A child is missing... What should you do?
A child is missing...

When a child goes missing it is always devastating for the family. A child is considered missing when the parents or guardians do not know the child's whereabouts. The age of the child and the length of time the child's location are unknown can correspond to the level of concern caused. Cause for concern may arise in relation to a teenager only when the child does not come home at night, while parents begin to panic almost immediately when a small child is out of sight even for a few minutes.

Of course, technology has gradually improved the situation and even elementary school-age children can have mobile phones enabling them to stay connected. However, new threats have appeared due in part to digital progress, leaving some parents unequipped to handle these new risks. The number of reports of missing children continues to be high. Though it is likely that the number of missing children is actually higher as some cases of missing children are never reported.

For instance, in the U.S., according to the FBI's National Crime Information Center (NCIC), hundreds of thousands of reports of missing children are received each year. In Russia, only tens of thousands of reports are received by law enforcement. Cultural and ethical differences, and the availability of information can directly impact the situation of missing children.

Basic recommendations for what to do in case a child goes missing, and tips to help prevent children from going missing, are useful to any parent – even those who do not believe that their child could ever be affected.
How can a child go missing?

A child can go missing in a variety of ways – there is no universal scenario. This is especially true when considering that the term “missing” also includes “abductions” and “runaways”.

Very small children are usually under the supervision of parents, grandparents, relatives, caregivers, or teachers. However, children cannot be supervised 100% of the time and caregivers can sometimes lose sight of the child. In reality, several seconds are enough for a small child to escape from sight. This is true not only outdoors, but even at home. Toddlers may be able to open the door and wander off to explore the world outside unless the locks are placed up high so very young children cannot reach them.
One challenge is that toddlers move quickly and have very little information about the world around them.

While some children know their home addresses, the challenge is that young children can encounter a multitude of dangerous situations every minute they are unsupervised. Children are generally unaware of danger and may not be cautious. Small children do not yet have the necessary orientation skills to find their way home, they do not know what to expect from things they may encounter outside, and they have not developed the survival skills needed to handle different situations. The inability to contact parents or guardians by mobile phone or some other device is just a small part of the problem.

For a very young unsupervised child, danger can be anywhere. They could fall from a window, be hit by a car, or wander off into a body of water.

An unaccompanied child often immediately attracts attention. It is ideal if the child quickly meets a person who is willing to help the child get home.

In a daycare or kindergarten setting, there may be cases when only one adult is left supervising a group of small children. And with many children constantly running and moving it can be difficult for the caregiver or teacher to keep track of them. Preschool age children may even try to get out of an enclosed play area or hide on the playground.
It is important for all parents to understand that the belief that "it will never happen to my child" is far from reality.

Every parent, even the most responsible, should take measures to prevent his or her child from going missing.

The first measure that should be taken to prevent a toddler or preschool age child from going missing is to help people easily identify the child. Everyday clothes should have tags with the information needed to help identify the child and locate the parents or caregivers. In general, this should include the child's first and last name, and contact information including several phone numbers. It is recommended to include mobile numbers for both parents, even if they are separated or divorced, as well as an alternate contact, such as a landline telephone number or email address.

The contact information should not be immediately visible to the public, rather it should be included on tags inside of the clothing. However, if the clothing will be sold or donated after the child has outgrown them, the tags can be made at home and sewn into the clothes for easy removal later.

Second, if the child can already talk it is important to teach the child their home address. Using a fun game or other playful method can help the child remember. It is important to explain to the child not to share their address with just anyone, but if they are lost to share the information with a trusted adult.

Third, some precautions should be taken in the child's home. For instance, the child should not be able to open the windows and doors without the help of an adult. Locks should be placed up high so the child cannot reach them.
Fourth, it is crucial to keep current photos or digital images of your child on hand. These images should be updated as the child grows and changes. Digital images can be quickly shared with law enforcement if a child goes missing and missing posters can be made available almost immediately to assist with the search efforts. The more recent the photo, the greater the chances that someone will recognize the missing child.

Some parents may even choose to put a small mobile device in the child’s pocket so that the mobile signal can be used to help locate the child, even if the child is too small to call the parents. While it may seem like a good idea, do not overestimate the effectiveness of this solution as it is quite difficult to place the mobile device, even a small one, in the child’s clothing in a way that will not bother or distract the child. In addition, it can take law enforcement quite a long time to obtain the positioning data from the mobile provider. The delay in receiving this information could cause the loss of precious time that could be better used searching for the child.

A mobile phone is a practical communication tool for school-age children. For very young children, a small mobile phone, rather than a smartphone, may be a better option. A small mobile phone is generally less expensive than a smartphone, the batteries have longer lives, there are no apps that can drain the battery and use the phone's memory, and low-tech devices are less likely to be stolen. A small phone can be kept in the child's pocket without disturbing regular daily activities.
All emergency telephone numbers should be entered into the contact list before giving it to the child. These numbers should include parents, relatives, and friends living in the area.

