

U.S. Department of Justice

Office of Justice Programs

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention



# When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide

5th Edition | 2023

NCJ 305831

OJJDP

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This document was prepared by Fox Valley Technical College under cooperative agreement 2020–MC–FX–K003 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. This edition is updated from the fourth printing.

The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of OJJDP or the U.S. Department of Justice.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance; the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the National Institute of Justice; the Office for Victims of Crime; and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking.

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## A letter from the families

Dear Friend,

*We know how difficult this will be for you and your family, and how it can become overwhelming very quickly. We have walked in your shoes in our search for our own missing children. There is a lot of information in this Guide. If you need to, ask others to help you get through it. Don't feel like you are in this alone. Many people and resources are available to help you. Use this document as a tool to get what you need when you need it.*

*In 1998, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention brought together parents of missing children to talk about our personal and collective experiences. For those of us who attended that meeting, it was the first time we met parents facing similar situations, experiencing the same anguish, and wading through the vast maze and confusion of figuring out how to find our missing children.*

*At that time, information and knowledge on how we could work with law enforcement, the media, and volunteers was nonexistent. The same was true for how to manage donations, rewards, and even our lives. Fax machines and pagers were the tools used for the fastest communication.*

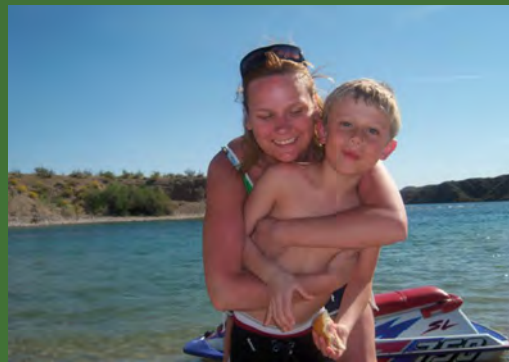
*But as we talked and shared our stories, we realized we had much we could offer to help others. Thus, we helped create When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide. The first of its kind, it quickly became the go-to source for people who, like us, "speak the language of missing" – not only in this country, but around the world. And for that we are proud. But a lot has changed since 1998 when the first edition of this Guide was published – much of it for the betterment of our cause.*

*Technology now allows us to reach greater numbers of people in targeted areas via social media and the wireless emergency alerts that activate cell phones during AMBER Alerts. More*

*training opportunities are helping law enforcement better understand how to effectively respond to and search for different types of missing children – from those abducted by a noncustodial parent to teens lured into sex trafficking. Additionally, scores of Child Abduction Response Teams are now ready to activate at a moment's notice to search for our missing children, and Internet Crimes Against Children task forces, which also*

**"From the moment our child went missing, time stood still – but went by so fast. Our lives changed dramatically."**

**Elaine Hall**



Elaine Hall with son Dylan Redwine

began in 1998, have become a force in the fight against technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and crimes against children that are perpetrated online.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) has also expanded and increased its offerings. The one that resonates most with us is Team Hope – perhaps because many of us volunteer to help parents of missing children navigate some of the same tumultuous experiences we have endured.

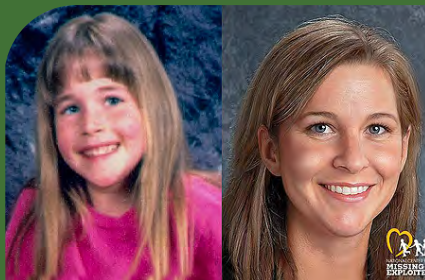
NCMEC can deploy experienced, retired law enforcement professionals and utilize a variety of sophisticated, modern forensic tools to help solve decades-old cold cases. As a result, some criminals have confessed to wrongdoings after many years of eluding justice.

In 2016, a Minnesota man finally admitted to abducting and killing 11-year-old Jacob Wetterling, the son of one of this Guide’s founding advisors, Patty Wetterling. While the news brought the search for her son to a close, it did not end the tireless work that Patty and so many others do to educate the public, law enforcement, and other child protection professionals about endangered missing children.

We recognize that every family is unique, and everyone’s missing child story is different – as are their interactions with law enforcement and volunteers. Our main goal was to update this Guide to ensure it continues to be of value and support to you, whether you are reading it in print, reading it online, or interacting with the array of resources found at [AMBERAdvocate.org/families](https://AMBERAdvocate.org/families).

We have seen so many positive changes to help us search for our missing children. Our hope is that you will soon be safely reunited with your child. In the meantime, know that we understand what you are going through and are with you always – in spirit, and in these pages.

The Parents



“I remember standing in the middle of the chaos and wishing I had a book to tell me what to do.”

Colleen Nick

Colleen Nick’s daughter, Morgan – missing since 1995 – is shown in an age-progression photo produced by NCMEC.

## Acknowledgments

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is grateful to the many individuals who have given their time, talents, and energy to developing this *Guide*. First produced in 1998, the publication has been a valuable resource for parents and families who have experienced a missing child. Since it was first written, many parents who know firsthand the anguish, and hope, involved in finding a missing child have provided important advice to ensure this *Guide* offers indispensable information. We especially want to thank the following parents who were instrumental in this update:

**Yvonne Ambrose**, mother of Desiree

**Elaine Hall**, mother of Dylan

**Noelle Hunter**, mother of Maayimuna, “Muna”

**Jeffery Morehouse**, father of Atomu Imoto, “Mochi”

**Colleen Nick**, mother of Morgan

**Ahmad Rivazfar**, father of Sara

**Nacole Svendgard**, mother of Jessika

**Patty Wetterling**, mother of Jacob

More details about the parents and their children can be found at the end of this *Guide*.

This *Guide* has been a labor of love for these parents of missing children, who are dedicated to giving other parents hope and encouragement even when life is at its darkest point. Their words, courage, and strength are greatly admired.

OJJDP also thanks the many professionals serving with the AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP) and the National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC) of Fox Valley Technical College (FVTC), as well as those from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. The dedicated employees, associates, and volunteers who give their time and effort to finding missing children, preventing child abduction, and supporting families with endangered missing children form the very bedrock of the Department of Justice’s initiatives to protect children.

OJJDP recognizes and appreciates the efforts of the *Family Survival Guide* project team who supported the contributing families through the development of this publication’s fifth edition. They diligently and carefully crafted and edited this document and its related web-based resource content to ensure it provides, both now and in the future, the information families desperately need when they find themselves in the crisis of a missing child.

**Helen Connelly**, Program Administrator (Ret.) and NCJTC-FVTC Associate Employee

**Bonnie Ferenbach**, Program Manager, AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program, NCJTC-FVTC

**Charles Fleeger**, NCJTC-FVTC Associate Employee; AMBER Alert Coordinator, Brazos Valley, Texas

**Stacie Lick**, NCJTC-FVTC Associate Employee; Captain and Child Abduction Response Team Coordinator, Gloucester County Prosecutor’s Office, New Jersey

**Denise Gee Peacock**, Project Coordinator, AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program, NCJTC-FVTC

**Blaine Phillips**, NCJTC-FVTC Associate Employee; Special Agent, Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation

**Janell Rasmussen**, Program Administrator, AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program, NCJTC-FVTC

**This Guide is dedicated to all of the children who are separated from their families.  
Our hope is that you know the search will continue until you are found.**



Family members joined AATTAP's *Family Survival Guide* project team in January 2023 for filming to illuminate information presented in the *Guide*. Top row, from left: Bonnie Ferenbach, Denise Gee Peacock, and Helen Connolly. Middle row, from left: Patty Wetterling, Nacole Svendgard, Yvonne Ambrose, and Janell Rasmussen. Bottom row, from left: Ahmad Rivazfar, Dr. Noelle Hunter, Jeffery Morehouse, and Elaine Hall. Also pictured from the Whitecap Interactive production crew are Nicole Pena and Brian Thurber. Not pictured is family member Colleen Nick, who was unable to attend the filming event.



