

The Washington Post

Child-abduction study finds capable kids are their own best defense

By Donna St. George
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The children most at risk of attempted abduction by strangers are girls ages 10 to 14, many on their way to or from school, and they escape harm mostly through their own fast thinking or fierce resistance, according to a new national analysis.

Probing a crime that is infrequent but strikes fear in the hearts of parents as little else does, analysts from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children found that children who encountered would-be abductors were usually alone, often in the late afternoon or early evening.

It's a chilling thought for working parents and all those who have asked children to hold hands tightly in crowds or to phone as soon as they get home from school. It calls to mind last year's killing of Somer Thompson, 7, snatched en route from school in Florida as she ran ahead of her siblings, and the highly publicized case of [Elizabeth Smart, taken from her Utah bedroom at age 14](#).

[The new analysis](#) examines more than 4,200 cases of attempted but unsuccessful abductions, and it shows that children were their own best protectors.

"They escaped these things not through the efforts of good Samaritans, but through recognizing a bad situation and either getting away from it, avoiding it, or screaming and kicking to draw attention," said Ernie Allen, president of the missing children's center.

In the vast majority of the cases examined, children escaped harm through their own actions. In 16 percent of the cases, an adult stepped in to help.

"The goal here is not to frighten, but to encourage parents to sit down with their kids, talk to them about their safety, and practice these things," he said. "Our overall premise is, kids protect themselves with their heads, and if they are prepared and alert, and if they know what to do and how to respond, they are at far less risk."

Allen said parents should be aware that children targeted in abduction attempts are often preteens and teens in middle grades. More than 70 percent were girls.

[Federal studies have found that teenagers are most at risk in non-family abductions](#).

Older children may be targeted more because they are less likely to be supervised, Allen said, and girls may be more often targeted by sexual predators.

Debbie VanDemark, a mother of two in Silver Spring and PTSA president at Briggs Chaney Middle School, said parents may be surprised to learn that older children are so often involved.

"I think by the time they get to middle school, parents think they are a little more savvy of the world and we don't need to be as protective," she said. That children that age may be especially vulnerable is important to know, she said.

Locally, 257 cases of attempted abduction by a stranger were confirmed -- 166 in Virginia, 84 in Maryland and seven in [the District](#) -- from February 2005 to late March 2010.

In one case from Virginia, a girl on the way to her bus stop was approached by a man with a gun. The child told a story about her mother coming to find her, and the man released her from a wooded area, according to the national center. The child had been touched sexually by the man, later linked to two assaults on adult women and convicted in all three cases.

In Fairfax County, Bruce Wiley, a senior detective who handles such cases, said police get one or two reports a week of "suspicious" people or events, for instance, the driver of a van stopping near a school and offering children a ride. "If we can work with it, we work with it," he said. But often, he said, "by the time the officers go there, they're gone."

Federal research shows successful abductions by strangers are relatively rare; an estimated 115 a year nationally involve children transported 50 miles or more and held at least overnight by a stranger in a classic kidnapping case.

An additional 21,500 stranger abductions involve other circumstances, [according to Justice Department statistics](#). About 36,700 other abduction cases a year involve a caretaker, neighbor or someone a child knows at least casually. The largest category is family abductions, with an estimated 204,000 incidents a year.

The national center looks at cases of attempted abduction as part of its work to provide technical assistance to police agencies nationally, helping to track patterns and link cases in different cities.

Attempted abductions are hard to track, officials said, because police reports are not often written up. The center searched widely for every possible incident, using media coverage, hotline reports and contacts with police agencies.

Because of the limitations, the analysis is unscientific, but officials hope the patterns that emerge will help parents and children. The cases examined by the center included 1,127 in which a suspect was identified or arrested, with 43 percent involving repeat offenders and 19 percent involving registered sex offenders.

Most children were approached by someone in a vehicle, often offering a ride. Other offenders lured children with sweets or money or with an animal or a story about finding a lost animal. Some asked for directions.

Among nearly 3,500 cases, more than 30 percent of children who escaped kicked and screamed; 53 percent ran or otherwise fled the scene. "The child should do whatever is necessary to stay out of the car, because once the child is in that car, it dramatically reduces the chances of escape," Allen said.

The largest number of cases occurred between 2 and 7 p.m. on weekdays.

Jennifer Shields, a mother of three in Takoma Park, said the need for safety is balanced against the need for exercise, social connection and independence. Shields encourages her 12-year-old daughter to walk with friends, avoid isolated areas and carry her cellphone. Lately, the girl has taken up jogging, which her mother does not want to discourage. But she wants her to stay safe, as she does her 14-year-old son. "Maybe we have a false sense of security about our boys," she said.

Jack Levin, of the Brudnick Center on Violence at Northeastern University in Boston, said parents should educate children but keep in mind what he regards as the infrequency of such incidents. "I think that one finding that is very helpful to parents is that children shouldn't wait for an adult to intervene and save them," he said. "That part I like. But at the same time, I am concerned parents will see these stranger abductions everywhere when they are almost nowhere."

