



When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide (Fourth Edition)

U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

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Each year, nearly 1.3 million children are reported missing. Although the unforeseen absence of a child is always upsetting, fortunately most missing children are returned home in a short period of time. This fact, however, provides little consolation for the parents of children whose whereabouts and welfare remain unknown. When your child is missing, your whole world seems to fall apart. You are bombarded by questions from friends, neighbors, the police, and the media and forced to make decisions that you never thought you would have to make. You feel desperate, confused, isolated. You may feel that you have nowhere to go for help or support. Many parents who have faced similar crises have said that they wished they had a book to tell them where to turn when their child was missing. They felt that they were left on their own to figure out what to do. They longed for someone to give them direction or to tell them where to go for help and what needs to be done. They also wished they had known what to expect and how to respond. This Guide was written by parents and family members who have experienced the disappearance of a child. It contains their combined advice concerning what you can expect when your child is missing, what you can do, and where you can go for help. It explains the role that various agencies and organizations play in the search for your missing child and discusses some of the important issues that you and your family need to consider. The first checklist, *What You Should Do When Your Child Is First Missing*, summarizes the most critical steps that parents should take when their child is first missing, including whom to call, what to do to preserve evidence, and where to turn for help. The rest of the Guide is divided into seven chapters, each of which is structured to allow you to find the information you need quickly and easily. Each chapter explains both the short- and long-term issues and contains a checklist and chapter summary for later reference. Chapter 1, *The Search*, focuses on the search for your child and explains how you as a parent can best participate in the search. Chapter 2, *Law Enforcement*, describes your relationship with law enforcement and offers tips that will help you work together effectively. Chapter 3, *The Media*, examines issues related to the media, including media packages, press conferences, and interviews. Chapter 4, *Photo and Flier Distribution*, offers suggestions for producing fliers about your child and for managing the photo and flier distribution process. Chapter 5, *Volunteers*, focuses on the many uses of volunteers—both trained and untrained—to help in the search and to provide for the needs of the family. Chapter 6, *Rewards and Donations*, discusses the use of rewards and the management of monetary donations. Chapter 7, *Personal and Family Considerations*, emphasizes the need to take care of yourself, your children, and members of your extended family. A list of recommended readings and a list of public and private resources appear at the back of the Guide. It is important to note that there is no right or wrong way to respond to the disappearance of a child, nor is there a right or wrong way to feel. The path you follow must be right for you. What makes sense for you will be based on your needs, your experiences, and your circumstances. Our hope is that the Guide will help you to make informed decisions about what you do and how you go about it. You may find that the information in this Guide is overwhelming right now. If so, ask family members, friends, or other support persons to read it for you. They can help you take the steps needed to help recover your missing child. Finally, as hard as it may seem, try to remain hopeful. Remember that hope is more than a wish, helping you to clear this hurdle. Hope is essential to your survival.

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