## Using this resource

When your child is missing, your mind races through so many questions – what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. It is overwhelming. We understand. We have been there. We designed this publication to help you take each necessary step, contact the right people, and know how to move forward.

**Chapters 1 through 5** contain checklists with critical information to help you navigate uncharted territory and work with law enforcement, the media, search and rescue professionals, and the countless volunteers and individuals you may encounter. It also suggests ways to maintain your financial, physical, and emotional well-being.

**Chapter 6** gives you a framework for understanding the different types of missing persons cases and related terminology. This includes terms such as endangered missing, international parental abduction, trafficking, and nonfamily abduction, among others. Use this chapter as a reference, knowing you can always come back to it while using the *Guide*.

**Chapter 7** provides a list of resources you can discuss with your law enforcement team. Use them to reach out for help whenever needed. If ever you have questions, or need information or support, ask your law enforcement investigator to contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at 800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678), and enlist the expertise provided in the chapter.

Finally, you can learn more about each contributing family member in the “About the Parents and Their Children” section that concludes this *Guide*.

THE AMBERADVOCATE

Visit [AMBERAdvocate.org/families](https://AMBERAdvocate.org/families)

Here you will find important resources, videos with advice shared from parents and helping professionals, and evolving information to support families of missing children.





# 1 | Steps to take when your child is missing

Quick action on your part will ensure the quick action of law enforcement. They recognize that the initial investigation phase – the first 48 hours of your child’s disappearance – is a critical time for them to employ every resource necessary to find your child and return them home safely. Follow this checklist for the best results. (For tips on working with law enforcement beyond the initial response, see chapter 2.)

## Checklist: Before law enforcement arrives

### A NOTE ABOUT THESE CHECKLIST ITEMS:

If law enforcement arrives quickly, you may not have time to gather or write down all of these things before they arrive.

Officers will help you recall and gather information when they get there.

This checklist will help you to be actively engaged in the initial response.

- Immediately report your child as missing to your local law enforcement agency.**
  - Do not delay the reporting by doing your own extensive search. Time is critical. Law enforcement can conduct complex searches more rapidly and effectively than you can.
  - There is **no waiting period** before you can report your child missing or overdue. [The National Child Search Act of 1990](#) requires law enforcement agencies to immediately accept reports of missing children and enter them

into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database. Learn more about NCIC in chapter 2.

**Write down a detailed description of your child, including:**

- Height, weight, hair color and length, and eye color.
- Distinctive features – prescription eyeglasses or orthodontic braces; a birthmark, scar, or tattoo/s; unique mannerisms, movements, or speech patterns.
- Clothing you last saw your child wearing, including sizes and brands if you know them.
- Personal items your child likely had at the time of disappearance, such as jewelry, a watch, headphones/earbuds, notebooks/books, backpack/purse, and a cell phone or other devices. Brands or logos help identify these items if you know them.
- Details about the vehicle your child had access to if a vehicle is missing, including the make, model, color, and license/tag number, if you know them. Any notable markings such as rust spots, dents, or bumper stickers can be especially helpful in distinguishing common makes and models of cars.

**“When first talking with law enforcement, there’s so much to take in. Your mind goes blank. Have someone with you who can write things down.”**

**Nacole Svendgard**



Jessika Svendgard, survivor and advocate  
– daughter of Nacole and Tom Svendgard

**Find good-quality digital photographs that show your child as they currently look on a normal day.**

- Avoid school or portrait-type photos if they don’t accurately reflect how your child typically or currently appears (the way they wear their hair, makeup, and clothing).
- The photo selected will be the first (and possibly only) visual image of your child the public sees through media broadcasts, social media posts, and fliers; this is why the selection of a photo is so important.
- Accurate, recent, and realistic photos can help law enforcement and the public recognize your child.

**Limit access to your home and property until law enforcement has completed a thorough search.**

- Do not touch, move, or remove anything from your child’s room.
- Clothing, sheets, grooming items, and trash cans hold clues to the whereabouts of your child through DNA evidence. They also can provide a strong scent for tracking dogs.

- Secure all digital devices your child uses – including computers, laptops, tablets, cell phones, gaming consoles, and external storage equipment (e.g., thumb or flash drives) – until law enforcement can conduct a forensic search of them.**
  - Do not attempt to investigate your child’s technology devices on your own.
  - Provide all items noted above to law enforcement.
  - Be ready to share whatever information you have regarding equipment, website and application logins, passwords, codes, email addresses, and screen names.
  
- Is anything missing – or not missing – that you would expect your child to have taken?** See if anything – or nothing – is absent from your child’s room or your home. Has your child taken personal items (such as clothing, a laptop, medications, or money)? Be aware that finding nothing amiss can be equally as telling as missing items – and can change the focus of the investigation.

## Checklist: When law enforcement arrives

This checklist and the ones that follow will reference a lot of information about the investigative process. Each case is different, and how a missing child investigation is carried out will vary based upon the circumstances of the disappearance. This information is provided to equip you with the knowledge to ask questions, understand what is happening, and request that actions be taken. Every law enforcement agency, particularly smaller ones, may have limited experience with these cases. Retired law enforcement professionals with years of missing child expertise are available from NCMEC’s Team Adam to help. Call 800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678).

- Tell law enforcement all of the facts and circumstances related to your child’s disappearance, including what efforts have been made to find them.**
  - When and where your child was last seen, if known.
  - Any friends your child may be with or may have talked to.
  - Any routes and modes of travel your child may have taken.
  - Your child’s favorite hangouts or comfort areas.
  - Your child’s normal routine and any changes or unusual behaviors or circumstances you’ve noticed.
  - If your child has run away or gone missing before.

### WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT YOUR CHILD IS BEING TAKEN OUT OF THE UNITED STATES

The International Parental Child Abduction (IPCA) resources in chapter 7 include specific details on the immediate actions to take and contact information for the following agencies:

- Federal Bureau of Investigation
- U.S. State Department
- U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Ask your law enforcement officer or NCMEC for help with making these contacts if needed.

**Inform your officer about your child’s medical conditions, or if your child has any health-related issues.**

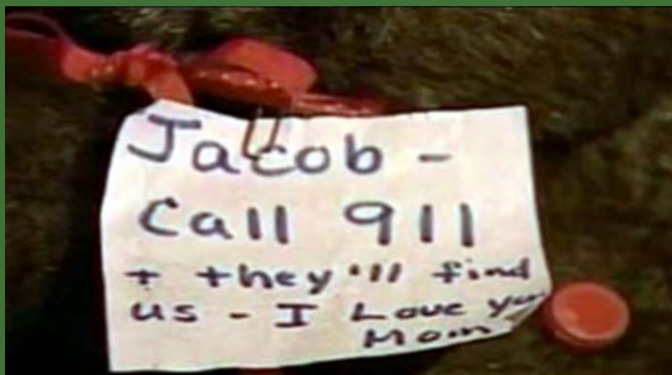
- Does your child rely on medications that they don't have with them, or may not have access to?
- Provide your child's blood type, if known.
- Does your child use any illegal substances or alcohol?
- Does your child have any special needs, such as a hearing or visual disability?
- Does your child have any cognitive challenges, such as autism, attention-deficit disorder, or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder?
- Describe any specific behaviors or movements they make, such as reactions to other people or environmental situations (e.g., loud noises, bright lights, bodies of water, wooded or other areas to which they are drawn).

**Be forthcoming about any problems going on in your home/family.** The more law enforcement understands about the situation at home, at school, and with friends, the better they can steer investigative efforts to find your child.

