The myths and truths of family abduction

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By Nancy Hammer

THE VERY IDEA Of child abduction is met by parents in equal measures of fear and disbelief—it can't happen to us. The series of high-profile abductions of children in 2002 raised the country's awareness. The kids spanned the ages of two to 15 and came from all types of families and environments, both urban and rural, across the U.S. In the more horrific cases, the abductor was someone the child did not know. Yet, a recently published study by the U.S. Department of Justice confirms that, compared to the frightening, but relatively rare, kidnappings by strangers, family abductions are commonplace.

In 1988, the Federal government first attempted to count the number of children who become missing each year. In 2002, the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART-2) was published. The study confirms, once again, that offspring taken by a family member without the knowledge or consent of the custodial parent continues to represent the second-largest category of missing children, with a total of 203,900 youngsters abducted by a family member, as opposed to 115 stereotypical kidnappings by a stranger. Indeed, in your lifetime, you are likely either to experience within your own family or know someone who has gone through some type of family abduction.

Despite the fact that so many kids are abducted by a family member, many people do not fully understand this issue. The public generally views these incidents as infrequent, minor occurrences best handled privately, "After all," people believe, "the child is with a parent; it can't be that bad." Or can it?

On a clear autumn day, John Cramer (name changed) did not return his daughter, age 11, or son, age nine, from his scheduled weekend visitation. John and his wife Sandy (name changed) had separated several months earlier and had begun divorce proceedings. After Sandy contacted police, John's car was found inside a storage locker with a hose running from the tailpipe to the driver's side window. Inside, police found the lifeless bodies of John and the two children. Although it was known that he was unhappy about his failing marriage, no one suspected the level of John's despondency or that he was capable of taking his children's lives as well as his own. While the typical incident of family abduction does not end in death, every time it occurs there is the potential for horrible consequences.
In family abduction cases, kids typically are taken by a parent, although in a few cases, a grandparent or other relative may be the abductor. Parents who abduct often do so when they feel their relationship with the child somehow is threatened. Research indicates that fathers, who are slightly more likely to abduct than mothers, often flee before a custody order is issued, perhaps spurred on by the fear that they are about to lose meaningful contact with their offspring. Mothers, however, typically kidnap after a custody order has been issued, perhaps reacting when the terms of the custody and visitation don't meet their expectations. Regardless of who the abductor is, the overriding motivation is a desire to control the child's relationships and hurt the other parent. The abducting parent often is unable to consider the effects on the youngster and thinks only of his or her immediate situation. One father, after the eight-year abduction of his children, reflected that his actions were motivated by his own inadequacies and need to control, not for the love of his kids.

The public has a tendency to minimize the risk to offspring involved in a family abduction in the mistaken belief that a child is safe in the hands of a parent. A simple scan of the headlines of any major newspaper reveals stories of child abuse, neglect, and even death of kids at the hands of their own parents. In this way, abduction is no different from any other crime committed against a child--kids often are at risk from those they know. Official statistics may not fully reflect the danger inherent in family abduction situations. Some cases resulting in death may be counted as murder or suicide, without reference to the family abduction incident that started it all.

This oversight may leave family abduction out of the crime statistics, yet abduction of a child, even if perpetrated by a parent, is a felony in every state. The state laws often are referred to as "custodial interference" statutes and, if charged as felonies, carry a jail sentence of one year or more and allow the abducting parent, when caught in another state, to be extradited for prosecution in the state from which he or she fled. A conviction of child abduction can have a serious effect on subsequent custody decisions in family court. The FBI can become involved under Federal law if the abducting parent flees with the child across state lines. Further, if the abducting parent takes the child outside the U.S., he or she has violated the Federal international parental kidnapping law, thus involving the FBI and other Federal resources to locate and prosecute the abducting parent.

Research conducted on the consequences of family abduction confirms the seriousness of these cases. In the best-known study of this issue, researchers Geoffrey Greif and Rebecca Hegar interviewed 371 parents whose kids were abducted by a noncustodial parent and found a seven percent incidence of sexual abuse, 23% incidence of physical abuse, and five percent incidence of both physical and sexual abuse.

In addition to statistical information, adults who were parentally abducted as children have begun to raise their collective voices through a new organization called Take Root. This group formed after an initial meeting hosted by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) and provides an online venue (www.takeroot.org) for the sharing of stories--in addition to hosting a newsletter called "The Link." One of the
members of the organization chronicles her own struggle for identity and self-awareness after having lived on the run and under many aliases during the period of her abduction. She writes, "I have had many [names] in my life. The first, my birth name, the name lovingly bestowed upon me as a newborn child, was Cecilie ... until my abduction at age four I was called Sissi or Sisselina, in the sweet custom of nicknaming a young child. After my abduction my father changed my name to Sarah Zissel, the first of many aliases, and for all intents and purposes my birth name was no more."

