

Just in case...

**Guidelines in
case your child
might someday
be missing**



National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®

**1-800-THE-LOST®
(1-800-843-5678)**

www.missingkids.com



Guidelines in case your child might someday be missing

The rising awareness of crimes being committed against children — and of missing children in particular — has left many families feeling vulnerable. It is important to be aware and alert, but your family and you do **not** need to be afraid. You should, however, be wary of gadgets and gimmicks purporting to protect your child or any sort of data-collection or registration services storing information about your child. To help ensure others do not misuse this information, you should be the **only person** to keep this information about your child.

The most important key to child safety is effective communication with your child. Remember, children are more vulnerable to abduction or sexual exploitation when they feel no one at home is listening or think their needs are not being met in the home. 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 scared, uncomfortable, or confused. The simple 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 true feelings.

This brochure gives instructions about the actions you should take to prepare for the **remote** possibility your child may someday be missing. It also provides instructions about the **immediate** actions you should take when you believe your child is missing.

Preparation

There are six steps you should take now to be prepared in case your child might someday be missing. Collecting the data noted below will help law enforcement search for and identify your child when he or she is recovered.

- **Keep a complete description of your child.** This description must include color of hair, color of eyes, height, weight, and date of birth. In addition the descriptions should include identifiers such as eyeglasses or contact lenses, braces, body piercings,

tattoos, and/or other unique physical attributes. The complete description should be written down.

- **Take color photographs of your child every six months or more often if your child's appearance changes such as due to loss of a tooth or a change in hair style.** Photographs should be of high quality and in sharp focus so your child is easily recognizable. Head and shoulder portraits from different angles, such as those taken by school photographers, are preferable, but make certain you have a photograph that most resembles your child. Candid photographs may be more representative of how your child looks than a posed shot. For information about the importance of having a good quality photograph of your child visit www.missingkids.com, and from the home page click on the link to "Parents & Guardians."
- **Have your dentist prepare dental charts and prints for your child. Be sure the dental chart is updated each time an examination or dental work is performed and dental prints are taken once every two years until your child is 18 years old.** Make sure your dentist maintains accurate, up-to-date dental charts and X-rays for your child as a routine part of his or her normal office procedure. If you move, you should get a copy from your former dentist to keep yourself until a new dentist is found. Make certain the information is easily accessible should you need it quickly. Also consider taking a bite impression of your child's teeth. Take a two-inch square of flat material such as Styrofoam™ and have your child bite partially through it. The bite should be strong enough to leave an impression of the upper and lower teeth. A new bite sample should be made each time your child loses or grows a tooth.
- **Know where your child's medical records are located.** Medical records, particularly X-rays, may be invaluable in helping to identify a recovered child. It is important to have all permanent scars, birthmarks, blemishes, and broken bones recorded. You should find out from your child's doctor where such records

are located and how you may be able to obtain them if the need arises.

- **Arrange with your local law-enforcement agency to have your child fingerprinted.** In order for fingerprints to be useful in identifying a person, they must be properly taken. Your law-enforcement agency has trained personnel to help ensure the fingerprints taken are useful. Most law-enforcement agencies provide this service at no charge, but they do not keep the child’s fingerprints on file. You will be given the only fingerprint card for safekeeping.
- **Consider having a DNA sample taken from your child.** DNA, or deoxyribonucleic acid, is rapidly becoming the “gold standard” for identifications. There are many DNA-collection kits available, but it is simple for you to collect a sample. For example an old toothbrush used by your child is rich with his or her DNA. Allow the toothbrush to air dry and place it in a brown envelope, have your child lick the envelope shut, and label it. The same procedure may be used for other samples such as baby teeth, an old hairbrush used exclusively by your child for at least one month, and dried blood from a bandage. If using a buccal-swab sample from the inside of your child’s mouth it is important to follow the instructions to allow for the swab to dry prior to storage.

As a family project make an identification box for each family member. Each family member should use a separate shoebox. In each shoebox place one family member’s fingerprints, extra dental X-rays and prints 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. The DNA sample should be good for up to six or seven years.

Action

If you believe your child is missing, **it is critical to immediately take the actions noted here.** If your child is missing from home, search the home checking closets,

piles of laundry, in and under beds, inside large appliances, and in vehicles including trunks — wherever a child could crawl into or hide and possibly be asleep or not able to get out. Check with your neighbors and friends of your child. If you still cannot find your child, **immediately call your local law-enforcement agency.**

If the disappearance occurs when your child and you are away from home — on a shopping trip, for example — notify the store manager or the 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, such as Code Adam®, which was started by Walmart® and is used by retailers all over the country.

When you call law enforcement, try to stay calm. Identify yourself and your location, and say, “Please send an officer. I want to report a missing child.” You should give your child’s name; date of birth; height; weight; and identifiers such as eyeglasses or contact lenses, braces, body piercings, tattoos, and/or other unique physical attributes. In addition you should tell them when you noticed the disappearance, last saw your child, and what your child was wearing. After you have reported your child missing to law enforcement, listen to their instructions and respond to their questions.

