

The Myth of the Magic Bullet

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One thing we have learned at Take Root is that all too often, searching families, missing child services, the media, and society become unwitting co-conspirators in placing a terrible burden of unreasonable expectation on recovered children.

The unreasonable expectation is that their pain and trauma will – and should – melt away the moment they are “found.” It is understandable that the left-behind parent would hope for this, as their crisis is over once their child is safely back in their arms and they would want the child to be happy and relieved to be “home”. The public and the media want to celebrate a feel-good success story, so the return and reunion of the child becomes their happy ending. The recovery experience from the child’s perspective, however, can be profoundly different.

As explained throughout Take Root’s *Kid Gloves for Handling Abducted Children* materials, there is difference between the “Recovery Event” and the long-term process of recovery. *Kid Gloves* materials also explain how and why “recovery” can mean vastly different things to different children: for some, it becomes another “abduction” involving the complete disruption of the identity, long-term relationships, geography, culture and meaning they have lived while abducted; for others the moment of being “recovered” is actually the moment their trauma begins; and for others, being “recovered” is the first step on the complex road toward true healing. There are of course children who are immediately overjoyed to be located and others who emerge from their ordeal relatively unscathed, but it is unreasonable to **expect** this to be the case. A much more reasonable expectation is that the child will be confused and distressed from their ordeal and will need qualified assistance.

The source of the pressures, messages, and expectations that surround recovered children are manifold, urging them both subtly and overtly – albeit often unintentionally - towards masking any conflicted or negative feelings they may have about being “recovered.”

The Media/Society

Everybody wants a happy ending. Everyone cheers when missing children are located. Headlines outright proclaim “It’s Over!” And it usually is, from the perspective of those left behind. The problem of not knowing where the child is has now been fully and completely solved. Unfortunately, the child’s problem was not that they did not know where they were. The issues with which **they** must contend have not been resolved. In many cases, a whole new set of abduction related challenges is just emerging. But the news coverage rarely includes the voices of others who were abducted and can empathize and express understanding of what the child is going through.

Take Root has members who point to newspaper photos of themselves smiling and hugging their family as they are being reunited then tell us “that was an act” or “they smiled and hugged me so I smiled and hugged back, but it doesn’t mean I was happy.”

Missing Child Experts and Service Providers

As above, there are cheers, “high fives” and “atta boys” from the missing children industry service providers when a missing child is located – and rightfully so. Finding missing children is critically important work! The job that missing child agencies are designed to tackle is now finished and the books on the case closed. Unfortunately, addressing the chapters that come next – going, as Take Root’s motto says, “beyond recovering missing children, to helping missing children recover” – is not consistently part of our nation’s response to missing children. Only a scattered two or three agencies nationwide have a program or service dedicated to working with victims of child abduction **after** they are no longer missing, and **Take Root is the only agency that benefits from being informed by the victims themselves about the long-term impacts of abduction that can persist throughout the victim’s life.** Since our inception in 2002, Take Root has been able to learn first-hand from our membership of over 200 former abducted children. Prior to Take Root, no substantive collections of data or literature on the lasting effects of family abduction on child victims gleaned FROM child victims existed to guide service providers. Therefore, actual practice had been informed by literature and prevailing wisdom based primarily on data collected from parents of abducted children and others **who have never experienced being abducted!**

*The fact that missing child agencies do not provide services for victims of child abduction after they are no longer missing, along with the fact that there has been no substantive research into the lasting impacts of a childhood abduction, contributes to delivering the same message to victims of child abduction: **we don’t expect you to need any additional help once you are “found.”***

Left-Behind Family and Friends

The source of the greatest pressure on the child, though that is seldom anyone’s conscious intent, comes from the child’s own left-behind family and friends. Returned children respond to the following currents:

Wanting family to be OK

Take Root members have reported feeling responsible for the pain and suffering experienced by their family during the abduction. Many pretended to be OK once “found” so as not to cause any more pain or anxiety for anyone else.

