

Know what to do if your child is missing

Many families feel they are faced with new and unprecedented challenges when trying to keep their children safer in today's fast-paced society. It is important to be aware and alert, but families do **not** need to be afraid. Families should, however, be wary of expensive gadgets and gimmicks purporting to protect children or any sort of fee-charging data collection or registration services storing information about children. Parents and guardians should be the **only people** to keep this information about their children.

The most important key to helping keep your children safer is effective communication with them. The first step you should take is to establish an atmosphere in the home in which your children truly feel comfortable about discussing sensitive matters and relating experiences in which anyone may have approached them in an inappropriate manner or a way that made them feel sad, scared or confused. The truth is children are often too afraid or confused to report their experiences and fears. Allow them to talk freely about their likes, dislikes, friends and feelings.

This document gives instructions about the actions families should take to prepare for the **remote** possibility a child may be missing someday. It also provides instructions about the **immediate** actions to take when a child is missing.

Preparation

There are key steps you should take now to prepare in case your child might someday be missing. Collecting the data noted below will help law enforcement search for and identify your child.

- **Keep a complete and current written description of your child.** This description should include hair and eye color, height, weight, complexion, date of birth and information about items such as eyeglasses or contact lenses, braces, body piercings, tattoos and other unique physical attributes.
- **Take color photos, digital if possible, of your child every six months or more often if your child's appearance changes.** Photos need to be high quality and in sharp focus so your child's features are easily recognizable.
- **Know where your child's medical and dental records are located and how they may be obtained.** Medical and dental records, particularly X-rays and radiographs, may be invaluable in helping to identify a recovered child. It is important to record and/or photograph all broken bones and identifying marks, such as permanent scars, birthmarks, blemishes and tattoos.
- **Contact your local law enforcement agency to see if they offer fingerprinting for children. If so, arrange with the agency to have your child fingerprinted.** Your law enforcement agency has trained personnel to help ensure the fingerprints taken are useful. You will be given the fingerprint card for safekeeping.
- **Collect a DNA sample from your child.** There are many DNA collection kits available, but it is simple for you to collect a sample on your own. DNA rich items include an old toothbrush allowed to air dry, baby teeth, a hairbrush used exclusively by your child for at least one month or dried blood from a bandage. These items should be placed in a brown envelope licked shut by your child and labeled.

As a family project consider making a separate identification box for each family member. Shoeboxes work well. In each box place one family member's fingerprints, duplicate dental X-rays or radiographs as obtained from the dentist, a recent picture and the DNA sample in separate brown envelopes. Store the box at room temperature in a dry place away from heat.

Action

If you believe your child is missing, **it is critical to immediately take the actions noted below.**

- **Search anywhere a child could crawl into or hide and possibly be asleep or unable to get out.** This includes closets, piles of laundry, in and under beds, inside large appliances, in vehicles including trunks or any other space into which a child might fit.

Check with relatives, neighbors and friends of your child to see if they have any information to help locate your child. For older children check all forms of communication used by your family to see if your child has provided information about a change in plans or updated schedule. **If you still cannot find your child, immediately call your local law enforcement agency.**

- **Seek the assistance of responsible adults near you.** Some children are missing from locations in which others are nearby. For instance if your child becomes separated from you while shopping, immediately notify the store manager or security office and ask for assistance in finding your child. Then **immediately call law enforcement.** Many stores have initiated a plan of action if a child is missing while shopping in their establishment that may help speed a recovery once activated.

