

# Just in case...

## Guidelines in finding professional help in case your child is missing or the victim of sexual exploitation



National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®

1-800-THE-LOST®  
(1-800-843-5678)

[www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com)

Families faced with the problem of a missing or sexually exploited child may benefit from the help of a knowledgeable and experienced professional. In missing-child cases of all types, parents and guardians may need to call on the services of a qualified and experienced therapist to help them address family stress during the missing event, child recovery and family reunification, or grieving process if the child is recovered deceased. In family-abduction cases in particular, the searching parent or guardian will need an attorney to assist in filing a civil legal action, recovering the child, and ensuring law enforcement brings the abductor parent/guardian to justice. In cases of child sexual exploitation therapists and physicians are helpful both in diagnosing exploitation took place and treating the problems caused by the exploitation.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children has compiled these guidelines for parents and guardians when needing to find professionals — therapists, physicians, and attorneys — to assist in treating and resolving cases of missing or sexually exploited children. These guidelines were originally compiled in cooperation with the National Resource Center on Child Sexual Abuse and Center for the Study of Trauma at the University of California at San Francisco.

## Counseling in Cases of Missing Children

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Child disappearance for any reason — whether a nonfamily abduction, family abduction, or runaway episode — is a loss that usually creates extreme stress within families. Parents, guardians, and the other children in the family may experience anxiety, fear, sadness, anger, or guilt. While there may be little prior life

experience to prepare families for this traumatic event, each family develops its own way of coping. In some instances the other children in the family may be forgotten or ignored due to all of the attention being given to the missing child. You may choose to rely on your own resources along with the support of relatives and friends. Other families, however, may find counseling gives family members the opportunity to express and better cope with their thoughts and feelings about the disappearance, reorganize family responsibilities, and keep communication open during a difficult and often painful period.

Every family with a missing child hopes for a successful recovery. This recovery, however, is only the first part of a family reunification process. The family and recovered child will need to discuss their experiences during the missing event and then begin to rebuild family life. Because the experiences of child victims of a nonfamily abduction, family abduction, or runaway episode may be very different, the tasks of the family and recovered child during reunification may vary.

**If your child has been abducted by a nonfamily member**, reunification counseling should begin with an evaluation of the impact of the missing event on both your family and child, as well as an assessment of your coping efforts. Nonfamily abductions frequently involve physical, sexual, or psychological abuse of the child. Your child may have been told family members who were “left behind” were dead or no longer wanted him or her. Efforts will have to be made to reassure your child that the separation was involuntary and overcome your child’s possible feelings of alienation. Family members need to be patient with the child during the reunification process.

While family counseling fosters the communication essential to rebuilding family life, individual counseling of your child may be necessary to address fears and traumatic experiences he or she may be reluctant to express in a family setting. In cases of extreme tragedy in which your child dies while missing, your family will need counseling to help cope with grief and other feelings. At some point it may be helpful to join a support group with others who have experienced a similar loss.

**If your child has been abducted by the noncustodial parent or guardian**, reunification counseling may need to address the child's feelings of separation from or loss of the abductor parent/guardian. The custodial parent/guardian may find it difficult to talk with the child about such feelings in light of his or her own anxiety or anger toward the abducting parent/guardian. Counseling may make it easier for such reactions to be discussed.

**If your child has run away**, counseling may be helpful in identifying why he or she left home. The act of running away usually results from a combination of unresolved family problems and individual problems. Counseling may also help reduce the impact of the problems and prevent future runaway incidents. Counseling should address all events that occurred during the runaway incident, as runaway children are at high risk for substance abuse, sexual exploitation, and physical abuse. Your child may have left a situation within the home or in some other area of his or her life the parents or guardians may not know about. It is important to allow your child to acknowledge these contributing factors and for the family to address the problems that drove the child to run away in the first place. If these issues are not addressed, the child may become a habitual runaway.

## Counseling in Cases of Sexually Exploited Children

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When a child has been sexually exploited the child should be seen by a therapist as soon as possible after disclosing the exploitation. Therapy may help your child understand he or she is not to blame and may help him or her cope with the overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame some children have. While physical evidence of sexual exploitation is often lacking, have your child examined by a physician to make sure he or she has not been physically injured. If law enforcement or child-protective services have not already taken your child to a therapist or physician as part of the investigation, you should seek such a professional on your own. A child who appears to be coping with the exploitation initially may not have come to grips with what happened or may be in denial. Children may tell only a part of what happened until they feel comfortable and secure enough to disclose more details. Seek referrals for qualified individuals from the other professionals who are helping you.

## Finding a Therapist or Physician

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In order to be helpful to you, a therapist or physician needs to have training and experience in handling child sexual exploitation or issues related to family reunification. Many jurisdictions have a child-protection team composed of trained professionals who investigate cases of exploitation and make recommendations for intervention.