It is not necessary for the child to memorize all of the numbers so long as the child knows how to make a call to each of the numbers in the directory. It should be possible to program “favorite” numbers into the phone so that the number can be dialed by pushing just one number (i.e., dial 1 for Mom, dial 2 for Dad). The parent should regularly check the battery level on the child’s phone and charge it as necessary. Smartphones will be more useful later when the child is older and able to fully understand how to use the apps and other functions such as GPS and online maps.

What should you do if your child goes missing?

Many missing child cases refer to situations when a child was not accompanied by parents or another adult. However, there are also cases in which the child is with an adult, the adult has looked away briefly, and the child has disappeared. This happens more frequently with small children.
In our busy lives, parents are often multi-tasking and may not always pay complete attention to their child.

No matter how busy the parent might be, it is important that if the parent goes out with the child that 100% of the parent’s attention is on the child. If you plan to go shopping or visit with a friend, if possible, consider leaving the child with someone you trust. The child's safety is the most important, and everything else is secondary. The only exception may be if the parent and child are alone in the car and the child needs attention – the parent should pull over and stop the vehicle and only then attend to the child.

When a preschool-age child goes for a walk with an adult, the adult should always stay close to the child, even on the playground, so that the child is always visible, both for physical safety and to prevent the child from going missing. A child should only leave the playground with a trusted adult – it is safer for both the adult and the child.

What if the adult is distracted even for only a short time and the child disappeared from sight? What should they do?

If the child is a toddler, they could not have gotten far. A preschool-age child may have gotten further away because they are already more independent. So, before calling 911, first look carefully around the area where you last saw the child in case they are in a hidden spot (like inside of tube slides on the playground).
Next, search in concentric circles, covering more and more territory from the place where the child was last seen. Carefully check all basins, ponds, rivers (all places with water), as well as any possible hiding places. Do not be afraid to ask people in the area if they have seen the child.

Your next steps depend on the age of the child and the specific circumstances. If the child is a toddler or preshooler or if you are outside of the city (at the beach, in the woods camping, etc.), start an active search by calling people nearby for help and immediately contact the police. A child who is school-age may consider themselves grown-up enough to try to reach home on their own (especially if the child is not far from home), so it would be wise to inform family members at home. If the child went missing in a public place (mall, airport, railway station), it is useful to make an announcement via public broadcast (intercom/loudspeaker) and to contact security, park police, or local law enforcement.

What should you do if there are many children with an adult and just one has gone missing? It is most important that you do not end up in a situation of having to search for multiple children. So, when you start your search, the other children should either be with you or with another trusted adult. Do not lock children in the car while searching as they can be dangerous for the child, particularly in the summer and winter.

What if a child goes looking for an adventure and wanders from home? To avoid this, parents should ensure that door locks are inaccessible to the child until the child is old enough to leave home without a parent.
Even a small child, if determined enough, can find a way to reach the lock on a door and open it. Some parents think that their locks are high enough or too complicated for the child to figure out, but children are clever and even a very young child may be able to find a way to unlock and open a door.

It may be helpful to install an additional lock very high so that only an adult can reach it. The same should be done on all of the home's doors including balcony doors.

If the child disappears while playing outside alone, first try to reach the child by mobile phone. There may be an issue if the child's phone is turned off or if the battery is dead. It is recommended that parents and inform their children that law enforcement will be notified that the child is missing if the child has not reported in or returned home after a certain length of time. This is particularly helpful for teenagers with a set curfew.

**Supporting the Search**

Law enforcement (police, sheriff, etc.) plays the primary role in the first stage of any missing child search operation.
The first missing child report should always be made to the police.

Law enforcement has all three key components for successfully conducting missing person searches: personnel, communications, and legal authority. Civil volunteer groups, and even retired law enforcement officers, cannot begin a ground search immediately, they may not have the needed number of trained people to assist, and the time they can volunteer may be limited. If the incident happened in a remote area, the search team must travel to the location and will require resources. If emergency rescue staff and specialized equipment (like scuba gear) are needed, law enforcement is better equipped to get the necessary resources more quickly.

If a report of a missing child is made by telephone, it is important to follow up with a visit to the nearest police station to provide law enforcement with as much information as possible about the missing child.

Law enforcement specialists are interested in any information that can possibly lead them to the missing child. Photos or videos of the missing child can very helpful. Today, police have powerful digital equipment so they can easily copy a photo of a missing child and disseminate an alert. It is important to provide law enforcement with the child's first and last name, age, physical characteristics, clothing, and home address. In addition, the following information might be helpful:

- Any information about the child’s intentions to visit someone or to go somewhere;
- Information about close friends;
- Information about how the parents and child communicated before the child disappeared;
Description of the child's behavior generally (e.g., the child is adventurous);
A list of the child's communication devices (mobile phone, tablet, computer); and
Information about whether the child has any money.