Wanting to fit in with peers

Take Root members have reported that they wanted to fit in with peers; “be normal;” escape the stigma of being “that abducted kid.” The pressure to fit in is enormous in later childhood and adolescence. The returned child wants a “return to normal” every bit as much as their friends and family do! Many Take Root members report trying to

pretend everything was perfectly OK even when it absolutely was not.

Feeling guilty/"wrong"

Take Root members have reported feeling guilty for missing their **abducting** parent and/or aspects of their abduction identity after they were located. Returned children are surrounded by covert and, at times, overt messages that the abduction was a terrible, horrible thing that should be put "under the rug"; fond memories or things the child misses about the time away become points of guilt and shame. Also, in a scenario that so clearly paints one parent (the abductor) as "All Bad" and the other parent (the left-behind) as "All Good," returned children can also feel guilty about not always agreeing with the supposedly "All Good" parent. Furthermore, the child cannot be divorced from a parent the way a spouse can. The abducting parent will remain a factor in the child's life whether physically present or not. The child's positive or ambivalent feelings about the parent presented as "All Bad" may become another source of shame and guilt, hidden from those around them. An unresolved relationship with their abducting parent continues to haunt many Take Root members throughout their lives.

Being told to forget...again

A hallmark of the abduction experience is that children are told to forget about their pre-abduction life...to forget about beloved friends and family, pets, places, toys, teachers, neighborhood, identity and so forth. Similarly, once they are found, children are encouraged to "forget about" their abduction experiences – told they should "move on" or "put it in the past". But when the abduction experience encompassed many months or even years of your childhood development, forgetting about it is not healthy and replicates the abduction experience of being cut off from a significant part of your life.

SOURCES OF "PRESSURE TO BE OK"

1. Desire to protect searching family
2. Desire to fit in with peers
3. Conditioned response to subtle
and overt messages from family &
friends, media, missing child
services, and society

Many Take Root members responded to all of the above pressures by turning to a learned skill that helped them survive the abduction: suppression. They learned to bury any pain and confusion and grief surrounding their recovery and presented to those around them what they thought others wanted to see. Reading and responding to environmental cues about what is expected is another common learned survival skill during an abduction and another trick utilized by many Take Root members during their recoveries.

At Take Root we see firsthand, every day, the end result of this kind of suppression and lack of proper care and treatment at the time of recovery. Many members become accomplished, successful adults...who don't understand why they seem to have such a hard time with certain aspects of their lives. They have successfully distanced themselves so fully from the abduction that they never link certain challenges they face as adults back to this childhood trauma. Others fare less well, crumbling completely or even suffering psychotic breaks in adulthood. The solution? As the Take Root motto says, we must expand missing child services "beyond recovering missing children, to helping missing children recover."

Consider this - the service and resource needs of children recovered from long-term stranger and nonfamily abductions are the same as those of children recovered from long-term family abduction:

- **Research and literature on the long-term impact of child abduction that is based on data collected directly from a statistically significant sample of actual primary victims;**
- **Treatment modalities based on that research and appropriate to treating the short, intermediate, and long term emotional and psychological sequelae to abduction;**
- **A sufficient network of mental health professionals trained in those treatment modalities;**
- **Education for searching families, missing child and allied service providers, the public, and the media about the challenges of "recovery;"**
- **A multitude of voices of fellow abductees accessible to returned children.**

Take Root is actively engaged in efforts to conduct and facilitate research, develop treatment modalities, train mental health providers, provide education, run a support program for former abducted children and serve as a platform through which victims who are no longer missing can be heard. But we alone cannot fill the need. What is called for is a shift in the goal of all missing child service providers. There must be a change in perspective to serve "*victims of child abduction*" rather than "*missing children*," so that these children, once found, are not left without services. We must work together to educate ourselves about the needs of victims of child abduction, and close the missing child service gap.

Together we can do more than recover missing children –
we can help missing children recover!