

Studies estimate there are approximately 350,000 parental abductions in the United States each year. Many of these abductions continue for months or even years, and the time spent away from home may have a traumatic effect on the child. The potential emotional and developmental effects on a parentally abducted child can be minimized by a successful reunification. The information provided in this brochure is designed to assist parents in the reunification process and help in the adjustment of the child with his or her family.



**Florida Department
of Law Enforcement**



**MISSING ENDANGERED PERSONS
INFORMATION CLEARINGHOUSE
1-888-FL-MISSING
(1-888-356-4774)**

www.fdle.state.fl.us

These tips are adapted from *Helpful Suggestions for Parents Recovering Their Abducted Children* by Georgia K. Hilgeman, M.A., Executive Director, Vanished Children's Alliance, copyright 1995. For a complete list, please call (408)296-1113.

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF LAW ENFORCEMENT **REUNIFICATION:**
A Parent's Guide

A logo for the reunification process, featuring a stylized illustration of a family (two adults and a child) in a diamond shape, with a blue and green background.

The Reunification

- H Prior to the reunion, have an experienced mental health professional assist in meeting the child and explaining to him or her what has happened and what will happen next.
- H Limit the number of people at the initial reunification. Extended family, friends, and media could make the child feel even more overwhelmed.
- H Reunification should never occur in the presence of the abductor.
- H When meeting your child, remain as calm as possible and speak in a soothing voice. Loud, emotional outbursts could additionally frighten the child.
- H Situate yourself to be at eye level with your child. This puts him or her on an equal level with you and is a form of empowerment.
- H Physical contact should proceed slowly and carefully. Hugs, kisses, and pats on the back could scare him or her.
- H Bring past photographs of the child and you together, and a past favorite toy that the child might remember.
- H Do not criticize the abductor in front of the child. Focus on the child and how the child is feeling.



Arriving Home



- H Show the child around the house, including where he or she will sleep, and where important articles are.
- H Insulate the child from numerous people. Try to spend some individual and special time with the child that will help the adjustment.
- H Be careful what you say to the child or in the presence of the child about the abductor or the abduction events.
- H Remember to positively interact with your other children and your spouse. Unspoken jealousies can begin here.
- H Establish clear, loving boundaries. Encourage your child and give positive reinforcement for good behavior.
- H Recognize that the child may initially be compliant and could later need to express some independence by acting out and testing limits.
- H Whenever possible, give the child some choices for acquiring an improved sense of control (i.e. Would you like a soft drink? What kind? Would you like it in the can or in a glass?)
- H There are many ways to communicate the anger that you are probably feeling about what has happened. Be aware that your child may feel responsible for what has happened to him or her, as well as feeling that he or she has caused you pain.

Ongoing Adjustment

- H Involve your child and family in individual or family therapy.
- H Ensure your child's safety. The child may fear reabduction (i.e. in the front yard, to and from school, when seeing the abductor in court).
- H Allow your child to speak about his or her experience and to share both positive and negative experiences he or she had while missing. If your child expresses a positive feeling or experience about or with the abductor, it is not a reflection on you.
- H When your child attends school, inform the school of safety concerns. Provide the school with a copy of your custody order. Inquire about the school's release policy and adult office check in policy, and insure that the school has a school call back program.
- H Ask neighbors to advise you if any people or cars seem to be monitoring your residence, your child's school, or play areas.
- H Make sure your child knows his or her correct name, address, phone number, and your full name. Have your child photographed and fingerprinted.
- H Make sure you have copies of your custody order that are certified and domesticated in the state you are residing in.

