

Checklist: What You Should Do When Your Child Is First Missing

The first 48 hours following the disappearance of a child are the most critical in terms of finding and returning that child safely home—but they also can be the most troublesome and chaotic. Use this checklist during those first hours to help you do everything you can to increase the chances of recovering your child—but if more than 48 hours have passed since your child disappeared, you should still try to tend to these items as quickly as possible.

FIRST 24 HOURS

Immediately report your child as missing to your local law enforcement agency. Ask investigators to enter your child into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Missing Persons File. There is no waiting period for entry into NCIC.

Request that law enforcement put out a Be On the Look Out (BOLO) bulletin. Ask them about involving the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the search for your child.

Ask your law enforcement agency about the AMBER Alert Plan (America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response). Through AMBER Alert, law enforcement agencies and broadcasters activate an urgent bulletin in the most serious child abduction cases.

Limit access to your home until law enforcement arrives and has collected possible evidence. Do not touch or remove anything from your child's room or from your home. Remember that clothing, sheets, personal items, computers, and even trash may hold clues to the whereabouts of your child.

Ask for the name and telephone number of the law enforcement investigator assigned to your case, and keep this information in a safe and convenient place near the telephone and program it into your cell phone.

Give law enforcement investigators all the facts and circumstances related to the disappearance of your child, including what efforts have already been made to search for your child.

Write a detailed description of the clothing worn by your child and the personal items he or she had at the time of the disappearance. Include in your description any personal identification marks, such as birthmarks, scars, tattoos, or mannerisms, that may help in finding your child. If possible, find a picture of your child that shows these identification marks and give it to law enforcement.

Make a list of friends, acquaintances, and anyone else who might have information or clues about your child's whereabouts. Include telephone numbers and addresses, if possible. Tell your law enforcement investigator about anyone who moved in or out of the neighborhood within the past year, anyone whose interest in or involvement with the family changed in recent months, and anyone who appeared to be overly interested in

your child. Also list your child's Internet interests; favorite sites and games; and Internet friends from MySpace, Facebook, and other social networking sites.

Find recent photographs of your child in both black and white and color. Scan electronically and make copies of these pictures for your law enforcement agency, the media, your state missing children's clearinghouse, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC), and other nonprofit organizations. Chapter 4 (Photo and Flier Distribution) contains suggestions on how to produce and distribute fliers and posters.

Call NCMEC at 800-THE-LOST® (800-843-5678) to ask for help. Also, ask for the telephone numbers of other nonprofit organizations that might be able to help.

Ask your law enforcement agency to organize a search for your child. Ask them about using tracking or trailing dogs (preferably bloodhounds) in the search effort.

Ask your law enforcement agency for help in contacting the media.

Designate one person to answer your telephone. Keep a notebook or pad of paper by the telephone so this person can jot down names, telephone numbers, dates and times of calls, and other information relating to each call.

Keep a notebook or pad of paper with you at all times to write down your thoughts or questions and record important information, such as names, dates, or telephone numbers.

Take good care of yourself and your family because your child needs you to be strong. As hard as it may be, force yourself to get rest, eat nourishing food, and talk to someone about your tumultuous feelings.

THE SECOND 24 HOURS

Talk with your law enforcement investigator about the steps that are being taken to find your child. If your law enforcement investigator does not have a copy of *Missing and Abducted Children: A Law Enforcement Guide to Case Investigation and Program Management*, suggest that he or she call NCMEC at 800-THE-LOST® (800-843-5678) to obtain one. Also, your law enforcement investigator can contact the Crimes Against Children Coordinator in the local FBI Field Office to obtain a copy of the FBI's *Child Abduction Response Plan*.

Expand your list of friends, acquaintances, extended family members, yard workers, delivery persons, and anyone who may have seen your child during or following the abduction.

Look at personal calendars, community events calendars, and newspapers to see if there are any clues as to who was in the vicinity and might be the abductor or a possible witness. Give this information to law enforcement. Save a copy of the local newspaper.

Expect that you will be asked to take a polygraph test, which is standard procedure. Volunteer to take a polygraph right away.

Work with your NCMEC case manager to identify locations where your child's poster could be distributed. When the case is media ready, NCMEC sends posters to the geographic area where the child is believed to be located.

Work with your law enforcement agency to schedule press releases and media events. If necessary, ask someone close to you to serve as your media spokesperson.

Talk to your law enforcement agency about the use of a reward.

Report all extortion attempts to law enforcement.

Have a second telephone line installed with call forwarding. Get caller ID and call waiting. Ask law enforcement to install a phone in your home that can be used to record calls. Get a cell phone or pager so you can be reached when you are away from home.

Take care of yourself. Don't be afraid to ask others to take care of your physical and emotional needs and those of your family. Contact your place of employment to see if coworkers are willing to help.

Make a list of things that volunteers can do for you and your family.

Call your child's doctor and dentist and ask for copies of medical records and x rays. Give them to law enforcement.

Talk to your law enforcement agency about creating a Web site to capture information on leads. Designate a screened and trusted volunteer to manage the Web site.

GATHERING EVIDENCE IN THE FIRST 48 HOURS

One of the most critical aspects in the search for a missing child is the gathering of evidence that may hold clues about a child's disappearance or whereabouts. The mishandling of evidence can adversely affect an investigation. Similarly, the collection and preservation of evidence are key to finding a missing child. Parents play a vital role in finding a missing child by providing critical information to law enforcement, by protecting evidence in and around the home, and by gathering information about persons or situations that might hold clues. The following are some tips on what you should do to help law enforcement conduct a thorough and complete investigation.

