized “helplessness” only triggers your child’s insecurity.
- Your taking on the “victim role” re-stimulates his own feelings of terror and helplessness.
- Take your power back – show your child that “doing” helps and running away doesn’t solve anything.

Mourn Your Own Losses

- Be prepared for unexpected intense feelings related to your own loss, betrayal, etc.
- Trauma can trigger your old issues from childhood, especially unresolved violation and loss.

Don't Contaminate You Child with Your Anger, Especially at His Other Parent

- Be a role model of appropriate ways of dealing with anger: call a friend, exercise, see a counselor, join a divorce recovery group (12 step, CODA, Al Anon, etc.), write in a journal.

Come to Terms with Your Guilt and Let Go of It

- Your self-blame can impact your parenting in unhealthy ways.
- It can cause you to overprotect your child and undermine his recovery and self-confidence.

Understand That Your Child's Experience Is Different from Yours

- Relief may flood you – loss/confusion/anguish may seize your child.

Don't Tear Your Child in Two by Asking Him to Choose Sides

- Kids already feel torn (physically and emotionally) in a separation/divorce/custody battle.
- They have a sense of being “divided up” and feel they can’t win, whatever they do!

Trust Your Child's Love for You

- Believe it! Don't doubt or question him, just because he tests you or still loves his other parent.

Give Your Child Permission to Love the Other Parent

- Children have a powerful need to be loved by both parents and to love them back (even in the worst of all circumstances!)
- If at all possible, kids do best with some kind of relationship with both parents.

(But be wise: use supervised visitation to protect you and your child, if you need to.)

Anticipate A Child's Ambivalent Feelings About the Abductor

- Children may experience a terrible ambivalence, tugs of conscience.
- Many develop an attachment for their abductor – and then feel guilt for missing the person.

Damage Control and Repair

- Children are very resilient! If you “blow it,” admit that you made a mistake!
- Apologize – then validate your child’s feelings and the hurt she’s experienced.

Pass On a Spiritual Belief, If You Have One

- Give your child the sense of something or someone larger than himself.
- This can be a great comfort to children, young and old, to create meaning in life’s difficult times.

Tools for Helping Your Child to Let Go of the Painful Feelings

All children need help in expressing their feelings. They often use play and fantasy (“pretend”) to rework their traumatic experiences and gain some sense of control over their dreadful feelings of hopelessness. Parents can help children to heal by “getting their inside feelings outside of themselves.” Often, when feelings are expressed (in any form), they begin to lose their power. Also, anything active a child (or adult) can do will promote healing by giving him back a renewed sense of control over his life. We call this “turning passive into active.” The following are some suggestions for helping children who are feeling “stuck” with repetitive and fearful worries.

Tell The Child “His Story”

- Reconstruct it from beginning to end: “Once upon a time there was a girl who...”
- Encourage her to help you fill in the pieces: “And then what happened? How did she feel?”

Buy A “Worry Monster” or “Worry Animal”

- Buy a stuffed animal (or puppet or dinosaur, etc.) with a large mouth.
- Ask the child: Can you give one of your worries to the Worry Monster? It’s his job to eat your worries so you don’t have to carry them around inside you any longer.”
- Help him say (or Whisper) one worry, or maybe several, to the Worry Monster. This really works!

Create A Magic Talisman for Your Child

- Let your child carry something of YOU with him (or her), wherever she goes: a picture of you encased in plastic, a handkerchief with your favorite scent on it, a key from home, a piece of your clothing, and inexpensive piece of your jewelry (watch, necklace) to wear, etc.
- This will become a “transitional object” that keeps your child comforted and connected to you while separated from you.

Use Play Items and Activities to Draw Your Child Out and Get Him Talking

- Engage a child’s magical thinking (active fantasy).
- Understand the power of play for a child as a means of conveying truth or understanding.
- Play helps a child talk about the experience but, at the same time, remove himself a safe distance from the subject – so it is less threatening for him.

“Normalize” His Experience: “I know a kid who...”

- Utilize the power of suggestion: “Once I knew a boy who hadn’t seen his dad in a long time, just like you, and he felt worried that his dad didn’t really love him any more...”
- Give information about feelings and what is normal for other children to think and feel.