- Are there any custody issues/court-ordered visitation rules in place? If so, give your officer contact information for the other parent.
- Have you or a family member recently argued with your child?
- Has your child previously been missing? If so, under what circumstances?
- Has your child experienced emotional, physical, or sexual abuse?
- Has Child Protective Services interacted with your family? If so, how recently and under what circumstances?
- Has your child had any prior involvement with the juvenile justice system?

“Although you may feel like you’ve been dropped onto another planet when first working with law enforcement, remember that they don’t know you, or your world. Work hard at letting them know who you are as a family, and what is both unusual and customary in your home. Think of their brusqueness as urgency as they begin their search and learn about you and your child.”

Patty Wetterling



A photo of a small note to Jacob Wetterling from his mother, Patty. It reads “Jacob - Call 911 and they’ll find us. I love you, Mom.”

- Let law enforcement know if you have noticed anything unusual about your child's behavior.**
  - Has there been a noticeable increase in cell phone, texting, computer, or social media usage?
  - Has their mood noticeably changed in recent weeks?
  - Has their normal routine or patterns of activity changed?
  
- Let law enforcement know of any transient activity or changes in your neighborhood.**
  - Has someone recently shown an unusual interest in your child?
  - Have unfamiliar individuals been seen in your neighborhood because of a construction job or public works project?
  - Tell law enforcement about any neighbors who have moved out of town recently or have been arrested.
  
- Provide your officer with contact information for the people who interact most with your child.**
  - Mention any new friends of your child who you don't know much about.
  - Think of similar-age close friends or other acquaintances your child routinely spends time with, either socially or through school, sports, or clubs.
  - Include extended family members your child sees, talks to, emails, or messages.
  - Don't forget neighbors, teachers, coaches, and group/club leaders. For older children, include coworkers, hair stylists, or other service providers with whom your teen regularly interacts.
  
- Officers on scene will work with their communications center to send out a BOLO ("Be on the Lookout") bulletin to other law enforcement personnel to alert them about your missing child.** If you have any questions about how and when law enforcement agencies will be notified, ask your officer.
  
- Any possible crime scene (where your child may have disappeared or have been taken) will be secured and evaluated.**
  - Officers will carefully search your child's room and other areas and secure personal items for DNA and fingerprint evidence, which is critically important for the investigation.
  - This may feel intrusive, but do all you can to allow law enforcement to do this work swiftly and without disruption. If at any point you have questions, it's always okay to ask.
  
- Law enforcement will need to know about all digital devices and bank/credit cards to which your child has access. If your vehicle or the child's vehicle was involved, they will also ask if it has GPS or onboard navigation.**
  - Devices and vehicles with a cellular or GPS signal can be tracked, and account activity can help determine what has been happening online or through apps.

- License plate readers can be used to track vehicles, along with GPS or onboard navigation.
- Bank or credit card activity can be reviewed to pinpoint usage times, locations, and directions of travel.

## Checklist: Before law enforcement leaves

- Confirm your child’s case has been entered in the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database.** If this is not confirmed, or if it seems your officer does not deem it a priority or understand the requirement and process, contact NCMEC at 800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678).
- Ask if your state’s missing child/persons clearinghouse has been notified.** Contact NCMEC for support, if needed. In addition to NCIC entry, your clearinghouse and/or NCMEC can assist with entry of your child’s information into the [National Missing and Unidentified Persons System](#) (NamUs). Learn more about NamUs in chapter 7.
- Ask about initial search and investigative efforts.** Your responding officer will explain the types of searches to you, and you’ll see more on this in the “First 48 Hours” checklist in chapter 2.
- Ask how the public will be notified about your missing child.** An AMBER Alert or Endangered Missing Alert can be used for cases that meet specific criteria. While not all cases will qualify for an AMBER or Endangered Missing Alert, every case is appropriate for public notification using the methods and tools to best assist in the investigation. Learn more about these alerts in chapter 6.
- Ask how your law enforcement agency’s Public Information Officer (PIO) will:**
  - Work with the media throughout the case to share posters and provide press conferences.
  - Help you know when and how to respond to media requests and manage interviews.
  - Use websites and social media to support the investigation and public alerts/updates.

### WHY NCIC ENTRY IS SO ESSENTIAL

NCIC entry by law enforcement for missing children cases is mandated by [federal law](#).

When your child (and any abductor and/or vehicle involved) is entered into NCIC, every law enforcement agency in the nation has immediate access to that information.

NCIC records are updated as new information is confirmed in your child’s case.

Special codes, called “flags,” can be added to the record if your child is abducted (a “CA” flag) or when an AMBER Alert is issued (an “AA” flag). These flags trigger automatic notification to NCMEC and the FBI.

NCMEC can help any law enforcement agency ensure both the initial entry and updates are made in NCIC.



- Ask how leads and tips will be managed.**
  - Will a special phone number or tip line (and/or email address) be used? How will that information be shared with the public?
  - Who will take the calls, monitor emails, and follow up on them?
  - How will you be updated on leads and tips?
  
- Ask about other specialized resource and assistance requests.** Your agency may request a Child Abduction Response Team (CART) that provides expertise in investigation, search and rescue, air and water support, volunteer management, leads and tips management, mapping and geolocation, family advocacy, and victim reunification support. CARTs are used in cases that meet certain criteria, and thus are not used in every missing child case. You can learn more about CARTs in chapter 2.
  
- Ask for assistance from a family liaison or a victim advocate.** The family liaison can serve as an intermediary between you and investigators to ensure a consistent flow of information. Connecting with a victim advocate can help you better understand what’s happening, and help you better cope with the dynamics and emotional toll of the investigation.
  
- Get full contact information for your law enforcement team (names, phone numbers, and email addresses).** Store it near your phone, or within your cell phone contacts for easy access. Contacts should include your lead investigator, backup or secondary investigator, PIO, and family advocate.
  
- Make sure law enforcement has your contact information, and that of people who can help reach you.** This includes relatives, neighbors, or friends who will know where you are at any given time.



“Asking law enforcement what they plan to do puts them on notice. It tells them you’re a parent who will be highly involved in your child’s case. And highly involved parents get more attention paid to them.”

**Charles Fleeger**

Texas Brazos Valley Network  
AMBER Alert Coordinator

## Checklist: After law enforcement leaves

- Keep a notebook or pad of paper by your phone and/or computer.** Use it exclusively for jotting down names, telephone numbers, dates and times of calls and emails, and other information pertaining to conversations with your officer.
- Stay connected with updates from your law enforcement contact.** If you don't receive them as discussed, continue to ask for daily updates on the investigation and search efforts. It's helpful to designate a specific family member or liaison for contact with your assigned law enforcement officer or team, to ensure communications are coordinated and to avoid duplicate calls and requests that can take time away from the investigation.

**Note:** As you follow this *Guide*, you will see the terms “officer” and “investigator” used when referring to law enforcement personnel involved in the search for your child. Both terms denote members of the law enforcement team with whom you will interact. While patrol officers are generally first to arrive at your home, as initial information is gathered and areas are secured, an investigator (sometimes referred to as a detective) will likely be assigned to work with your family. Depending on the size of your law enforcement agency, and other resources brought in to assist, you may communicate with more than one investigator.



**“Gear up for what must happen in the first 24 to 48 hours. It’s time to fortify your mind, your soul. Prioritize self-care and family care, too, because you will need both.”**

**Dr. Noelle Hunter**

Maayimuna N'Diaye, “Muna,” survivor and youth ambassador for the iStand Parent Network – daughter of Dr. Noelle Hunter





## 2 | The search: Understanding the work of law enforcement and volunteers

### Understanding the search

While you will desperately want to help with the physical search, the best use of your energy will be to share information with investigators as soon as you get it; from remembering something, learning something new about your child's case, or simply connecting the dots regarding information you did not have before. Being available, and being close to home – or able to get there quickly if your child returns, or if you are needed by law enforcement – is vitally important. The following checklist will help you understand what is happening, and suggest ways to follow up if you believe the proper procedures are not being followed.