Secure your child's room. Even though your child may have disappeared from outside the home, your child's room should be searched thoroughly by law enforcement for clues and evidence. Don't clean the child's room, wash your child's clothes, or pick up your house. Don't allow well-meaning family members or friends to disturb anything. Even a trash bin or a computer may contain clues that lead to the recovery of the child.

Do not touch or remove anything from your child's room or from your home that might have your child's fingerprints, DNA, or scent on it. This includes your child's hairbrush, bed linens, worn clothing, and pencil with bite marks, diary, or address book. With a good set of fingerprints or a sample of DNA from hair, law enforcement may be able to tell whether your child has been in a particular car or house. With good scent material, tracking dogs may be able to find your child.

Do not allow anyone else to sleep in your child's bed, play with his or her toys or computer, or use his or her bedroom for any purpose. Law enforcement dispatch should advise you not to disturb any part of the house until a thorough search of the scene has been conducted. Investigators should let you know when their search is complete.

Be prepared to give investigators all the facts and circumstances related to the disappearance of your child. This includes knowing where your child was last seen, where your child normally went to play, what your child was wearing, and what personal possessions your child had with him or her.

Describe in detail the clothing your child was wearing and any personal items in the child's possession at the time of the disappearance. Specify color, brand, and size. If possible, have someone obtain replicas of clothing, hats, purses, backpacks, or other items your child had or wore at the time of the disappearance. Give these articles to law enforcement for them to release to the media and to show to searchers. Make sure you mark these items as duplicates or replicas.

Make a list of personal identification marks and specific personality traits. Describe birthmarks, scars, tattoos, missing teeth, eyeglasses, contacts, speech patterns, and behavioral traits. If possible, find photographs that show these unique features. If you have fingerprints of your child or a DNA blood sample, also give these to law enforcement.

Gather together personal items, such as baby teeth, old baseball caps, or old toothbrushes. These items may contain hair or blood samples that may be useful as DNA evidence. Also look for pencils or toys that contain impressions of your child's teeth.

Think about your child's behavior and routine. Be prepared to discuss where your child played or hung out, what was the usual route taken to and from school, and what other paths of travel might have been taken. Be specific about what your child did for recreation, including playing outdoors, surfing the Internet, video games, sports, and other activities. Ask your child's teacher about new friends or changes in behavior.

Try to remember any changes in your child's routine or any new experiences. Look at personal and family calendars to see if they contain clues as to your child's whereabouts or the identity of the abductor. For example, during the past year, did your child join a soccer team, change teams, or get a new coach? Did your child start playing or hanging out in a different area? Did your child keep a diary that might hold clues?

Try to remember if your child mentioned any new friends, including those on Internet social networking sites. Talk with your child's friends and teachers to see if they know of any new friends or other contacts your child recently made.

Find recent photographs of your child in both color and black and white, then have someone make multiple copies of the photographs and keep the originals in a safe place. Check your cameras for undeveloped film because the most recent photos of your child may be found there. Ask family members and friends to do the same. Give law enforcement multiple photos showing different poses. Steer away from formal or posed photos that do not look like your child. Being careful not to damage the photo, mark the back of each picture with your child's name, address, date of birth, and age when the picture was taken.

Find videotapes or movies of your child and make copies. Also ask family members and friends if they have videotapes or movies of your child, perhaps at birthday parties, soccer games, and so forth. Give law enforcement copies that show your child's expressions and mannerisms.

Make a list of family members, friends, acquaintances, coaches, teachers, and other school staff. Write down as many telephone numbers and addresses as you can. Offer information for prior in-laws and relatives as well. Include on your list anyone you feel might have something against you or your family or anyone who may have a special interest in your child.

Make a list of everyone who routinely comes to your home. Your list should include postal workers, meter readers, garbage collectors, repair persons, salespeople, pizza delivery persons, and so forth.

Make a list of new, different, or unusual people or circumstances in and around your home or school within the past year. Think about if you or any of your neighbors had any home remodeling or house repairs done within the past year. Were any houses listed for sale in your neighborhood in the past year? Has there been any road construction or building in the area? Have any traveling carnivals passed through the area?

Ask your child's doctor and dentist for copies of the child's medical and dental records and X rays. Give copies of all medical and dental records to law enforcement for use in the investigation.

The Role of Private Investigators in the Long-Term Search

If the immediate search is not successful, you may be tempted to try almost anything. Some parents turn to private investigators to aid in the search. Consider hiring a private investigator *only* if you are convinced that he or she can do something better or different than what is being done by law enforcement. Be certain that you are not simply wasting

money that could be spent more productively in another way. If you decide to use a private investigator, the following tips can help:

Always ask for and check references to find out if the investigator is legitimate.

Be wary of people who say they can bring your child back immediately for a specific sum of money. If you run into this situation, report it to law enforcement.

Make sure you are paying a reasonable rate. Insist that the investigator itemize expenses.

Make sure the investigator has experience working with law enforcement. Law enforcement must be notified immediately of any leads you receive from a private investigator.

Inform your assigned law enforcement investigator about your decision to hire a private investigator. In most instances, this individual will need to talk to law enforcement before becoming involved in the case. **(US Department of Justice)**

Citations:

(US Department of Justice)-

"When Your Child Is Missing." *National Center For Missing and Exploited Children*. US Department of Justice, n.d. Web. 19 Jan. 2013.