Use Play with Dolls, Puppets, Small Animals, or Action Figures

- Toy props can help a child express his feelings about his experience(s) through play.
- “Miniaturize it”: “We can do it with dolls...” (Then encourage the child to take a doll’s voice)

Tell Heroic Stories

- Make up stories about heroes who mastered similar difficulties; have him help you with the ending.
- Change the outcome if it is catastrophic – always promote hope and transformation!

“You Really Wish...”

- Allow the expression of fantasy: “You really wish you could bring your dog Buckie here too...”

“Worry Stone”

- Tuck a smooth “worry stone” in your child’s pocket for him to finger and touch when he is anxious.

Put It On Paper:” Draw Me A Picture...”

- “...of what happened” “...of the worry inside you right now.” “...of what you remember.”

Mutual Story–Telling Technique

- Make up a story with a meaningful theme and let her help with the telling:” Once upon a time...”
- “What do you think the little girl would do next, feel about that, etc.?”

Write A Letter (Have Your Child Dictate to You)

- To say goodbye or express feelings (mad, sad, hurt):” Let’s write a pretend letter to...”

Night Time “Worry Basket”

- Help your child put her worries and fears in a “Worry Basket” by the door each night.
- This will relieve her by: 1) taking a concrete action and 2) examining her fears.

“Give Your Feelings a Voice”

- “What do they say?”

Make A Memory Book

- Use pictures (or drawings) to create a book that heals

Let’s Pretend:” What would you like to be?”

- Encourage him to pick a character from TV/Books/Movies.
- This allows you child to feel his feelings through identification with a character who has experienced an obstacle in life and has found a way to overcome it.

Look at Old Photos Together

- “How did you feel about yourself then? How are you different now?”

“If You Had Been There, What Could You Have Done?”

- Help address any self–blame or guilt your child might carry in this way.

Empowerment/Problem–Solving

- Practice gives a sense of comfort and control. Role play alternative actions your child could take:” What could you do again? How could you get help? What can you do to protect yourself now?”

Draw Your Family Before and After the Abduction

- Use this as a tool to help talk about the changes that have happened to everybody in the family!

Deep Breathing When Fear Strikes

- Teach your child:” When fear hits, create a picture in your head of a safe person (a parent? Or?) ...then take a deep breath...and say to yourself, three times: I’m OK...I’m safe.”

Beware of “Parental Alienation Syndrome” (Brain–washing A Child)

Not infrequently, an abducting parent will “program a child to hate or fear the other parent. This is painful for the non–abducting parent to experience upon reunification and it often requires professional help. All parents caught in high conflict situations with an ex–spouse should be aware of the dangers of causing long–term harm to a child in this way. Monitor your own actions to be sure you don’t inadvertently fall into similar patterns.

Methods of brain–washing a child include:

- Denying the existence of the other parent
- Attacking the other parent’s character and lifestyle
- Placing the child in the middle

- Speaking to a child about issues that should be discussed privately (i.e. visitation, schedules, money, child support)
- Manipulating circumstances
- Exaggerating differences
- Making the child serve as an ally
- Threatening to withdraw love from the child
- Rewriting reality for a child

When One Parent Has a Serious Problem

Many times, a parent who abducts a child has emotional or psychiatric problems. Address the issue honestly.

- Be direct and truthful.
- Let your child know he does not have to identify with that part of his parent.
- Encourage your child to brainstorm the things he likes about him or her.
- Help your child notice how many of that parent's admirable traits he also has.
- Try to let your child hold onto his good times with the other parent, even if it's painful for you.

Patterns That Are Most Harmful to Children

Mental health research indicates that the following patterns have the most destructive effect on a child:

- Ongoing parental conflict
- Unexpressed or repressed feelings; lack of "working through" a traumatic experience
- Parental worry or hopelessness about a child (it "leaks" to the child and undermines confidence)
- Overindulgence and/or overprotection
- Internalized distortions of what happened (self-blame and shame)
- A parent's need for revenge
- A child who takes on the role of an adult
- Alienating or brainwashing a child

What are the long-term consequences of these negative patterns on a child?

- Self-doubt, paralysis of self-confidence, damaged self-esteem
- Overly responsible, quick to assume blame or guilt
- Doubtful of his own judgment, unable to trust his 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 become manifest in physical and emotional problems later in life

Take Hope! Recovery Is Possible!

Never give up! Healing is always possible for you and your child if you keep moving forward, reaching out, and inviting others in to help you. Remember that recovery is an uneven process, without a clear beginning and end. When you notice a return of energy and a re-engagement in ordinary life, you are seeing the signs of hope at last!

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