Stranger Abductions — Nothing is more important than keeping our children safe. Statistics show that the number of children abducted by a stranger for sexual purposes or ransom is fewer than one hundred a year. Is this too many? Yes. I do not mean to diminish in any way the loss of these children or the pain they and their parents went through while the child was missing or after they were located. But it is not the epidemic some would have you believe. Are these the more serious cases? Yes. According to the FBI, forty percent of these children will be found deceased.

On July 1, 2005, according to National Census statistics, there were 73,469,984 children under the age of eighteen living in the United States. That means one in 734,998 children will be abducted by a stranger. However, there are over 350,000 children abducted by a parent or family member. Using the same statistics, one in every 2,099 children will be taken by a parent or family member.

Parental Abduction — This is one of the hardest things to teach children; in fact, it is near impossible. You can’t say to a child, “Now watch out, your Dad/Mom may try to take you away from me.” (Well, you can’t do this if you care about your child’s mental well-being.)

Parental abduction is one of the sad consequences of a broken marriage. It further deteriorates when one of the parents uses the child to get back at the other. Many times this results in a child being abducted by one of the parents, denying the other parent access to their child. This is a form of child abuse and is only a selfish act by the parent.

We are not talking about a person fleeing an abusive relationship or when the child is being abused. If this is the case, the authorities should be notified immediately. If you take a child from the other parent and you or the child are being abused, report it and get it on record early. This may save you a lot of grief later on.

Runaways — Over 400,000 children run away from home each year. This means that one out of every 1,836 children will be reported as a missing runaway. To a parent who has a child who runs away, it can be devastating.

This is an area where a lot more work needs to be done. Better training must be given to law enforcement. Many of these children end up on the street where predators are waiting to use them for their own selfish purposes.

Prevention — Use good common sense when you are out in public with your child. Never let your child play in the toy section while you shop. Always be aware of where your child is; a child can get away from you in a flash. Don’t assume your child will stay put. The younger they are, the more they are lured away by distractions.

To help keep your child safe, remember two things:

First, never let your child out of your sight. If they are “runners,” you may have to get creative. I once saw a mom at the Atlanta airport with three young children and a baby. She had all three young ones on leashes and carried the baby. These children were NOT going to get away from her. This was a responsible parent.

One more thing: don’t worry about what others may think or say of your creativity. These are your children and they are counting on you to make sure no harm comes to them.

Secondly, you need to talk to your children about how to stay safe. You must remember that the younger the child, the more time you need to go over the rules. The concept of a stranger may be completely foreign to them. Many times the child will tell you what they think you want to hear.

A child does not have to understand why you do not want them to talk to strangers, or why they are not to help someone look for a puppy. They only need to know that Mom or Dad said not to do this. They need to respond instinctively, without hesitation. My suggestion is make a game out of it. “What would you do if someone asked you to help look for their puppy?” Let them answer, go over and over it, until they react instantly if the situation presents itself. Be careful not to scare the child by telling them what will happen to them if they are taken.

What Can I Do? — One of the most valuable tools you can have is a clear, close-up photo of your child looking directly into the camera. This should be updated every 6 months. Information such as height, weight, hair and eye color should be written on the back of the photo. Have this documentation readily available in case of an emergency.

The first one or two hours are crucial when a child is missing. Act immediately — remember there are no waiting periods for runaways, stranger or family abductions! For additional information, including valuable checklists for keeping kids safe and what to do if your child is missing, please contact:

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