It can be very difficult to locate the abducting parent and captive child. An abductor can find many hiding places. While some abductors simply adopt new names, others seek to alter their identities illegally. Information on forging birth certificates and creating assumed identities is only a click away on the Internet. Other abductors get assistance from relatives willing to hide a child in violation of the law, or from more formal groups, sometimes known as underground networks, which help abductors violate the law by providing funds and housing. Many abducting parents seek refuge in a foreign country. Not all international abduction cases involve parents of two nationalities. Often, American parents choose to flee to a foreign destination in order to better bide their crime or to be with a new partner.

*Parents as abductors*

Regardless of the method or the destination, parents considering abduction must realize that, one day, they could be found. NCMEC's nationwide poster distribution program leads to the recovery of one in six children featured. A growing awareness of missing children and an increasingly vigilant public shed light into the dark corners where abducting parents once hid their children from the other parent, extended family, friends, and law enforcement. In the past year, the U.S. has seen several recoveries of children who had been missing for more than five years. Abducting parents find, upon their return, that the problems they tried to run away from still exist. In addition, their actions have created new ones. Facing the issues now, however, requires being honest with the child about the left-behind parent, often for the first time since the abduction, and may result in a sense of betrayal in the child who does not know whom to trust. Moreover, the child frequently suffers emotional confusion and depression, as he or she is left to wonder what will subsequently happen. The irony for some parents is that the same child they fought so hard to keep for themselves can become estranged once he or she learns the full truth of the abduction.

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If you are concerned about the potential of family abduction, there are steps that can be taken to lessen the risk. Every parent should strive to reduce the tension with the other parent throughout the separation, divorce, or custody process. As difficult as it may be to go through divorce and resolve the custody issues, children need both parents in order to become the individuals they were meant to be. For some families, seeking help from a mediator to define custody and visitation helps both parties to feel as though their concerns have been addressed. A resolution reached together may help prevent one side from feeling like he or she "lost," and therefore, prevent a potential "lashing out" through
abduction. In addition, a mediator can talk openly about how parents should strive to remember that their child's need for access to both parents must come first.

Parents should take any threats of abduction seriously and evaluate the risk. Additionally, lawyers should encourage the court handling custody issues to do the same. Recently, California enacted legislation requiring courts to consider whether such a risk exists. The law is modeled on a Department of Justice report, "Early Identification of Risk Factors for Parental Abduction," and can be obtained at www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org. If the court finds a risk of flight, it is required to consider certain measures designed to prevent the abduction from occurring. They include:

* **Child custody bond.** The court may require parents to post a financial bond or give some other guarantee that they will comply with its order. Such a bond may be obtained from an insurance carrier or bail bonding company. The Professional Bail Agents of the U.S. maintains information on how to find a company able to write this type of bond and may be reached at 1-800-883-7287.

* **Supervised visitation.** The terms may allow visits only at certain places, such as the custodial parent's home or a visitation center to be supervised by a professional or other intermediary. This may be appropriate in cases in which an abduction has occurred previously; where there is violence in the relationship; or when threats of abduction have been made.

* **Restrict child's removal from state or country.** The court may require either parent to obtain legal permission prior to removing the child from the state, if there is a risk of international abduction, the court will issue a bulletin with the U.S. Department of State's "Children's Passport Issuance Alert Program." It requires a written request to enter the child's name and enables the Department of State to notify a parent before issuing a U.S. passport for the child. Information can be obtained at www.travel.state.gov.

Parents also should take certain practical steps to reduce the risk of family abduction and ensure swift action to locate the child:

* Keep a current photograph of your offspring.

* Maintain a complete description of your child, including height, weight, birthmarks, and other unique physical characteristics. Fingerprints also are provided by most law enforcement agencies. All copies of the fingerprints should be turned over to the parent for safe keeping.

* Teach kids to use the telephone. Make sure they know their home phone number, including area code, as well as emergency numbers such as "911" and "0."

* Notify schools, babysitters, and day care centers of the terms of your custody order and who is permitted to pick up the child.
* Maintain identifying data about your former spouse, including description, date of birth, social security number, and contact information for friends and relatives,

Once it is determined that the child is missing, a parent immediately should take the following steps: Contact the local law enforcement agency to make a missing child report; ask that the child be entered into the National Crime Information Center computer as missing (NCIC is the national law enforcement database, operated by the FBI, that allows law enforcement in other states access to information about the child's disappearance); call NCMEC at 1-800-843-5678 and report the child as missing; ask local missing child organizations for assistance; aid law enforcement's search by providing all information available to help locate the child and the abductor; and obtain temporary or sole custody if it was not already court-ordered.

Family abductions are real crimes with real child victims and no winners. If you are considering abducting your child or are concerned that your child might be abducted, help is available. Besides maintaining a 24-hour hotline, NCMEC provides information on family abduction and other child protection issues on its website, www.missingkids.com.

Despite the frequency of these cases and the trauma caused to the families involved, there is hope in every child recovery. The public's understanding of this issue and awareness in looking at the pictures of missing children and reporting suspicious circumstances involving children will yield even more happy endings.

Nancy B. Hammer is the director of the International Division of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, Alexandria, Va.