All of the above things will help police and volunteers to better set up the search operation, taking into account the specifics of the particular child, and to properly prioritize search efforts.

The second report about a missing child should be made to the center for missing children in the city/country where the child went missing.

There are national centers for missing and exploited children in some countries that coordinate with law enforcement on the issues of child abduction and missing children.

A national center may be an NGO or a federal entity. These centers often have staff and volunteers that take reports of missing children, provide support to law enforcement handling the case, assist with search efforts, and provide support and services to the child's family. A national center may run a telephone hotline or other reporting mechanism for the public to report that a child has gone missing and tips about the possible sighting of the child (e.g., 1-800-THE-LOST). These organizations generally can be reached online or by telephone and most have their own websites (e.g., http://www.missingkids.com) and a presence in social media networks.

The staff and volunteers should be given the same information as law enforcement, including a photo of the missing child and should be informed that a missing child report has been filed with law enforcement as NGOs generally cannot begin work on a case unless law enforcement has first been notified. The activities of these centers supplement the efforts of law enforcement and often bring resources to which law enforcement may not otherwise have access.
National centers traditionally have well-established mechanisms for the rapid dissemination of information about missing children. They can quickly create and disseminate posters with missing child information and contact information to report if the child is seen. These posters can be widely distributed by displaying them at partner organizations and businesses, shared with various media outlets, and posted online through social media networks and websites.

*A missing child poster usually has a photo of the child, important information about the child, and contact information to report if the child has been seen.*

The national centers often have specially trained search teams that may include retired law enforcement officers. These search teams participate in the actual field search, provide needed resources, and help coordinate search efforts in the area of the child’s disappearance. These teams may also include former rescue team specialists, medical specialists, and others.

These teams are often well-equipped or have access to special equipment and tools through their partners.

National centers may also have trained individuals on staff who can create age-progressed images of children who may have been missing for some time. Age-progressed images are helpful for law enforcement as children grow and their appearance changes the longer they are missing. These images provide the most accurate representation of the child as they may currently look.
Should family members take part in the search along with police and volunteers? There is no universal answer to this question.

An independent search can be started by the family of the missing child or family members can join a volunteer group assisting with the search. It is important to abide by the rules of the search group and to trust their experience. At the same time, at least one adult should stay at home in case the child finds their way back home or is brought there by someone.

What else can be done by the parent or adult family member?

Family members can share information online by posting alerts in the social network communities visited by the child. They can also post on community message boards, social media pages, and websites.

It is important to inform the child’s friends and friends of the family that the child is missing as they may have seen the missing child, or the child may contact them directly. Information can also be disseminated in neighborhoods, parks, and other locations that the child regularly visits.
The child has been recovered...

Statistics show that most missing children are recovered within 24 hours after a missing child report is made. Sometimes – especially with teenagers and in runaway cases – the search may take several days or more.
While preschool and elementary school-age children may get lost accidentally, an older child may run away intentionally.

If the child ran away intentionally, it is important to discuss the reasons with the child, though not immediately after recovery, and to explain the dangers of running. In the case of a runaway, if the child returns on their own, the child may not go first to a parent for fear of punishment or a negative reaction, but may instead go to a close relative or friend.

It is more complicated if the parents are separated or divorced and the child has left home to go see the other parent and gets lost along the way. In this case, the child’s intention is different. If there is a conflict in the family or between the child’s parents, the incident should not be used as the reason to limit the child’s communication with the other parent. This kind of restriction will not serve to prevent similar incidents in the future. The best solution is to show the child how to get to the other parent’s home, pointing out landmarks and other recognizable things along the way, or to improve how dropping off and picking up the child from one parent to the other is handled.
To prevent future incidences of a child running away, a detailed analysis of the reasons that led to the child running away may be needed.

It is important for parents to talk to their teenage children about what to do if they are lost. This may include learning about some useful apps and functions on a mobile device, discussing how to behave in certain situations, and explaining how to read landmarks and their surroundings in order to find their way home.

An adventurous teen can make it much further from home than a younger child.

In some cases, teens simply do not inform their parents of their whereabouts. To address this kind of repeat behavior, a specially-trained youth psychologist may be helpful. Physiological growth does not equal an increase in life experience, and in an emergency a teen may not know what to do. Many educators and psychologists rightfully note that the key factor in helping to avoid disappearances of pre-teen and teenage children is the atmosphere of trust between the child and close relatives, especially the parents. Trust is most important; and a parent-child relationship that allows for the open discussion of problems with trust and understanding can help to avoid situations in a young person's life that may cause them to run away from home.
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