Levin also suggested that in some cases "the assailant seeks only to instill fear and anxiety in the child. There are simply too many cases where a man will drive by a child, offer him candy or tell him that he's a friend of his parents, but then will not succeed in kidnapping the child."

CHILDREN AT GREATEST RISK OF ABDUCTION WHEN GOING TO AND FROM SCHOOL OR SCHOOL-RELATED ACTIVITIES

ACTOR TIM KANG FROM CBS "THE MENTALIST" HEADS CAMPAIGN TO HELP PARENTS KEEP THEIR CHILDREN SAFE

ALEXANDRIA, VA – August 18, 2010 --As parents prepare for the start of a new school year, teaching children how to be safe needs to be at the top of their list of things to do. An analysis by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) of attempted abductions during the past five years found that children are at most risk when going to and from school or school-related activities. NCMEC is partnering with actor Tim Kang, of the hit CBS show *The Mentalist*, to launch a new campaign to help educate parents about what they should be telling their children to keep them safe.

"A common factor with children who escaped their would-be abductors was that the child did something proactive instead of being passive or polite: 31% yelled, kicked, pulled away or attracted attention and 53% of the children walked or ran away," said Ernie Allen, President & CEO of NCMEC. "We know that teaching children about safety works. Tim Kang is an ideal spokesman to help increase awareness among parents about what they should be teaching their children to keep them safe."

"As a new dad I am more aware than ever before of the dangers that children face and of the need for parents to do anything possible to help keep their children safe," said actor Tim Kang. "If parents would spend just a few minutes teaching their children about safety, it could literally end up meaning the difference between life and death. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children has great resources for parents including a *Know the Rules* series of safety tips parents should routinely review with their children."

An estimated 800,000 children are reported missing every year. That is 2,000 children every day or one child every 40 seconds. NCMEC analyzed more than 4200 attempted abductions for the five year period from February 2005 and March 2010 and found that:

- **38% of attempted abductions occur while a child is walking alone to or from school, riding the school bus or riding a bicycle;**
- **37% of attempted abductions occur between the hours of 2:00 PM through 7:00 PM on a weekday;**
- **43% of attempted abductions involve children between the ages of 10 and 14;**
- **72% of attempted abduction victims are female;**
- **68% of attempted abductions involve the suspect driving a vehicle.**

The five most common lures included offering a child a ride, offering the child candy or sweets, showing the child an animal or asking for help finding an animal, offering the child money and asking the child for directions.

Parents also need to understand that most of those who abduct children are not “strangers”. The phrase “stranger danger” is pervasive in our culture. However, teaching children to only be afraid of strangers is the wrong message. Children don’t get it. Children view a “stranger” as someone who is “ugly” or “mean”. If someone spends time talking to a child or is even just around a child they think they “know” the person and don’t view them as a stranger. Research shows that of the 58,000 non-family abductions each year 63% involved a friend, long-term acquaintance, neighbor, caretaker, baby sitter or person of authority and only 37% involved a stranger. The number of pure strangers is not insignificant but it remains far smaller than other offenders who have easy and legitimate access to children.

As children return to school parents should take time to review the below ten Back-to-School Safety Tips adapted from the NCMEC *Know the Rules* Child Safety series.

About the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Since it was established by Congress in 1984, the organization has operated the toll-free 24-hour national missing children’s hotline which has handled more than 2,475,300 calls. It has assisted law enforcement in the recovery of more than 151,300 children. The organization’s CyberTipline has handled more than 935,920 reports of child sexual exploitation and its Child Victim Identification Program has reviewed and analyzed more than 37,030,200 pornography images and videos. The organization works in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Justice’s office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. To learn more about NCMEC, call its toll-free, 24-hour hotline at 1-800-THE-LOST or visit its web site at www.missingkids.com.

About Tim Kang

Tim Kang is a sought after and versatile actor in both television and film. He can currently be seen on the hit CBS drama *The Mentalist* where his character “Kimball Cho,” the straight-arrow investigator, has emerged as a fan favorite on the show. *The Mentalist* won a 2009 People’s Choice Award for “Favorite New TV Drama,” and was nominated for a 2009 Television Critics Association Award for “Outstanding New Program of the Year.” Other television credits include guest-starring roles in popular TV shows, such as *The Ghost Whisperer*, *The Office*, *The Sopranos*, *Monk*, *Chappelle’s Show*, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* and *Law & Order: Trial By Jury*, and reoccurring roles in *NBC’s Third Watch* and *CBS’s The Unit*. Tim was also seen in the films *Rambo*, *The Forgotten*, *Two Weeks Notice* and most recently the lead in the independent film *Mister Green*.