Any significant and unexplained deviation from your child’s daily routine should prompt a timely law-enforcement response. This response may be expedited if any of these circumstances exist. Your child is

- Younger than 13 years of age
- Mentally incapacitated or drug dependent
- A potential victim of foul play or with adults who could endanger the child’s welfare
- Communicating with someone he or she has become acquainted with via the Internet and has arranged to meet, in person, with the individual

Request your child’s name and identifying information be immediately entered by law enforcement into the

Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Missing Person File (MPF). NCIC is an FBI database accessible to local, state, and federal law enforcement across the United States and is used to assist in the location and identification of missing children. The database contains records regarding missing-person cases and other criminal-justice information. The information contained in the database helps ensure any law-enforcement agency in the country will be able to identify your child if he or she is found in another community. When missing-children cases involve other information that would require a record in NCIC, such as missing siblings or companions, stolen vehicles, and/or a warrant, ask law enforcement to link your missing child's case to these other cases to assist in the search for your child.

Federal Missing Child Laws

If your child is missing, you have certain rights under federal law.

- Law enforcement is not allowed to observe a waiting period before taking a report from you. This means when you call law enforcement to report your child is missing, law enforcement cannot tell you to wait a certain amount of time to see if your child returns home before they take the report (42 U.S.C. § 5780).
- Law enforcement must enter your child's information into the FBI's NCIC database and your state's law-enforcement system database within 2 hours of receiving your missing-child report (42 U.S.C. § 5780). You may contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678) to verify information about your child has been entered into NCIC.
- NCMEC provides free services to families. NCMEC operates the nation's clearinghouse for missing and sexually exploited children. 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 learn more about what NCMEC may do to help (42 U.S.C. § 5773).¹

How NCMEC May Help

After you have reported your child missing to local law enforcement, call NCMEC's toll-free telephone number 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678). A Call Center Specialist will take information concerning your child and forward it to NCMEC's Missing Children Division (MCD). An NCMEC Case Manager will follow-up with you and the law-enforcement agency investigating the case. NCMEC may also be able to refer you to a support group in your community.

An additional tool used in the search for long-term missing children is the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs). NamUs is a program created by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) in response to the challenges involved in investigating and solving missing- and unidentified-person cases. It contains databases storing detailed information about missing persons and unidentified remains and may be searched for possible matches between cases. Talk with your NCMEC Case Manager about the benefits of using this database as another avenue in the search for your missing child. NamUs is a free, online system that may be searched by the public, law-enforcement officials, medical examiners, and coroners to help solve these types of cases. For more information regarding NamUs and the services offered please visit their website at www.namus.gov.

Another resource is *When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide* (NCJ 204958). This book, written by searching parents and published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), 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.

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) was established in 1984 as a private, nonprofit organization. Per 42 U.S.C. § 5773 and other federal legislation NCMEC fulfills 20 core federal mandates

including the operation of a national, 24-hour, toll-free telephone line by which individuals may report information regarding the location of a missing child and request information about the procedures necessary to reunite a child with his or her legal custodian; operation of the national resource center and information clearinghouse for missing and sexually exploited children; coordination of programs to locate, recover, or reunite missing children with their families; provision of technical assistance and training in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of cases involving missing and sexually exploited children; and operation of a CyberTipline® for reporting Internet-related, child sexual exploitation.

A 24-hour, toll-free telephone line, **1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)**, is available in Canada and the United States for those who have information regarding missing and sexually exploited children. The “phone free” number is 001-800-843-5678 when dialing from Mexico and 00-800-0843-5678 when dialing from many other countries. For a list of other toll-free numbers available when dialing from specific countries visit www.missingkids.com, and from the home page respectively click on the “More Services” and “24-Hour Hotline” links. The CyberTipline is available worldwide for online reporting of these crimes at www.cybertipline.com. The TTY line is 1-800-826-7653. The NCMEC business number is 703-224-2150. The NCMEC facsimile number is 703-224-2122. The NCMEC website address is www.missingkids.com.

For information about the services offered by NCMEC’s other offices, please call them directly in California at 714-508-0150, Florida at 561-848-1900, Florida/Collier County at 239-566-5801, Kansas City at 913-469-5437, New York/Buffalo at 716-842-6333, New York/Mohawk Valley at 315-732-7233, New York/Rochester at 585-242-0900, South Carolina at 803-254-2326, and Texas at 512-465-2156.

A number of publications, addressing various aspects of the missing- and sexually exploited-child issue, are available free-of-charge in single copies by contacting the



Charles B. Wang International Children’s Building
699 Prince Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314-3175
U.S.A.

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

This project was supported by Grant No. 2009-MC-CX-K002 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. 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®, 1-800-THE-LOST®, and CyberTipline® are registered service marks of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. NCMEC Order #17.

Note

¹The Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today (PROTECT) Act of 2003 (Pub. L. No. 108-21) contains a provision recognizing the concern of the U.S. Congress for the safety of **missing young adults, ages 18 to 20**. The provision, known as Suzanne’s Law, extends to these young adults some of the same reporting and investigative procedures already provided to children younger than 18 years of age. 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.