## What to Look For in a Therapist

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- Your therapist should have an advanced degree in a recognized mental-health specialty such as psychiatry, psychology, social work, counseling, or psychiatric

nursing. Advanced degrees are master's degrees (MSW, MS, MA) and doctorates (MD, PhD, PsyD). Make sure your therapist is licensed to practice in your jurisdiction.

- In cases of missing children your therapist should have specific knowledge about the consequences to the child and family following child disappearance, legal issues surrounding child search, and child recovery and family reunification. Therapists with proper degrees and credentials who lack this specific knowledge may be useful if they are willing to seek educational material about the subject.
- In cases of child sexual exploitation your therapist should have special training in child sexual exploitation, know how it affects children and adults, understand how to place responsibility on the exploiter, and have a treatment plan.

## What to Look For in a Physician

- Your physician should have board certification in a relevant medical specialty such as pediatrics, family practice, or obstetrics/gynecology. Board certification means the doctor has had specific training and experience in that area of medicine after medical school and then passed an examination in that specialty.
- Your physician should have particular experience in conducting medical evaluations of children for sexual exploitation. Child-sexual-exploitation cases may involve complex issues about diagnosis, evidence collection, and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases.

In cases of child sexual exploitation your therapist or physician should have knowledge of the legal issues involved in child sexual

exploitation, especially the laws about reporting child sexual victimization; procedures used by law enforcement and protective services; the rules of evidence; and the use of expert testimony in your jurisdiction. If you find you need a therapist or physician with knowledge of or experience in testifying in court about your child's assessment and treatment, consult with a prosecutor or other attorney. Many jurisdictions have now established child-advocacy centers providing all of the above-referenced services under one roof. Check with your law-enforcement agency or child-protective-services agency to see if a child-advocacy center is in your community.

## Where to Find a Therapist or Physician

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Many communities have special programs for treating child sexual exploitation or therapists with experience in certain areas. As services to families of missing children represent a relatively new field, however, it may be difficult to find therapists with this specialized training in your community. You may find reputable therapists in your community through the organizations noted below.

- Nonprofit-service providers serving families of missing or sexually exploited children
- Local psychological or psychiatric association referral services
- University departments of psychology or psychiatry
- Child-exploitation hotlines
- Child-protective-services agencies
- Rape-crisis or sexual-assault centers
- Family-court services of court-appointed, special-advocate (CASA) groups
- Crime-victim-assistance programs in the law-enforcement agency or prosecutor's (district attorney's) office

## Working With Your Therapist or Physician

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When you have located a therapist or physician, it is reasonable to ask about his or her experience and training in working with a particular problem. If you are not satisfied, find another professional. Even if you pay a reduced fee or receive services at no cost, you have the right to have a therapist or physician with the proper training and experience. You may wish to express a preference for a male or female therapist or physician.

Discuss your child's situation openly, completely, and honestly. Trust your feelings and your child's feelings. Your child and you should feel comfortable with the therapist or physician, even if the examination or assessment process creates feelings of guilt or shame. If you are not comfortable with your therapist or physician, discuss this discomfort openly. If this discussion does not produce positive change, request another therapist or physician.

Provide a complete history so the professional is able to properly assess and treat your child. Try to cooperate as fully as possible and help the child cooperate with the therapist or physician. Ask questions if you do not understand what is happening. Be open and candid in providing information to the therapist about your child and family. This information may be helpful in formulating a treatment plan.

Discuss the fees for examination and find out what services are covered by health-insurance benefits you may have. Ask for a written statement explaining the basis for charges. Your law-enforcement agency or district attorney's office should be able to tell you if your jurisdiction has a crime-victim-assistance program that will pay for necessary counseling and medical treatment.

During an investigation of child sexual exploitation, therapy, or the medical exam, you may be told there is no evidence of victimization. There may be many reasons for the lack of evidence, but this does not necessarily mean your child was not sexually victimized. And, conversely, behavioral changes may have been due to causes other than sexual exploitation such as a medical, family, or school problem.

Even if no physical evidence was found, the therapist or physician may still be able to testify in court about the evaluation and discuss the fact your child was exploited. It is important for the therapist to continue seeing your child, even if the court does not find sexual exploitation occurred.

**Note:** All medical professionals and therapists have a code of ethics they must follow. It is always wrong for any professional to be abusive or act in a sexual way with a client. If you believe your therapist or physician is acting inappropriately or is not keeping you informed about the assessment and treatment, discuss your concerns openly. If this discussion does not produce positive change, talk to his or her supervisor or contact a professional or medical association for more help. Do not stay in a therapy situation that makes your child or you feel uncomfortable.

## Finding an Attorney

The services of an attorney may be helpful at any time during the investigation of a missing- or sexually exploited-child case, but they are particularly important if you are facing one of the situations noted below.