#### WHAT MORE CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

Ask your investigator what you can do to help them during the initial investigation. Ways you may be able to help include:

- Asking neighbors to share recent home security camera footage that may have captured images of your child.
- Sending video clips showing your child's unique mannerisms.
- Posting your child's missing flier on neighborhood or other group social media sites.
- Posting printed missing child fliers in places your child was last seen.
- Monitoring and sharing current banking and credit card records.
- Talking with the PIO about ways to increase media interest in your child's case.
- Meeting with a victim advocate. (Learn more about their work in chapter 7.)

## Checklist: The first 48 hours

**Confirm if your law enforcement agency will use a local search and rescue (SAR) team.** If your law enforcement agency is not prepared with full search capability, either internally or through a CART, Child Abduction Rapid Deployment (CARD), and/or Team Adam, they should quickly contact the National Association For Search And Rescue (NASAR) at [info@nasar.org](mailto:info@nasar.org) or 877-893-0702.

**Ask what types of searches are planned.** Searches can include a variety of locations and approaches. Your case investigator can explain various searches that may involve:

- Area(s) where your child was last seen.
- Your home and its surroundings.
- Your child's school locker.
- Neighborhood canvass (door-to-door "knock and talks").
- Land or "grids" (often used for large fields).
- Trash pickup or landfills.
- Sea/water or air.
- Roadblock canvasses.
- Business canvasses.
- License plate tracking.
- GPS and cellular signal tracking.
- Geomapping and database searches to confirm locations of registered sex offenders in the area.
- Tracking or trailing dogs, such as bloodhounds, may be brought into the scene to help with the search. They can be valuable in tracking and following your child's scent in the air and on the ground, even if your child was carried in someone's arms or in a vehicle.

### CHILD ABDUCTION RAPID RESPONSE TEAMS

Depending upon the circumstances, law enforcement may request help from one of the following rapid response teams that are trained and equipped to find missing children. These teams include:

- Local, regional, or state Child Abduction Response Teams, or CARTs. These are multijurisdictional teams composed of experienced law enforcement professionals who can deploy quickly. They have established roles, high-tech mobile command centers, and a network of specialized search resources – from K9 handlers to aerial search experts. Learn more at [amberadvocate.org/CARTresources](http://amberadvocate.org/CARTresources).
- Nationally, the FBI's Child Abduction Rapid Deployment (CARD) teams are strategically located throughout the U.S. and deploy at the request of an FBI field office. CARD teams provide on-the-ground investigative, technical, analytical, and resource assistance ideal for complex cases.
- NCMEC's Team Adam consists of retired law enforcement professionals with years of experience at the federal, state, and local levels. NCMEC also provides technical assistance to agencies investigating long-term missing cases. Ask your officer for help accessing Team Adam support.

- Ask law enforcement to keep you updated on what areas have been searched, who was present, and what was found.**

- Second searches of the same area are often performed because they can yield information and leads that were previously missed.
- Make sure you feel confident the search effort is adequate and progressing as expected. If not, ask how improvements can be made.

**“When parents are persistent, we know they are going to follow up. That holds us accountable. And we can respect that they want to be a voice for their missing child.”**

**Captain Stacie Lick**

CART Coordinator, Gloucester County  
Prosecutor’s Office, New Jersey

- Keep lines of communication open and respectful.** Agree on a daily time or regular cycle for your investigator to update you about search and investigative efforts. Don’t be afraid to ask questions or air differences of opinion. Ahmad Rivazfar recalls detectives making him feel like “just another piece of evidence” during their investigation into the heinous crimes committed against his daughters. If you are not satisfied, speak up.

## Checklist: The long-term search

*“You are going to survive this, even if you don’t want to. Nobody really thinks they will be in it for the long haul.”*

– Colleen Nick

After the initial steps are taken in the first 48 hours, investigators will shift gears into a longer search strategy. This does not mean the search for your child is less urgent, but rather that additional investigative processes and specialized resources will be incorporated to support and sustain the effort.

When the search for a missing child becomes long term, not all parents are emotionally or financially able to stay actively engaged in the process. They may need to ask others to take the lead. This is completely understandable. Whatever you decide is best, here are some things that you, your family, friends, and volunteers can do:

- Discuss the plan and goals for the continued search.** Work with law enforcement to determine what role you and others can play in the long-term effort. Make sure goals, approaches, and resources are clearly defined and understood.

### USING TIP LINES FOR LEADS

Law enforcement prefers to handle incoming tips about your missing child’s case via an internal tip line, where calls are accepted 24/7.

They will use a specially designed leads management system to track incoming information to investigate.

NCMEC provides a 24/7 hotline for receiving tips but does not provide reward information about your case.

Crime Stoppers also offers a 24/7 [tip line](#) (and does use rewards) but its services are not available everywhere.

Never share your personal phone number or email address on your child’s poster or web/social media sites.

Ask about the best number(s), emails, URLs, or QR codes to use on your child’s missing poster before it is created. This will ensure that tips are received, processed, and investigated in a timely and organized manner.

- Schedule regular visits with your investigator.**
  - Establish a schedule to review the case and share updates.
  - Immediately provide law enforcement with new information that may impact the direction of the case.
  - If developments call for an increase in the scope or complexity of the investigation, and you get the sense that your law enforcement team is becoming overwhelmed or under-resourced, don't be afraid to ask if the FBI or state police can help. Also ask if NCMEC's Team Adam investigators can assist. Contact them at 800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678).
  
- Ask to periodically discuss the investigative strategy and progress.** By doing so, you may recognize something meaningful that was overlooked or remember something significant that law enforcement was unaware of. In agreeing on a review process, however, understand there may be information that law enforcement cannot release to you because it may jeopardize or hinder the investigation. Some states do not allow the release of police reports until a case is closed. Ask your investigator what information can be legally shared with you, and when, so tensions don't build up around unmet or misunderstood expectations.
  
- Talk with law enforcement about the benefits (or dangers) of offering a reward for the safe return of your child.** Read more about this aspect of the search in the "Offering Rewards" section in chapter 4.
  
- Find out if Crime Stoppers may be able to help.** Crime Stoppers answers telephone calls 24/7, is skilled in how to intake tip information, provides caller anonymity, and works effectively with law enforcement. If Crime Stoppers is used in your child's case, you can share their toll-free telephone number, 800-222-TIPS/8477, for calls about a reward. (Note: NCMEC will not provide reward information on its toll-free hotline, 800-THE-LOST/800-843-5678.) For more information visit [crimestoppersusa.org/contact-us/](http://crimestoppersusa.org/contact-us/).
  
- Inquire about programs that help with tips and rewards for crime reporting.** Ask your law enforcement agency and prosecutor's office about other local, state, regional, or national programs that can be used to securely and reliably intake tips and offer rewards.
  
- Use images and posters to sustain public awareness of your child's case.** If your child remains missing for a year or more, use [NCMEC's array of long-term missing case support services](#), which includes age progression depictions of your child based on photos and other physical information. These age-progressed images can be used in conjunction with original pictures in the case, and can be shared on updated posters, billboards, and other items to sustain public awareness and support of the ongoing investigation. [Your state missing child/](#)





[persons clearinghouse and/or NCMEC](#) can assist with poster creation and updates. Remember to consult with your case investigator before sharing any new information with the public to ensure it does not compromise the investigation. Chapter 3 contains checklist items for working with the media.

- Use a notebook or written/audio journal to document your feelings and discoveries as the case proceeds, and review it periodically.** Occasionally a thought or passage will trigger a memory or give you new insight. It doesn't have to be written perfectly, and it may prove useful in the future.

## Collaborating with law enforcement

When your child is missing, you and law enforcement become partners pursuing a common goal – finding your child. As partners, you both work to establish a relationship based on mutual respect, trust, and honesty. You do not have to agree on every detail, but engaging in honest communication can alleviate or resolve many issues.

