



Teaching Skills, Instilling Confidence Best Ways to Prevent Child Abduction

"Stranger danger" lessons alone don't protect children

Monday, October 04, 2004

ROCHESTER, Minn. — Parents and pediatricians could be doing more to prevent child abductions, says a new clinical report from the American Academy of Pediatrics. Daniel Broughton, M.D., a pediatrician at Mayo Clinic and former director of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children agrees.

"Rather than teaching children to fear strangers, which is at best, woefully inadequate, we need to use positive messages," says Dr. Broughton. "Children need to learn skills and confidence, not fear and avoidance."

Dr. Broughton is one of the authors of the newly published American Academy of Pediatrics Clinical Report entitled, "The Pediatrician's Role in the Prevention of Missing Children." Published in the October issue of Pediatrics, the report offers prevention strategies for pediatricians to share with families.

Dr. Broughton says, too often, emphasis is placed on stranger danger. However, most children reported missing are runaways or were taken by noncustodial parents. Only a small number of children are victims of classic kidnappings, though many are abducted for shorter periods and released. Most people who perpetrate these crimes on children are not strangers in the eye and mind of the child.

"It could be a neighbor, a familiar face in the child's daily routine, or someone the child's parents know well enough to greet," says Dr. Broughton.

According to research conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, in cases of long-term kidnapping in which the child was found alive, 85 percent of the victims did not consider the kidnapper to be a stranger. In at least 65 percent of the cases in which a child was found dead and the perpetrator identified, it was clear that the child would not have considered the person a stranger.

"Those statistics are powerful reasons to teach children a different approach than "don't talk to strangers," says Dr. Broughton. "The stranger danger message frightens them without any proven benefit."

What to teach instead

"Parents can teach about personal safety without causing unwarranted fear," says Dr. Broughton.

- Children should know their name, address and phone number (with area code) so, if lost, they can be reunited with their family. Older children should know parents' work numbers.
- Away from home, older children should always be with a friend, always tell an adult where they will be, and say "no" if they feel threatened or uncomfortable.
- Children need to know that appropriate strangers — store clerks or police officers — can offer assistance if they are lost or need help.
- Parents need to listen, and respect their children's feelings. Children can sense unease in inappropriate relationships. They'll likely share their concerns if parents routinely take all of their concerns in life seriously rather than downplaying or shaming them.
- Children need to know that they do not need to kiss, hug, touch or sit on the lap of anyone, relative or not, if they do not wish to. This respect for their wishes translates into self-respect and the ability for children to say no to unwanted contacts without generating fear.
- Parents need to supervise children who use the Internet. Although still relatively uncommon, the practice of pedophiles and child molesters approaching children on the Internet is occurring more frequently.
- Parents need to keep reinforcing safety messages through middle school and high school. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, most victims of nonfamily abductions were 12 years or older (58 percent). Most were girls (65 percent).

- Parents should realize the limitations of participating in programs where children are fingerprinted or otherwise identified. These programs can frighten children and raise fears in adults without giving perspective on the real nature or risk of abduction.
- Parents should keep on hand a high-quality recent photo of each child, such as a school photo. Law enforcement officials consider photos the best tool in finding missing children.
- Parents should promptly report a missing child. The Amber Plan, the national program to immediately flood a region with news of an abduction, is credited with helping to recover more than 130 children since it started two years ago.

The pediatrician's role

Pediatricians can be a resource to families and help put the risk of abduction in perspective. The pediatrician's advice for preventing child abductions needs to be a balance of safeguarding children while not causing fear, says Dr. Broughton.

"None of these safety approaches needs to be taught specifically as safeguarding against abductions — with all its overtones of danger and threat," says Dr. Broughton. "Instead, safety should be taught as common sense so children can learn confidence and independence."

Facts on abductions

Missing children overview

- Of the 837,055 missing persons reported in 2001, an estimated 80 percent were children.
- About 99 percent were found within hours or days by usual law enforcement response.
- More than 7,000 children nationwide were missing for prolonged periods.

(Sources: FBI, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children)

Nonfamily abductions

- In 1999, more than 50,000 children and adolescents were taken by nonfamily members by physical force or coercion for at least one hour.
- Ninety-one percent of nonfamily abductions lasted less than a day, with 29 percent lasting two hours or less.
- Classic nonfamily kidnappings pose the greatest risk of death or serious harm. About 100 children were kidnapped by nonfamily members in 1999.

(Source: U.S. Department of Justice National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children, 2002)

Family abductions

- 203,900 children each year are victims of family abductions, where the child is taken by a noncustodial parent.
- 24 percent of these abductions lasted one week to one month. Police were contacted in 60 percent of the cases.

(Source: U.S. Department of Justice National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children, 2002)

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