- Your child is the victim of family abduction and you need to obtain a custody order, file criminal charges against the abductor, and encourage law enforcement to investigate and the prosecutor to prosecute. **Note:** If

your child was taken to another jurisdiction, you may have to hire a second attorney to enforce the custody decree in the jurisdiction to which your child was taken.

- You are considering separation, divorce, or dissolving a nonmarital partnership and want to prevent a family abduction. Or, you want to stop visitation or are considering separation or divorce because your child discloses sexual exploitation. Whether or not you are legally married, you should have paternity established and obtain legal custody of your child. To obtain a custody order you must file legal papers, called pleadings, in the family court. It will be much simpler to do this if you get the assistance of an attorney.
- You want to sue someone who sexually exploited your child.
- You want to sue an agency or institution that failed to protect your child from sexual victimization.

**Note:** You do not need an attorney merely because your child is testifying in a criminal case regarding abduction or sexual exploitation. You may inquire whether or not your child will be appointed a guardian ad litem or CASA to assist in the court process. Your child may also receive assistance from a victim-witness advocate through the prosecutor's office. You may want to consult an attorney, however, if you have questions the prosecutor or these other professionals are unable to answer.

## What to Look For in an Attorney

Missing-child cases and cases of child sexual exploitation may have complex legal issues. Parents and guardians should consider the items noted below when hiring an attorney.

- Legal advice should come from an attorney only.

- Your attorney should be licensed to practice in the jurisdiction where the case arose and/or where any trial is likely to occur. Only a lawyer licensed in that jurisdiction will know the applicable laws in order to competently advise and represent you.
- If your child has been abducted by a non-custodial parent or guardian, your attorney should be familiar with family/domestic-relations law. You may also want an attorney experienced with the civil and criminal laws applicable to parental kidnapping such as the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction and Enforcement Act (UCCJEA); Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction Act (UCCJA); Parental Kidnapping Prevention Act (PKPA); Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, if another country is involved; and child-abduction lawsuits.
- If your child has been sexually exploited, your attorney should be familiar with child-abuse and neglect investigations, the laws about custody and visitation, and new procedures that may be used in trials when a child is a witness. If a parent or guardian has been involved in the exploitation, there may be issues surrounding child custody and visitation.
- Your attorney should be experienced in conducting trials, especially trials in criminal and family court. For example cases regarding child sexual exploitation may require complex pretrial and trial procedures.
- Your attorney should be comfortable advocating for you outside of the courtroom if necessary. For example an attorney may assist by encouraging law-enforcement or other government involvement in your case.

- Your attorney should be honest with you about the case. He or she should vigorously represent your interests. Moreover, your attorney should treat your child and you with courtesy and respect.

## Where to Find an Attorney

The agencies and organizations noted below may be able to help you find an attorney. If you cannot afford a private lawyer or otherwise qualify as being eligible for free or reduced-fee services check with the agencies and organizations noted below about whether they may help with your case or refer you to someone who may be able to help.

- Nonprofit-service providers serving families of missing and sexually exploited children
- Legal-aid office
- Organizations providing legal services to those with physical disabilities or illness, senior citizens, or migrants/refugees
- Lawyer-referral services of the local or state/jurisdiction bar association
- Employer-based legal representation from unions, military, or prepaid legal insurance
- Court Clerk's office
- Legal directories
- Student legal services departments for those enrolled in college or university
- Law-school clinics

## Working With Your Attorney

After you have identified one or more possible attorneys, call for an initial consultation. This is usually not expensive and sometimes free. Describe your situation openly, completely, and honestly. An attorney is not allowed to reveal what you say to him or her during your discussions, even if you later choose a different attorney to represent you. You should provide all the facts, including any documents, orders, or other paperwork related to your case, so your attorney is able to properly advise and represent you. Ask

about your attorney's experience and training and, if you are not satisfied with the answers, discuss them further or seek another attorney.

Trust your feelings, and choose an attorney with whom you feel comfortable. When you have decided on an attorney, discuss the attorney's fees and court costs, and ask for a written statement explaining the basis for charges. If the attorney quotes an hourly fee instead of a total charge, ask for an estimated total based on past cases. Request a copy of each document and correspondence your attorney prepares regarding your case.

**Note:** If you have a complaint against your attorney, first try to resolve it with a frank and open discussion. Remember every case has a "winner" and a "loser"; you may be disappointed in the outcome of the case even though your attorney represented you competently and vigorously. If you believe your attorney acted unethically, you may make a complaint to the appropriate bar association.

## 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](http://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](http://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](http://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



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At the time this brochure was originally written the National Resource Center on Child Sexual Abuse was an information, training, and technical-assistance center designed for all professionals working in the field of child sexual abuse.

At the time this brochure was originally written the Center for the Study of Trauma was the only university center devoted to the study of abduction and disappearance. The Center's research implemented a systematic approach which recognized problems of abduction and disappearance require analyses from the perspectives of psychology, criminal law, civil law, and sociology.