

There are many different factors that will influence your child's successful reintegration back into family life. While the safe recovery of your child is the most important thing, it is extremely vital to understand factors that may influence your child's long-term healing and well-being after they have returned home. Recognizing these factors and discussing them with your support system (which may include the police, *MissingKids.ca* caseworkers, counsellors, prosecution lawyers, etc.) will help prepare you for the best possible reunification with your child. Things you may need to consider include:

- The length of time your child was missing
- The possibility that your child may have experienced some form of abuse while they were missing
- The circumstances surrounding the abduction
- Your child's or your own relationship to the abductor
- The circumstances surrounding the recovery of your child (i.e. was the child released by the abductor or was there further trauma in the recovery process?)
- The circumstances surrounding the reunification of your child with the family (i.e. did the reunification happen in a controlled environment or in a high-stress public space?)

A concerted effort needs to be made to ensure as smooth a recovery and reunification process as possible. This means minimizing the child's exposure to the public and the media, as well as to the response of the abductor. Plan with the police to ensure a safe and sheltered location is provided for your child to reunite with family. This is a perfect opportunity to have your family spokesperson handle the media while you focus on your child.

If the separation has been for an extended period of time, it is important to consult with professionals regarding the reunification process as early as possible. These professionals may include a child psychologist, a play therapist, a forensic paediatrician, a missing children services organization, social workers and law enforcement. There are many steps that can be taken to help ensure a successful reunification and to ease your child's burden. Two publications which may be helpful to you during this time are:

- *You're Not Alone: The Journey From Abduction to Empowerment*
 - By the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, (Washington, U.S. Department of Justice, 2010).
- *Family Reunification After a Lengthy Abduction* (Very good information even if the abduction was relatively short-term)
 - By Geoffrey L. Grieff, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, and the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, (Virginia, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2010).

WHEN YOUR CHILD IS LOCATED

Immediate Steps

- Call your support agency (such as your *MissingKids.ca* caseworker) if they are unaware that your child has been located.
- Consult with the officer in charge of your child's case about the next steps that need to be taken.
- Remember that your child's safety is law enforcement's number one priority. They have the discretion on how to proceed.
- Consideration needs to be given to the length of time your child has been gone, and the circumstances surrounding their abduction. If your child has been gone for many years, the reunification process between you and your child may become more complicated.
- Talk to law enforcement and the prosecutor assigned to your child's case about a publication ban being put in place to protect your child's privacy. The prosecutor assigned to your child's case should always be willing to do this for you.

Important Considerations

- Have a reunification team — this team may include law enforcement, a child therapist, a family advocate, and/or a support person from a missing children services organization.

When your child is located, they should be given an explanation using age-appropriate language of what is taking place and why, rather than leaving the child to their own fears and fantasies.¹

- Consider preparing a recovery kit with some photographs of the family and some of your child's favourite things. Depending on the amount of time that has passed, the professional working with your child may show the child a current photograph of you before the child is actually reunited with you. This professional can also identify and address any false stories that have been told to the child about you to help ease the reunification process.
- Engage help (i.e. law enforcement, advocates, etc.) to protect your child's and your family's privacy, asking that there be no media covering the reunification between you and your child.
- Avoid the temptation to immediately reunite with your child particularly in a public space. Especially in the case of a long-term separation, when it is important that the reunification process focuses on the child's needs and limits any type of pressure or stress placed on the child. Where possible (and depending on the age of the child) your child should be given the opportunity to understand what will be happening before being put in an intense situation, such as a reunification process, without preparation.
- Reunification between you and your child should happen in a protected and private environment if possible.

¹ From Kathryn M. Turman (ed.) *Recovery and Reunification of Missing Children: A Team Approach* (Virginia, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, ©1995).

WHEN YOUR CHILD IS RETURNED

- What your child has been through or has been told will be unclear at first. Police will most likely take the time to sort this out before reuniting you and your child. This will mean that you may not be reunited with your child right away.
- Immediate consideration needs to be given to whether or not the child should be interviewed by the police.
 - Depending on the circumstances (for example a criminal investigation), a proper child forensic interview may be conducted. This will:
 - Minimize the contamination of a child's evidence
 - Help in the collection of the best evidence
 - Limit the amount of testimony needed from a child in court
 - Lessen the trauma experienced by a child
 - Please discuss the need for this interview with the lead investigator on your child's case.
- Immediate consideration needs to be given as to whether your child should see a doctor in case there has been any maltreatment or for an overall well-being check. It is important to recognize that the abduction will have been very stressful for your child.

DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

While the media may have played an important role in the search for your missing child, they should play absolutely no role in the reunification process. The process of reuniting with your child needs to be managed carefully and involve only those individuals trained to support and assist. Media involvement during the recovery and reunification process is not advised and may cause harm by exposing your child and family when privacy is needed. Notifying the media of your child's recovery and any follow-up messaging about your child's case can be postponed until your child's safety and privacy are secured. Steps should be taken with your reunification team (which may include law enforcement, a child therapist, a family advocate, and/or a support person from a missing children services organization) to ensure that the media is unable to access your family during this sensitive time.

Do not hesitate to ask for help with managing the media and dealing with persistent interview requests — ask law enforcement, a *MissingKids.ca* caseworker or if you have a Community Response Plan in place, your media spokesperson, to help by acting as a buffer between the media and your family at this time.

Consult with your MissingKids.ca caseworker on how to deal with the media.

SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD

- Depending on the duration of time you were separated from your child, it is important to consider that they may be confused about their return home. Your child may be confused about their relationship to you and/or to the abductor, the truth about what actually happened, where their loyalties lie, etc.
- When possible, a trusted and neutral third party (for example a police officer, a victim services worker, or an advocate) should meet with your child to explain to them what is going to be happening (who they will see, speak to and when). This will give your child time to absorb the reality of the situation.
- Know that the most significant factor in your child's recovery and healing is time. You don't have to answer all of your child's questions and concerns at this time. Reassure your child and make them feel at ease.

Remember, you are not alone!