When you call law enforcement, be prepared to provide your child's

- Name
- Date of birth
- Height
- Weight
- Unique identifiers such as eyeglasses or contact lenses, braces, body piercings, tattoos and other key physical attributes

When talking with law enforcement, be prepared to describe

- When you noticed your child was missing
- Where you last saw your child
- What your child was wearing when last seen
- What circumstances, if any, about the situation indicate a significant and unexplained deviation from your child's daily routine

When receiving a report of a missing child, law enforcement assesses the risk a child faces based on the information provided. Thus provide key information in the report to help law enforcement immediately assess that risk. Model law enforcement policies¹ recommend an expedited law enforcement response if a child

- Is 13 years of age or younger
- Is out of what is believed to be the zone of safety for his or her age and developmental stage
- Has mental, developmental or behavioral disabilities
- Is drug dependent, including prescribed medication and/or illegal substances, and the dependency is potentially life-threatening
- Has been absent from home for more than 24 hours before being reported to law enforcement
- Is determined to be in a life-threatening situation as based on available information
- Is believed to be in the company of an individual who could endanger his or her welfare as based on available information
- Is absent in a way inconsistent with his or her established patterns of behavior and the deviation cannot be readily explained
- Is determined to be at risk based on other circumstances involved causing a reasonable person to conclude the child should be considered as such

¹[Law-Enforcement Policy and Procedures for Reports of Missing and Abducted Children](http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PageServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=3289#model_policies). Alexandria, Virginia: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, October 2011, www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PageServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=3289#model_policies, accessed August 1, 2012.

Federal missing child laws

If your child is missing, federal law requires a specific, timely response from law enforcement agencies. Federal law

- Prohibits law enforcement agencies from establishing or observing a waiting period before accepting a missing child report. When a child is reported missing, law enforcement may not require the reporter to wait a certain amount of time for the child to return home before taking the report (42 U.S.C. §§ 5779 and 5780).

- Requires law enforcement agencies to enter the child’s information into the FBI’s National Crime Information Center database, known as NCIC, and the state² law enforcement system database within 2 hours of receiving the missing child report (42 U.S.C. §5780). You may contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children[®], known as NCMEC, at 1-800-THE-LOST[®] (1-800-843-5678) to verify information about your child has been entered into NCIC.
- Extends, to missing young adults ages 18, 19 and 20, some of the same reporting and investigative procedures already provided to children younger than 18 through a provision known as Suzanne’s Law³ in recognition of Congress’ concern for the safety of missing young adults in this age range. NCMEC immediately takes reports of all missing children younger than 18 and will take a report about children aged 18 to 20 when notified by law enforcement and when law enforcement expresses a concern of suspicious circumstances or foul play.
- Authorizes NCMEC to provide free services to families as the nation’s clearinghouse for missing and sexually exploited children. Many of NCMEC’s authorized services are listed in 42 U.S.C. § 5773. After you have reported your child as missing to your local law enforcement agency, call NCMEC’s toll free telephone number at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) to also report your missing child.

²The term “state” includes American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

³Suzanne’s Law was a portion of the Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today Act of 2003, known as the PROTECT Act, (Pub. L. No. 108-21), and it amended 42 U.S.C. §5779(a).

How NCMEC may help

When calling NCMEC, a Call Center Specialist will take information about your child. Next a NCMEC case management team will work directly with your family and law enforcement offering technical assistance and information dissemination tailored to the specific circumstances to help ensure all available search and recovery methods are being used. Teams coordinate an array of services including

- Rapid creation and dissemination of posters to help generate leads
- Rapid review, analysis of and dissemination of leads received on 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) to the investigating law enforcement agency
- Constant communication with federal agencies providing services to assist in the location and recovery of missing children
- Rapid provision of peer support, resources and empowerment from trained volunteers who have experienced a missing child incident in their own family
- Constant access to referrals families may use to help with the emotions experienced when a child is missing

Another resource is *When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide* (NCJ 228735). This book, written by searching parents and published by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, explains the role various agencies play in the search for a missing child and features helpful checklists. Copies are available by calling 1-800-851-3420 or visiting www.ncjrs.gov.

Copyright © 1985, 2004, 2010, 2011 and 2012 National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. All rights reserved.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2012-MC-FX-K001 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. This document is provided for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice or professional opinion on specific facts. Information provided in this document may not remain current or accurate, so recipients should use this document only as a starting point for their own independent research and analysis. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children[®] and 1-800-THE-LOST[®] are registered trademarks of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.