

What To Do When Your Child is Missing or Runs Away

Check List of The Best Practices That Help In
The Recovery of Missing Children

Edited from material collected by the Justice Department

Recovery Plan Checklist for When a Child Goes Missing

The FIRST 48 Hours

Any missing child (excluding abducted children) is considered a run away for the first 48 after they go missing. **The police and media will not help in the search effort until 48 after the child's disappearance.** This is because runaway children often return home within a few days of leaving.

The Search and Law Enforcement

- **Expect that you will be asked to take a polygraph test**, which is standard procedure. Volunteer to take a polygraph right away.
- **Keep a spiral notebook with you to record your thoughts** and review it periodically. You never know when you might remember an important detail or clue. If you come up with new information make sure you give it to law enforcement as soon as possible.
- **Find out what Crime Stoppers** (503-823-4357) **can do** to help with the search. Often they will offer a reward for information leading to the resolving of a case. Inquire about this also.

Media

- **Prepare a media package.** Make copies and keep a copy for yourself.
 - Description of child and clothing
 - Description of place last seen
 - Current black/white, color and digital photos
 - Phone number for people to call with information – lead police officer
 - Details of reward (if being offered)
 - Other descriptions: suspicious vehicles, activity, people at time of disappearance
 - Information on websites you are using to aide in finding child
 - The statement you want to give regarding your missing child
- **Keep a list of all media contacts**, including their names, telephone and fax numbers, email, especially the assignment editors. Develop a rapport.

- **Schedule press conferences** and interviews around media deadlines. Many parents have found 10am and 3pm to be good times.
- **Assign a spokesperson** if you need to have someone speak to the media for you. However, it is best to give interviews yourself as much as possible. The spokesperson can also stand beside you as a support.
- **Review** all media stories, comments and tapes to see if new information or tips are being revealed.

The First 72 Hours

The Search and Law Enforcement

- **Talk regularly with your law enforcement contact.** Choose a specific time of day to call your primary contact. Have one person designated for calling and speaking with your primary law enforcement officer. **Remember law enforcement may not be able to share all information so the case is not jeopardized.**
- **Satisfy yourself that law enforcement is handling your child's case properly.** All agencies involved in the case should be working with one another in finding your missing child. **If the primary contact can't answer your questions, ask who can.** Ask to see your child's case file periodically.
- **You can solicit help** from school board members; city commissioners; your state Governor; senators and representatives; members of the U.S. Congress. You can also seek out those individuals who can get your child's poster displayed in public places such as stores, buses, subways, parks, tollbooths, post offices, etc. Make sure that the public is kept informed, but **be sure to consult with your law enforcement contact about information to share so that the investigation is not compromised.**

Media

- **Keep up public interest** in the disappearance: schedule press conferences, give story new slant, organize a vigil, announce a reward, use rapport with a reporter/editor to keep story in spotlight, etc. Coordinate these efforts with law enforcement. **Consider granting exclusive interviews.**
- **Continue working with Assignment Editors.** If you plan an event email or fax the information in a news release to the assignment editor.

- **Give a wish list** to the media if you need volunteers, training, printing, equipment, etc.
- **Contact a Media Expert.** If possible obtain the help of a media expert to help navigate the media.

If your child is returned don't jeopardize identification of the perpetrator by allowing your child to review tapes of the suspect.

Photo and Flyer Distribution

- **Get your child's posters put up in high traffic areas across the country.** You can do this by asking local companies and organizations. Truck lines can post flyers on the back of their trucks. You personally asking these companies may make it a little hard for them to say no.
- **Prepare a press kit for distribution.** Make sure that you ask a local public relations firm or person with writing skills to help you prepare the kit. Make sure you use a secure email and street address. Include local and regional radio stations in the distribution.
- **Research and look for** events where volunteers can distribute flyers in your community, state or region such as county fairs, farmers markets, sports contests, festivals and concerts.
- **Make your own personal photo cards** to insert into mailings and get permission from the proper agency to have them inserted in newspapers, local utility bills and bank statements.
- **Ask** national groups such as law enforcement, Lions Club, Rotary Club, etc. to help distribute your child's photo or flyer.
- **Ask franchise businesses** such as fast food or gas stations to distribute posters along with their normal supplies. Most people who abduct children frequent liquor stores and adult bookstores more than banks, post offices and schools. **Put reward posters up where people with information will see them.**
- **Consider** using public gimmicks such as printing your child's photo on buttons, T-shirts, bumper stickers, etc.