### Checklist: Ensuring good communication

- Do everything possible to eliminate your family as suspects.** Though troubling, the fact is many children are harmed by members of their own families. Depending on the circumstances of the case, you and your family may be considered suspects until you are cleared through the investigative process. Cooperate with interviews, and volunteer early to take a polygraph test (if used in the investigation) to help law enforcement eliminate you and your family. At that point, they can focus on identifying other suspects and apprehending the perpetrator(s) in your child's case. Insist that all family members are interviewed in a timely manner to prevent prolonged, unnecessary scrutiny by law enforcement and the media.

#### PARENTAL FRUSTRATION WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

**Q:** I think my law enforcement agency is not handling my child's case in a timely or professional manner, and I often feel disrespected. I now wonder if my accent or cultural heritage may be an issue. What should I do?

**A:** Tell your investigator, "I understand you may have other cases assigned to you, but I don't believe you're giving my child's case the attention it needs. My goal is not to get you in trouble, but I would like to speak to your supervisor. I'd like to discuss how we can improve the work being done on my child's case." Then, when speaking to the supervisor, be specific about statements or actions that have concerned you, and ask how problems can be resolved.

**Blaine Phillips**

Agent in Charge  
Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation

- Be honest and forthcoming in your statements and answers.** Fully disclose all recent activities of, and conversations with, your child. What may seem insignificant to you may be helpful to an investigator. It's important to understand that law enforcement's role is not to judge difficult dynamics with your child or family, but to consider them carefully in the context of the investigation and search for your child. If at any time you do not feel supported in this regard, seek assistance from your family advocate or [NCMEC's family support services](#).
- Be prepared for difficult, repetitious questions from investigators.** As challenging as it may be, try not to respond in a hostile manner to questions that seem personal or intrusive, even offensive. Investigators must ask difficult and sensitive questions to do their jobs effectively. If you believe that a cultural or language difference may be affecting your ability to work together or communicate effectively, ask the law enforcement agency for assistance. An interpreter, liaison, advocate, and/or mediator can help facilitate better understanding.
- Insist that everyone close to your child be interviewed.** Besides family members, ask friends, your child's boyfriend or girlfriend, neighbors, teachers, and coaches to cooperate in the investigative process.
- Leave the interviewing of your other children to law enforcement.** Do not question them yourself. For younger children, a law enforcement officer trained in child forensic interviewing should conduct those sessions. Many law enforcement agencies will have officers specially trained to interview children; child advocacy centers (CACs) may also have professionals able to help in this process. Allow law enforcement to coordinate with CAC personnel if necessary.
- Ask for a child advocate to sit in on each interview with your missing child's siblings.** Child advocates are specially trained staff and volunteers who support children involved in the criminal justice process. In addition to private CACs, some state and municipal agencies have child advocates available, usually within the district attorney's office, the courts, or law enforcement agencies. Ask law enforcement for information about your local child advocate resources. You also can visit the [National Children's Advocacy Center](#) website to find a chapter in your state. If your child's sibling is very young, you may be asked to sit in on the interview. Do not be alarmed, however, if law enforcement needs to have a trained child forensic interviewer speak with your child(ren) alone.
- Be prepared for a constant law enforcement presence in your home.** For the protection of you and your family, an officer may be stationed there around the clock. Your investigator or family advocate should help you understand why this is necessary. If your law enforcement agency does not have the resources to provide this type of security, ask for whatever security they can provide.
- Although law enforcement's presence may feel intrusive, welcome the officers who are there to help with your child's case.** Understand officers will be assigned to your home to perform a variety of critically important functions, such as answering calls, intaking leads, performing interviews, securing and processing evidence, and providing security. A family advocate and other resources from NCMEC can help you through this difficult aspect of the investigation.

- Talk regularly with your primary law enforcement contact.** Missing children cases are handled by various units within law enforcement agencies, including Special Victims, Homicide, Major Crimes, Human Trafficking, and/or Missing Persons. The unit to which your child's case is assigned does not determine what may have occurred or how the case will be handled. For example, if your child's case is assigned to the Homicide unit, this does not mean your child is deceased.
- Let law enforcement know the best time of day to call you with new information.** Realize there will be days when your investigator has nothing new to report. Within your family or support circle, it's important to agree that only one person should contact law enforcement about your child's case. If your investigator is bombarded with calls, emails, and messages from multiple people, valuable time needed to work on the case will be lost.
- Communicate your expectation to learn about significant case developments from your law enforcement contact(s) – not from the media.** Likewise, you and your family must honor law enforcement's request not to disclose certain information to the media.
- Be prepared for predatory or prank calls, texts, or emails.** These can involve ransom demands as well as offers from psychics and private investigators. Report any suspicious or harassing behavior to your case investigator. Do not respond or provide any information until law enforcement can verify the identity of the sender and the validity of the message.
- Continue to ask questions.** The more you understand the investigative process, the better you can ask questions about it. It's important to realize that many law enforcement officers do not have firsthand experience in working on a missing child case. If you feel that your child's disappearance has been classified inappropriately, ask for an explanation. If you are not satisfied with the response, request to speak with the officer's supervisor.
- Continue to use your resources, and seek more if needed.** Chapter 7 of this *Guide* contains a list of organizations with which you can connect. Also, never hesitate to ask your law enforcement agency and [NCMEC](#) for additional support.

### USING A PRIVATE DETECTIVE

- Hire a private investigator only if you believe they can do something better or different than what your law enforcement team is providing.
- Make sure the private detective has law enforcement experience. This is essential for them to collaborate effectively with your investigator and to protect the integrity of the case.
- Ask for and check references.
- Ensure you're paying a reasonable rate. Get itemized receipts.
- Immediately report to law enforcement anyone who says they can return your child to you for a specified sum of money.
- Ensure significant case leads from the private investigator are immediately shared with the lead investigator in your case.

## Enlisting and managing volunteers

There is great power in large, well-coordinated search efforts. Yet when hundreds of people want to help your family during a moment of crisis, law enforcement must ensure those volunteers are properly organized and prepared. Those enlisted in a search – either as part of a pre-vetted organization or as ad hoc volunteers – should have their contact information recorded, be fully briefed on assignments and reporting, and be monitored throughout the process to protect the investigation. Missteps such as overlooked or destroyed evidence can delay your child’s recovery.

### Checklist: Volunteer management support

- If you decide to use volunteers to support law enforcement or provide public outreach, designate a volunteer coordinator who is organized, efficient, and effective at providing direction.** While you may be tempted to take this on yourself, it’s often too much to handle, both logistically and emotionally, given all that you are enduring. It is important for you to stay closely connected with the investigation. Your coordinator won’t perform volunteer activities directly, but should delegate and manage activity for specific needs – from finding someone to print posters and T-shirts to having local restaurants donate and deliver food and water to your family or search team personnel. You can ask your officer for thoughts on where to start in finding help with volunteer coordination. Organizations with volunteer contingents, such as those shown in the sidebar on this page, may be helpful resources. Make sure your law enforcement team has contact information for your volunteer coordinator if you select one, and for all volunteers approved to help your family.

- Your volunteer coordinator can keep track of those who offer to help for later contact, if needed.** When your child goes missing, it is hard to think of what you need right then, much less what you will need in the future. Keep notes on who offers to volunteer, and what they can do to assist, for later reference. Once you decide what you need, refer to your notes and contact your volunteers to help.

### GO-TO GROUPS FOR VOLUNTEERS & DONATIONS

- Red Cross chapters
- Rotary clubs and other civic organizations
- Churches, synagogues, mosques, and other places of worship
- Parent-teacher associations
- Scout troops
- Internet advertising agencies
- Retiree organizations
- Labor unions
- Military installations
- Printers
- Paper suppliers
- Pizza franchises
- Fast food chains
- Liquor store chains
- Airline companies
- Taxicab and bus companies
- Trucking companies
- Public and private transportation agencies
- Hospitals

- Do not be afraid to ask for what you need – or have your volunteer coordinator ask on your behalf.** You will be amazed by the support you receive. People really do want to help.