Ten Important Back-to-School Safety Tips

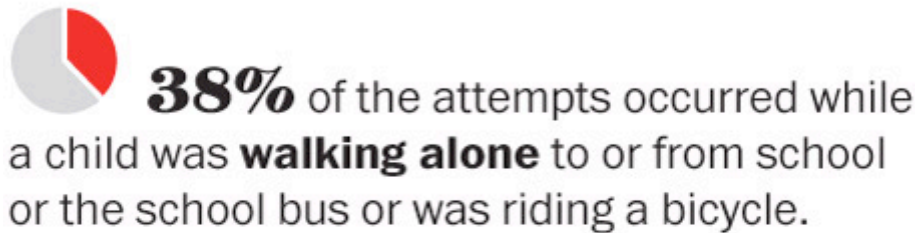
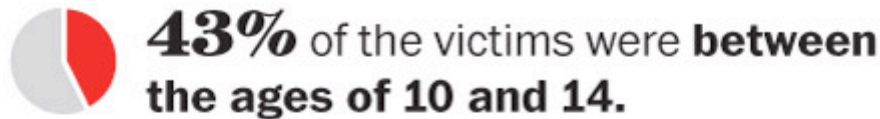
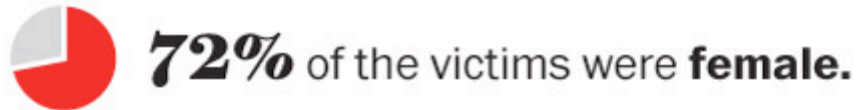
1. Teach your children to always **TAKE A FRIEND** with them when walking or biking, and stay with a group while standing at the bus stop. Make sure they know which bus to ride.

2. Walk the route to and from school with your children pointing out landmarks and safe places to go if they're being followed or need help. Teach your children they should **NEVER TAKE SHORTCUTS** and always stay in well-lit areas.
3. It is not safe for young children to walk to and from school, even in a group. Parents should always provide supervision for young children to help ensure their safe arrival to and from school. If your children wait for a bus, wait with them or make arrangements for supervision at the bus stop.
4. Teach your children that if anyone bothers them, makes them feel scared or uncomfortable to trust their feelings and immediately get away from that person. Teach them it is ok not to be polite and **IT IS OK TO SAY NO**.
5. Teach your children if anyone tries to take them somewhere they should **RESIST** by kicking and screaming, try to run away and **DRAW ATTENTION** by kicking and screaming "This person is trying to take me away" or "This person is not my father/mother."
6. Teach your children **NOT TO ACCEPT A RIDE** from anyone unless you have said it is ok in that instance. If anyone follows them in a vehicle they should turn around, go in the other direction, and run to a trusted adult who may help them.
7. Teach your children that grownups should **NOT ASK CHILDREN FOR DIRECTIONS**, they should ask other adults.
8. Teach your children to **NEVER ACCEPT MONEY OR GIFTS** from anyone unless you have told them it is ok to accept in each instance.
9. Make sure the school has current and accurate emergency contact information is on file for your children and confirm names of those authorized.
10. Always know where your children will be. Teach your children to always **CHECK FIRST** before changing their plans before or after school. Teach your children to never leave school, with anyone unless they **CHECK FIRST** with you or another trusted adult, even if someone tells them it is an emergency.

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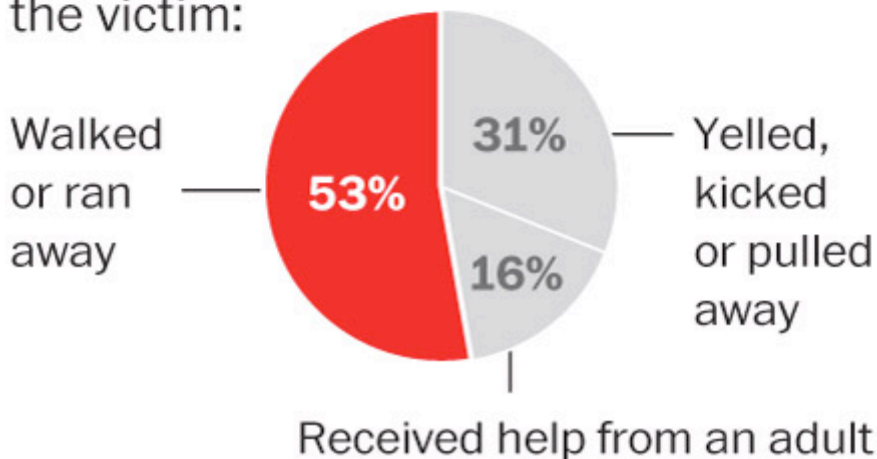
Attempted abductions

An analysis of 4,202 attempted abductions that took place between February 2005 and March 2010 revealed that ...



How children escaped

More than 4 out of 5 attempted abductions were foiled because the victim:



Source: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children | Credit: The Washington Post

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/graphic/2010/09/05/GR2010090500253.html?sid=ST2010090404711>