Rewards and Donations

Rewards

- **Get advice** from professionals / people who have first hand experience managing a reward fund (attorney, your primary law enforcement contact, your banker, and other parents of missing children). We recommend a bank account be set up.
- **Ask an attorney** for pro bono legal assistance to help you in the legal wording of your reward offer.
- **Keep your law enforcement contact informed** of any decision you make regarding a reward. Ask law enforcement if there are any special reward funds that already exist (locally, state, FBI, Crime Stoppers, etc.).
- **Outline your reward:**
 - Decide what you want the reward to accomplish and then make sure that this purpose is clearly described.
 - Set a time limit for the reward (keep short at onset; you can always extend it later).
 - Establish the amount of the reward (Don't offer more money than you can raise. Do not use your personal funds).

Donations

- **Be aware** that pledges are not as reliable as donations.
- **Use volunteer groups** to solicit funds, manage donations.
- **Keep a list** of donors and their contact information, receipts and records of donations.
- **Set up separate bank accounts** for each type of fund: Reward, family support, search efforts.
- **Designate trusted individuals** outside the family to have signature authority over donation accounts.
- **Designate one person** to answer all questions from the public concerning the funds / donations / spending.
- **Establish written procedures** detailing how the money is to be dispensed if it cannot be used for a reward.

Maintaining Emotional and Physical Strength and Focus

- **Maintain your daily routine. Be diligent about eating, sleeping and exercise.** Keeping yourself strong to help in the search for your child requires that you attend to your own physical and emotional needs.
- **Stay away from alcohol, drugs and harmful medications.** These can prevent you from being an effective member of the search team and can even induce depression. **If you have trouble sleeping at night or coping during the day ask your physician for help.**
- **Find productive ways to release your emotions and relieve stress.** These are things like keeping a journal, talking with a friend, taking a walk, exercising etc. Take time to find a quiet place to be alone and regroup but **don't isolate yourself.**
- **Lean on your faith.** Many parents find great comfort in their faith. Turning to religion can provide much needed support in this time of crisis. Reach out to spiritual leaders in your sphere of life. This can bring you peace.
- **Don't blame yourself** for your child's disappearance and do not allow yourself to shoulder the blame of others who do not understand the situation. Don't continually "What If?" in hindsight. This will drain you and make you less effective in the fight to get your child back.
- **Stay united with your spouse and family** in your fight to find your child. Don't allow the stress of the investigation drive a wedge into your family life.
- **Talk to your family.** Don't allow the absence of your child to become a taboo subject. Encourage open discussion of feelings in a safe, caring, nonjudgmental environment during family meetings.
- **Focus on the needs of your children still at home.** Establish different routines for daily life. Find a safe place away from your home where your other children can feel free to play and express themselves, away from the spotlight of the search and the media. **Don't be surprised if their behavior changes drastically in this difficult time and seek counseling if needed.**
- **Allow your other children to participate in the search along with an adult.** They can distribute posters, flyers or balloons. Remember the child's maturity, emotional and security issues need to be addressed when deciding if this is appropriate
- **Seek professional counseling for yourself and children to help you cope.** Don't try to provide emotional support to everyone in your family. Look for support from your church, friends, family and local community resources. **You do not need to go through this crisis alone!**

Preparing for the Long Term

- **Help your other children return to a sense of normalcy by going back to school.** Listen carefully to them before they go to cover any questions or fears and request that the school bring counselors into the classroom to discuss the situation with the children.
- **Don't feel guilty if you need to return to work.** Remember that you are working to provide a home for your child to return to.
- **Include extended family members to serve in the search effort.** They can function as spokesperson for the family, coordinator of volunteers, etc. They can also help with posters and flyers, request assistance from missing children's organizations, etc.
- **Bring people up to date on the progress of the search.** Put a daily or periodic report on your home answering machine or voicemail greeting, or website.
- **Never stop looking.** Dedicate part of each day to your missing child by making phone calls, writing letters, contacting law enforcement, or doing whatever you think will help in finding your missing child.