## HELPFUL VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

**Volunteers can do many things for you. Let them. These activities are particularly well suited for volunteers:**

- Visiting area businesses to request donations of supplies your family may need.
- Contacting nonprofit organizations for assistance with designing and distributing fliers (consistent with approved flier content, design, and layout) and T-shirts.
- Distributing posters and handing out fliers.
- Keeping a list of donated items and writing thank-you notes.
- Preparing meals.
- Helping with household chores such as cleaning, doing laundry, watering flowers, mowing the lawn, maintaining the yard, or shoveling snow.
- Running errands (e.g., buying groceries or pharmacy items).
- Taking care of pets.
- Forming and updating prayer groups.

**The following activities should be coordinated with your law enforcement team to protect the investigation:**

- Assisting with the intake of tips and leads.
- Overseeing and monitoring social media.
- Coordinating with traditional media on stories to promote awareness. (Someone with a background in journalism or public relations is a good fit for this position.)



Volunteers meet to be briefed and assist in the search for Dylan Redwine.

## Checklist: Search support

- Law enforcement will coordinate both sworn and volunteer search personnel.** They should oversee all search efforts, striving to use only experienced, organized groups of SAR volunteers to assign across a 3- to 5-mile radius based on where your child was last seen. With enough volunteers, they can cover broader search areas as identified through the investigation.

- Established SAR teams bring organization, readiness, and credibility – all of which reduce the chance for disorganization; accountability and authority disputes; and delayed, ineffective searches.**

Here are some SAR advantages:

- Pre-vetting (background checks and confirmed personal information).
- Deployment in large numbers.
- Rapid mobilization.
- Skill and experience in identifying, securing, and preserving evidence.
- Proven procedures for search team chain of command, communication, and reporting.



- When directed by a qualified coordinator, volunteers can perform numerous functions, including:**

- Providing transportation and parking for search teams. (Members will often be asked to arrive at a parking lot at an assigned time before being transported by a bus or van to the volunteer staging area.)
- Managing sign-in and sign-out of searchers, and ensuring all required contact and ID information is documented in accordance with policies of the search organization and the investigating law enforcement agency.
- Donating, delivering, and distributing clothing, supplies, equipment, and refreshments for searchers.
- Donating or delivering portable restrooms, fans or heaters, and furnishings to the staging area.
- Creating durable posters of the missing child and distributing fliers in designated geographic areas.

- Several organizations are devoted to the long-term search for missing children.** Contact NCMEC at 800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678) for more information and to help distribute your child's poster, coordinate volunteer activities, locate the nearest certified canine search resources, or connect you with other parents for support through [Team HOPE](#).

- If you are contacted by people who want to volunteer in the search, give their information to law enforcement.** All volunteers should undergo background checks by your law enforcement agency to ensure any individual with a criminal history is not permitted to aid in the search. Even if you know the person, commit to following this procedure. The safety of your child, and every person working on the case, is worth it.

- Law enforcement will oversee and direct all aspects of the search, and ensure search staging areas are set up in a location removed from your home.** If you have questions or concerns about how searches are conducted, talk with your law enforcement contact.

## Watch for worrisome helpers

While you don't want to be paranoid, unfortunately some individuals can, and do, prey upon and exploit people at their most vulnerable times. If you feel uncomfortable with anyone who wants to help for any reason, tell your volunteer coordinator or investigator. Be wary of the following types of individuals:

**Over-Involved:** Someone involved in your child's disappearance may unexpectedly insert themselves into your orbit – perhaps to volunteer for a search, help post fliers, or plan vigils – and may

do so to try to stay one step ahead of investigators. Some law enforcement agencies set up cameras at volunteer sign-in sites because criminals, pedophiles, or thieves – even those responsible for your child's abduction – have been known to show up unannounced and ask to join a search.

**Opportunist:** Someone may want to use your loss to draw attention to themselves. They will want to speak on your behalf, but they may also have a personal or political motive – perhaps to gain notoriety or discredit law enforcement leadership based on personal or political grievances.

**Psychic:** However well-meaning psychics may be – or adamant that they have actionable information regarding your child's disappearance – do not let them have access to your home or your child's belongings.

“Embrace offers of help – they will sustain you. But be cautious of individuals trying to insert themselves into your life.”

Parents of Missing Children

“I was in tears as my husband kept sending our child's belongings to psychics. We still haven't gotten back his stuffed animals.”

Patty Wetterling

“If you are contacted by a psychic with information, report it to law enforcement, and abide by any rules you or law enforcement set.”

Elaine Hall





## 3 | Media and public engagement

How and when you and your law enforcement team work together to engage the media will change over time. With time not on your child's side, intense, early publicity within the first 48 hours is the best way to generate leads from the public. This should be handled by law enforcement to ensure the right information is released in a format best suited for media's use. Robust broadcast media coverage – enhanced with the issuance of an AMBER Alert or Endangered Missing Alert – often yields powerful public attention, and has increasingly resulted in powerful outcomes, such as abductors releasing the child.

Your biggest challenge will be understanding how the media operates. Traditional media (printed and online newspapers, broadcast television, and radio) are largely driven by large media conglomerates, with journalists serving as reporter, photographer, and videographer. Nontraditional media (primarily social media and streaming video services) are increasingly curated by quick-acting “influencers” aiming to beat journalists to the punch by announcing breaking news (and stirring public reaction in the form of views, re-posts, and likes).

The public will remain interested in a compelling story that is presented across multiple platforms. In your child's case, law enforcement's goal is to provide credible and timely information to reputable media outlets. Visual content (images and video), combined with an engaging title and introductory information, are more important than ever to catch the public's attention in a cluttered, ever-changing news feed delivered in a 24-hour cycle.

Law enforcement should involve their Public Information Officer (PIO) early on to navigate these dynamics, keep you informed, and answer your questions throughout the case. This will ensure your safety and well-being, the integrity of the investigation, and skillful collaboration with the media.

## How to increase public awareness in your child's case

Media attention generates leads and keeps your story in front of the public. The following ideas can increase awareness while encouraging volunteers to help. Work with your PIO ahead of time to ensure these efforts are approached carefully and done in a way that protects you, your family, and your child's case.

- Appear on radio, TV, digital and print news outlets, social media sites, podcasts, and at events to discuss your child's disappearance.
- Consider writing an open letter to your child on their birthday or the anniversary of their disappearance. [Here is a moving example from Patty Wetterling.](#)
- Hold an assembly at your child's school with music, posters, candles, and shared messages of support.
- Ask your child's school to organize a letter-writing campaign to politicians, the media, or your state legislature.
- Develop buttons or T-shirts with your child's picture and a special message.
- Hold a prayer or candlelight vigil.
- Organize a concert or benefit auction to raise funds for a favorite charity.
- Give a special award to the law enforcement officer who serves as your primary contact.
- Ask area sports teams to include pictures of your child in their programs and make public service announcements at games.
- Plant a tree or dedicate a memorial garden in your child's name. You can also ask local businesses to dedicate these types of displays to pay tribute to your child.
- If your child has been abducted out of state or to another country, share information about state, federal, and international efforts to bring them home.

