



MISSING CHILDREN

*A psychological approach
to understanding the causes and
consequences of stranger and non-stranger
abduction of children*

JAMES N. TEDISCO AND MICHELE A. PALUDI

Missing Children

A Psychological Approach to Understanding
the Causes and Consequences of Stranger and
Non-Stranger Abduction of Children

James N. Tedisco
and
Michele A. Paludi

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Foreword

Nothing electrifies and frightens everyone in a community like the kidnapping of a child from our midst. From a street just like yours. Perhaps a child just like yours.

When a child is abducted an entire community suffers. Friends, neighbors, even casual acquaintances rally round the afflicted family. Community members are both horrified and frightened for the safety of their own children.

So great is America's concern for children that cases of abduction make the national news. Yet in spite of the attention following an abduction, no real profile of the abductor or abductee has been written. Tedisco and Paludi's *Missing Children* makes an important contribution to the subject.

When I first came to the capital region of New York State, the disappearance of Sara Anne Wood spotlighted the horror of this subject. Images of her father, community members, police officers, and other searchers combing endless cold acres of Adirondack forests in the futile search for her body were shown on the nightly news.

When a child in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, escaped a would-be abductor by using techniques learned in an anti-abduction class at school, I began soliciting listeners to my radio show on WGY in Albany, New York, to write and call the Governor and legislators in support of James Tedisco's proposed abduction avoidance curriculum. I am proud to have been of some assistance to him in obtaining passage of that legislation.

This book is a natural extension of Jim's commitment to the cause of understanding abduction of children. Michele

Paludi's collaboration with him as his legislative advisor on women's issues, plus her background as a psychologist, college teacher, and author, contributes to making *Missing Children* an authoritative work. It should be required reading for parents, police officers, school administrators, faculty and students, as well as state and national legislators.

Myrna Lamb
Albany, New York

Preface

There's more than anger, more than sadness, more than terror. There's hope.—Edith Horning, cited in Bass & Davis, 1988.

Recently, I was reminded of these words of Edith Horning when I was asked by an interviewer to share an experience with the listening audience that I considered to be a miracle.

The miracle in my life thus far centered around my appointment in 1984 as the chair of the New York State Assembly Republican Task Force on Missing Children. The task force held statewide public hearings to gather information from individuals who testified about their experiences with missing children and their families, peers, and teachers. Throughout each of the hearings in New York State, individuals highlighted the need for support in locating missing children—displaying pictures/descriptions of missing children in post offices—and developing significant legislation to address the issue.

This request on the part of individuals providing us with testimony was utmost on my mind as I drove to and from my office each day. One morning, as I was en route to the assembly I got on the thruway in Schenectady, got my ticket and proceeded to Albany. A few hundred feet away from the toll both I pulled my car over and reviewed the ticket I has just been given. Why not put pictures of missing children on the back of toll tickets in New York State? The prospect of this idea becoming a reality was exciting for me. When I got to my

office I discussed the idea with my colleagues, including representatives for Governor Mario Cuomo, and within a few weeks the first picture of a missing child, a young girl, was placed on the back of toll tickets in New York State. New York thus became the first state in the nation to use its transportation system as a way of locating missing children.

Edith Horning's words were beginning to take on more meaning for me with the governor and the entire legislature supporting my suggestion.

There's more than anger, more than sadness, more than terror.

There's hope.

This isn't the end of my "miracle" story, however. The first girl whose picture we placed on the toll tickets in New York State was found three weeks after we initiated this procedure. Her recovery is truly a miracle and gave me great hope in our efforts to deal with child abductions and missing children. I have carried this first toll ticket around with me in my appointment book since 1984 as a symbol of hope and the importance of individuals working together, regardless of political affiliations, to help with the problem of missing children.

This still isn't the end of my miracle story. A few years ago, while campaigning door-to-door for my reelection to the assembly, I rang a doorbell on one home and was quickly invited into the house. As I entered the house, I saw a young woman of about sixteen sitting with her father. On the wall behind the young woman hung the picture of the seven-year-old girl on the toll ticket. Yes, this was the girl who had been found with the assistance of New York State's transportation system. As I shook her hand and heard the tremendous amount of appreciation in her family's voices, I took out my copy of the toll ticket from my appointment book and shared the feelings of joy I had experienced when this young woman had been found and brought back to the safety and love of her family. I also told them that if I never accomplish anything else in my tenure as a member of the state legislature, at least I

know I had helped bring this woman and her family back together. Meeting this young woman nearly ten years after her abduction gave me an enormous sense of hope.

When I talk with mothers and fathers of missing children to this day, I remember our first success story and try to remind the family that yes, they should be angry that their child is missing. And yes, they should also be saddened at the loss of seeing, hearing, and talking with their child, watching her or him grow. And, yes, the mothers and fathers should sense the terror their child may be experiencing with an abductor and/or from being apart from their loved ones. But, I also tell mothers and fathers to have hope in their child, in themselves, and in the many hundreds of individuals who are all working together to bring their child back home.

It is because Michele Paludi and I truly believe in this sentiment that we wanted to write this book.

James N. Tedisco
Schenectady, New York

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Child Abduction and Missing Children

Introduction

Although generalizations are difficult given some problems in identifying children as “missing” or “abducted,” the best estimate is that child abductions is the most widespread of all forms of child victimization studied.

In 1992 a total of 27,553 cases of missing children were reported in New York State through the Missing Children Register. The majority of missing children cases involved suspected runaways. Abduction cases accounted for 1 percent of the total report; those committed by family members comprised the most frequent form of abduction (as opposed to abduction by strangers). In addition, 88 percent of the children reported missing were thirteen or older, 60 percent were girls, and 58 percent were white. The single largest group of cases involved white girls between the ages of thirteen and fifteen.

Researchers have clearly established that child abductions are not usually sexually motivated, but are a violent way to achieve a sense of power. Case studies support a similar psychological mechanism among child abductors. Abductors use the advantage of their physical strength over their victims, or wield a gun or a knife. Abductors also use age, social position, economic power, authority, and/or manipulative lures as their weapons. They rely on their victims’ fear, vulnerability, and obedience to adults’ authority. Child abductors are characteristically habitual offenders and carry out their assaults in a highly stereotypical modus operandi.

The abduction of a child has a radiating impact and can thus affect the life experiences of all those in the child’s community, transforming parents, siblings, friends, and teachers into

victims also. It is inevitable that once victimized in this way, at minimum, one can never again feel quite as invulnerable.

Child abduction is a serious socioeconomic problem. To date there is no text that addresses the incidence, psychological dimensions, and explanatory models of child abductions. This book fills a need in the literature on child abductions and missing children by focusing on variables that can assist communities in confronting and preventing child abductions. These variables include teacher training, public education and awareness, and psychotherapeutic techniques for families and friends of abducted children, as well as the children themselves.

Part one begins with an exploration of the myths individuals hold about missing children and child abductions. Part two consists of a discussion of the three types of missing children: runaways, stranger abductions, and noncustodial abductions. For each of these types of missing children we integrate the legal and psychological approaches to understanding the occurrence of these behaviors. Part three centers around parents and teachers educating children and adolescents about safety with respect to child abductions. An overview of current legislation in New York State as well as other states is also provided. Suggestions for curriculum integration projects are also offered for teachers of elementary and secondary school students.

The best protection individuals can give children lies in the power of understanding and education. It is the hope of the authors that parents, teachers, and other concerned individuals who read this book can successfully impart this information to the children in their lives.

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Part One

Introduction to the Psychology of Child Abductions

