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"Child Abduction in America—
and How to Keep Your Child Safe"

By Kimberly Blaker

On June 24, a Lexington County, South Carolina teenager was seized at gunpoint and taken by the perpetrator to his Columbia apartment, where, for 18 hours, the girl was trapped and repeatedly raped. When the kidnapper-rapist fell asleep, the teen ran away and narrowly escaped a more serious fate.

The girl was an instant heroine when it was discovered that Richard Marc Evonitz, the man she led the police to, was the long-sought murderer of three girls from Spotsylvania County, Virginia.

Evonitz committed suicide as police closed in on him and the case, and a month later, the teen heroine was rewarded \$150,000 by the parents of the murdered girls.

A very different but no less frightening scenario took place in North Charleston, South Carolina in August when a young boy vanished within a few feet of his mother.

Kim Stahl pulled up to Blockbuster Video and hopped out of her 2002 Chrysler minivan to make a quick drop, leaving the van running. When she turned, to her astonishment, she saw her vehicle driving off with her son still in it.

Stahl remarked according to the *Charleston Post and Courier* August 10, 2002, “I was no more than 10 feet away, and he was gone like that.”

Fortunately, police returned Austin safely to his mother after being dropped off by the car thief.

Although publicity surrounding other recent cases has alarmed parents across the nation, the overall number of child homicide abductions is relatively small. Based on 1990 FBI data, criminologists Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak have estimated that child homicides from abductions range between 43 and 147 per year as noted in “Homicides of Children and Youth” published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojjdp/187239.pdf>

Based on the 1990 child population, that’s between 1 and 3 abduction homicides per 100,000 children.

And according to the first National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMA^{RT}), the total number of *stranger* abductions for 1988 was between 200 and 300, reports University of New Hampshire Crimes Against Children Research Center (CACRC) at <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/factsheet.html#4>.

Still, the abduction—and especially the murder—of even one child, is far too many!

More disturbing, reveal Finkelhor and Ormrod, 39 percent of abductions are by acquaintances—not strangers—making difficult where to teach children and teens to draw the line.

In addition, in light of the rare homicide abduction, 3,000 to 4,000 short-term abductions occur annually and result mostly in sexual assault and other crimes according to CACRC.

What parents should know

“Sex offenders,” says Columbia psychotherapist Carol Smith, “are pretty good con artists.” Smith explains, it should raise a red flag if an adult has found access to your child but doesn’t seem to have relationships with other adults, as reported on July 20, 2002 in *The State*.

In fact, abduction is not a child’s only stranger danger. Most children who are sexually assaulted will *not* be abducted.

Frighteningly, “One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused,” says Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina in *The State*. These statistics can be deceiving, however, since a large number of children are sexually abused by fathers, stepfathers, or other family members rather than strangers or acquaintances.

Shy children are at higher risk for abduction says Jim Marks, Professor of Psychology and Education; and certainly, for sexual assault as well.

The reason, explains Marks, is that many predators look specifically for shy children and those who lack self-esteem. These children are easy targets because they lack the assertiveness to speak up for themselves.

If you have a shy child or one with low self-esteem read *The Shy Child: Helping Children Triumph over Shyness* by Ward K. Swallow, Ph.D., Warner Books, 2000, or one of many other good books on helping your child to overcome this trait.

Also important, while not all children who are abducted are murdered, of those who are, 75% of the killings take place within three hours reports the *Charleston Post and Courier*, August 3, 2002. Therefore, it's essential to report a possible abduction to law enforcement immediately.

So far, several programs have been launched throughout the country to involve full communities in the immediate search for a missing child.

These alert systems make use of broadcast outlets such as newspaper Web sites, radio, and television where information pertaining to the missing child is immediately announced within the county or region of the child's disappearance. Unfortunately, such programs can be costly and are not yet implemented everywhere.

Finally, remember that children of different age groups face different types and levels of risk. However, contrary to what might be expected based on their mental maturity and physical size, teenagers are at the greatest risk of being murdered by a stranger. Finkelhor and Ormrod reveal that only 3% of children under 12 that are murdered are victims of strangers in comparison to 87% of teen murder victims.

Teaching our children to be safe

Getting across to children the dangers of strangers and sometimes of acquaintances requires talking to your child on his level of understanding. Don't avoid discussing possible risks with your child, but do emphasize those that especially pertain to your child's age group. Then offer realistic ways for your child to protect herself.

Teach your child the following:

- If your child is on a bike and someone tries to grab him, he should wrap his full body (arms and legs) around the frame of his bike. Because the bike moves with the child, it makes difficult for the abductor for a fast getaway.
- If caught or being chased your child should defend herself. She should scream loudly and continuously and attempt to run away.
- Create a secret family password that only specific family members and friends would be given in order to pick up your child. If your child is approached and the password is not immediately relayed, your child should run away, even if approached by a police officer.
- Your child and even your teen should always tell you where he is going (the exact address), who he will be with (first and last names), and for how long. If the time is unknown, give your child a check-in time.
- Your child should always walk with others, never alone.
- Try not to scare your child, but offer real life incidents to which your child can relate. If you or someone you know has been victimized, cautiously share this information with your child in an age appropriate manner that she can comprehend and can emotionally handle. Adults and children especially, live in the moment and tend to believe, “It can’t happen to me.” Sharing a real event that has happened to someone that you or your child knows reveals that it *can* happen to anyone—but that there are ways to protect oneself.
- Teach your child to say “No!” to adults that she doesn’t know and even to adults she does know if something doesn’t seem right.

- Keep doors locked, even when an adult is at home. Teach by example, and *never* open the door to a stranger regardless of his appearance. If your child is home alone, she should not even open the door for acquaintances unless parents have approved for that particular person.
- For parents, in the event of a carjacking, do not argue or talk to the hijacker. Simply attempt to remove your children from the vehicle as quickly as possible.

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SIDEBAR IDEAS/WAYS TO LOCALIZE: List local programs for teaching children about stranger safety and self-defense. Give details on local alert systems and local reporting information.

Kimberly Blaker of New Boston, Michigan writes for parenting and women's magazines across the United States and other publications.

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