**"I want you to know that since you were stolen away from us, people everywhere have been searching, praying, and hoping for your safe return. That's pretty amazing, 26 years later. People care. There are more good people than bad in the world, and people still hope."**

**Patty Wetterling**

*From an open letter to her son, Jacob, published on what would have been his 38th birthday in 2016. Her letter became national news.*



## Checklist: Working with media in the first 48 hours

- For credibility, your law enforcement investigator or PIO should make the initial calls to media outlets.** This ensures accurate information is provided, and in a format best suited for the media. Follow up with your investigator or PIO to ensure contact is being made as swiftly as the investigation allows.
- To protect your well-being and allow you to focus on your work with law enforcement, have a close friend, adult relative, neighbor, or religious/spiritual advisor help with media requests for interviews.** This person should follow your PIO's guidance and coordinate with the case officer before confirming any interviews, whether by phone, virtual meeting, or in person. They also should keep track of all contact information for reporters who make requests, including each person's name, phone number, email address, and media outlet or station affiliation, and provide that to the PIO.
- Share your designated media coordinator's information with law enforcement.** Make sure that person's cell phone number is only shared with the media, not the public.
- While it may feel overwhelming for you to speak directly to the public via the media, audiences identify with the raw emotion parents feel when their child is missing.** Seeing your face and hearing your voice will motivate viewers to look more closely at the picture of your child and to search harder for them. Yet it's important to honor your limits. If you are uncomfortable being interviewed, ask someone you trust, such as a close friend, your child's teacher, or a religious/spiritual advisor, to speak on your behalf. Try to stand beside your spokesperson during an interview. It will help the community recognize your face in future media coverage, and allow you to become more comfortable with the process.

### MEDIA KIT BASICS

Having a readily accessible media kit will ensure all reporters have the same accurate information, reducing the time you and your PIO spend answering basic questions. You should be able to email the kit through an online file-sharing server or provide it on a portable flash drive. (Ask a tech-savvy volunteer to help you with this important task.) The kit should include the following:

- A complete description of your child and the clothing worn at the time of disappearance.
- Law enforcement-approved information about the suspect in your child's disappearance and a description of any vehicle known or suspected to be used or missing.
- A description of the place where your child was last seen.
- High-resolution digital photos, video clips, and a copy of your child's missing poster or flier.
- Information about websites or social media sites being used in your child's recovery.
- A phone number and/or email address (not personal ones) for the public to use for possible leads.
- Details about a reward if one is being offered.

- Do not contact news outlets if your PIO is already working with them.** This can be frustrating to news editors, who may opt not to cover your story if they think it will be confusing or produce inaccurate or misleading information.
- If your PIO is unable to do so, have a tech-savvy family member or friend prepare a digital media kit** containing your child's information, missing person flier, photos and video clips, and more.
- Before talking with the media, ask your investigator if there is specific information that should not be released – and honor that request.** Always make the protection of your child, by safeguarding the investigation, a top priority.
- Although television coverage is crucial for disseminating pictures and stories of your child, do not ignore other types of media.** Social media and neighborhood news sites are ideal avenues for sharing your missing child's poster.
- Ensure interviews are scheduled in keeping with media deadlines.** Consult with reporters to find out the best times to conduct them. Between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. is ideal for broadcast reporters, as it gives them enough time to prepare stories for prime-time news shows.
- Do not schedule interviews or speeches back-to-back.** Know that you have limited mental and physical resources, and will not be effective if you are overwhelmed or exhausted. If you have an opportunity to appear on a popular radio or television show on a national network, give this engagement top priority.
- Remember that local television and radio stations will be in your community after the major networks leave, so work to develop a long-term relationship with them.** Sometimes local stations can rerun portions of your interview with a national affiliate.
- Parents, family members, and friends should monitor traditional and social media posts and comments for helpful information.** Any concerning content should immediately be sent to your PIO or investigator. Watch for multiple appearances by one individual, or comments indicating knowledge of personal or confidential information not previously revealed, which may help pinpoint either the perpetrator or persons close to them. Do not engage with online trolls.



Colleen Nick, speaking at a press event, displays a poster of her daughter, Morgan Nick, missing since 1995.

## INTERVIEW DOS AND DON'TS

- Schedule interview times and locations that are best for you and your PIO, and accommodate the media production/airtime schedule.
- Don't let the media take anything from your home or touch anything that is off limits during the investigation. This includes your child's room, belongings, toys, etc.
- Articulate the most crucial information in every interview (your PIO can help you prepare for this). Be consistent in how you discuss information pertinent to the case (as vetted by your law enforcement contact). Refer to the "Media Kit Basics" sidebar in this chapter for thoughts and ideas.
- Don't discuss information that your law enforcement or PIO representative has advised you to keep confidential. Work with them in advance to make sure you don't disclose sensitive case details.
- Never publicly criticize law enforcement. Even if you are unhappy with someone or something, resist the temptation to publicly complain about your child's case. This type of information often goes viral throughout the media. Air and discuss issues and concerns in private. Ask Team HOPE and family advocates for help, if needed.
- Include your child's picture in every interview. Make sure the picture accurately depicts your child. For related advice, see the "Photo and Flier Best Practices" checklist in this chapter.
- Cover the most important topics and information first. Keep your responses to simple 10- to 20-second sound bites to make sure your messages are received.
- Make your child relatable by sharing stories about their wit, interests, and most endearing qualities.
- Maintain control of the message. If a reporter digs a skeleton out of the closet, don't be afraid to say that a previous event has nothing to do with your child being missing. Take the high road by only sharing information meant to help bring your child home.
- Be patient with young or inexperienced reporters. If asked inappropriate questions, you don't have to answer them and don't have to explain why.
- And remember:
  - » You do not have to answer every question.
  - » Nothing you say is "off the record" – no matter what you are told.
  - » You do not have to be interviewed if you feel uncomfortable.
  - » The media does not control you. Only you control you.



## Checklist: Long-term assistance from the media

“Media fatigue” can unfortunately occur when top stories no longer yield updates for “breaking news” – usually after one to two weeks. To counter that, consider these ways to keep your child’s case in the public eye:

- Obtain the help of a media expert if possible.** Sometimes professionals working in the field of public relations donate their services to parents of missing children, which can be a tremendous help.
- Create an engaging article or social media post to sustain public interest.** Send a news release or schedule a press conference on an important day, such as National Missing Children’s Day (May 25), your child’s birthday, or another significant event.
- Update your media kit to include any new information about your child’s case (as approved by your investigator).** Add links to well-reported news features.
- Research reporters who have covered stories involving missing children and contact them directly.** Tell them you want to work with them to keep your child’s case alive through new approaches to the story (as guided by your law enforcement team).
- Develop rapport with someone in radio, television, or print, or someone with a prominent social media site or blog.** If a reporter takes a special interest in your child’s case, they can devise ways to return it to the spotlight. Maintain a list of important publicity sources, and your interactions with them, for future reference.
- Identify the assignment editors for each news organization and send press releases to their attention.** Assignment editors decide which stories to cover and the reporters to be assigned. If you plan an event, let the news organization know what is happening by emailing them a news release at least a week in advance. Follow up a day or two before the event to express your hope that they will cover it.
- Strategize how to share unique perspectives on your child’s case.** Bring in someone new to discuss the case (as guided/agreed upon by your investigator). Other family members or friends close to the case, politicians, psychologists or helping professionals, and appropriate public interest figures can increase public interest and sustain coverage.

“When being interviewed by the media, don’t worry if you’re not a great speaker; just talk from your heart. Tell people you love your child and need their help in finding and bringing them home. Bolster your confidence by having someone you know be beside you to provide support and step in if necessary.”

Colleen Nick

- Consider granting exclusive interviews.** In the beginning, you likely will not want to do this; interest will be high, and you will want the widest coverage possible. (Also, granting an exclusive interview to one news organization over another can create tensions that may impede future coverage.) Later on, offering an exclusive may be the best way to revive an editor's interest in covering your child's case with a focus on updates that can reengage the public. (Consult with your investigator or PIO beforehand.)
- Use the media to appeal for special help.** If you need volunteers, training, printing, or equipment that is expensive or not readily available, ask the media to broadcast your request. Give a wish list to local radio stations; they are often willing to publicize such appeals as a public service. This not only can provide you with the help you need, it can also be another way to remind the public to keep looking for your child.
- Ask NCMEC to share your child's case with credible, nationally televised programs that spotlight missing child cases.**
- Be aware of your public status.** The media may turn up at any time and any place, asking for information. For your child's sake, conduct yourself at all times as if all eyes were upon you. Realize you no longer have the same privacy you once had. Do not do things that will cast you or your family in a negative light. Ultimately, however, you should continue to live your life as necessary to ensure normalcy and well-being.
- And remember, pace yourself.** Don't take on more than you can handle. Lean on your PIO and media volunteers, and recognize that you are in the driver's seat, not the media. Take good care of yourself to remain strong for your missing child and the rest of your family. See chapter 5 for ways to sustain your well-being.

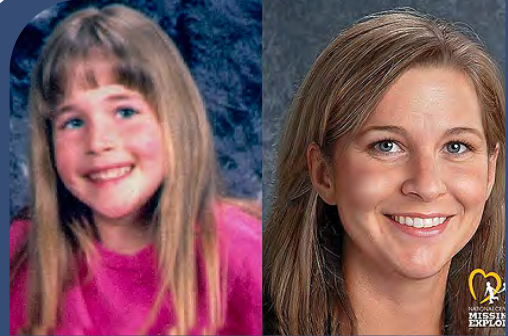


**"Don't feel guilty about laughing. Your other children need to see you smile."**

**Elaine Hall**

## Checklist: Photo and flier best practices

- Select the most recent pictures of your child.** Good-quality digital photos are best. Ask family and friends for photos or videos taken at their last birthday party, holiday celebration, sports event, or school outing.
- Choose photos that most resemble your child on any given day.** Remember that posters and fliers will show the head, neck, and top of the shoulders. Candid shots are fine if the facial image is clear. Photos that show your child from different angles will not allow viewers to get the true “picture” of your child. The goal is to have someone instantly recognize them.
- Video clips are ideal for airing on TV, online, and through social media – and best depict your child’s appearance, mannerisms, and voice.** They also tend to engage the hearts of viewers, inspiring them to be on the lookout for your child or volunteer to help.
- If a professional photographer took the picture, ask permission to have it reproduced.** Most photographers will be glad to give permission once you explain your situation.
- Seek local help with flier and poster printing and distribution.** You or your volunteer poster coordinator can ask printers to produce the fliers either for free or at a discounted rate.
- Have fliers printed in assorted sizes and in various formats.** Use them for buttons, handouts, reward posters, yard signs, mailings, labels, and more.
- Put someone persuasive in charge of flier and photo distribution.** Have them track where your child’s poster has been shared (locations and websites). And plan to remove fliers when your child is found.
- Obtain permission from those who can authorize the posting of your child’s flier in well-traveled public places, such as**



From left, Morgan Nick shown at age 6 in 1995, and as she may have looked at age 31 in 2020.

### NCMEC’S PHOTO SERVICES

Plug into the photo distribution services offered by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. NCMEC posts photos of missing children on its website, [missingkids.org](https://www.missingkids.org). The organization has circulated billions of photos and coordinates national media exposure through its partnership with traditional and social media outlets, television networks, and other organizations. Give the media a copy of the NCMEC poster as well as a link to its website.

When desired, ask for help with NCMEC’s age-progression services. Call 800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678) or go to [missingkids.org/ourwork/casesources](https://www.missingkids.org/ourwork/casesources). The image above is what forensic artists created to depict Colleen Nick’s missing daughter, Morgan, in 2020. Learn more about [how age progression photos are created](#).

NCMEC case management personnel are on call to make emergency posters and distribute photographic images 24/7.



buses (inside and out) and other public transport vehicles, at bus and subway terminals, tollbooths, rest stops, parks and recreational areas, and in federal and state buildings. By [Presidential memorandum](#), federal agencies may be required to post fliers of missing children in their buildings, or have programs to receive photos from NCMEC to disseminate in official publications. Ask your investigator, PIO, or NCMEC for help if needed.

- Ask as many individuals and organizations as possible to share your child's missing poster**, including neighbors, friends, and local businesses. Request that churches and civic organizations email the poster to their members. Ask NCMEC, your state missing child/persons clearinghouse, and regional nonprofit missing children organizations to distribute your child's picture or poster via their networks and social media sites.
- Consider using billboard space to share a photo and pertinent details about your missing child**. Contact the companies whose name or logo is shown on billboards you see; they may offer to donate their use for your child's missing poster or related information.
- Distribute fliers at regional events likely to draw large crowds**. Have volunteers create a calendar of popular events such as sports games, county fairs, festivals, and concerts.
- Never underestimate the power of a paper flier or poster**. Because people see ads daily across various websites, digital billboards, and social media platforms, the messages they carry often get lost in all the digital communication. Printed fliers and posters of your missing child create a sense of urgency when an individual receives one, accompanied by a request for help.



Dr. Noelle Hunter in Washington, DC, advocating for IPCA and families of missing children.

## Checklist: Enlisting the help of legislators and other public officials

The media often takes special interest in publicizing cases in which political figures are involved.

- Seek help from school board members; city or county commissioners; your state governor, senators, and representatives; and members of the U.S. House and Senate.** Besides participating in interviews and press events, prominent officials can assist with placing your child's missing poster in numerous public places, such as federal, state, and local agencies.

"It wasn't until we took legislative action against Backpage.com that we got the media's attention."

Nacole Svendgard

- Carefully consider any attempts by well-meaning politicians to involve you in hastily written legislative proposals that could become a detriment in your child's case and those of other missing children.** If motivated by political objectives not aligned with the work of protecting children and bringing missing children to safety, and if rushed to suit election cycle battles, they may seek to use you, your child's case, or your family for their own self-interest.
- Stay in contact with your congressional representative and senators.** Build relationships by sending regular updates to the congressional staff members assigned to your child's case. Staff members often change positions, so regular followup will help you maintain current contact information. Also consider that while your child's return is your top priority, the congressional staff member with whom you are working must respond to hundreds of constituent requests. Be courteous, yet persistent.



October 9, 2019, Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC. From left: Jeffery Morehouse, Bring Abducted Children Home; Vikram Jagtiani, Bring Our Kids Home; Rick Johnson, Children at Borders; and Dr. Noelle Hunter, iStand Parent Network.





## 4 | Financial considerations

The offer of a reward may spark or renew media interest in reporting on your missing child, “or might be what it takes to persuade someone who knows something to speak up,” says Yvonne Ambrose. However, rewards do not always produce the right leads or anticipated results. There are important considerations for managing donations and rewards.

As for other financial considerations, monetary donations and pledges can help finance the reward and ancillary search costs, and also provide support for your family if you are unable to work. But donations, if not managed properly, can result in legal and financial issues that add to the stress concerning your child’s case. The following are some important considerations for managing donations, rewards, and funds.

### Checklist: Offering rewards and accepting monetary donations

- Get expert help.** Because legal and technical issues can arise from a reward offer, have a knowledgeable attorney, financial advisor, or banker with a fiduciary responsibility provide you with accurate information. Your primary law enforcement contact, banker, or parents of missing children who have successfully established a reward fund can also point you in the right direction. Ensure that those who give you advice have firsthand experience or qualifications in this area.

“After the search fund for our daughter was established, the rumors began to fly about the new vehicles and houses we had purchased. We even heard about a fabulous vacation we supposedly had taken with the money from the fund.”

Colleen Nick

- Be prepared for resistance from law enforcement.** Some law enforcement agencies disapprove of reward offers because they can result in a torrent of false tips. If you decide to offer a reward, discuss cost-benefit considerations with them, emphasizing the importance of doing everything possible to generate information about the case. It may only take one solid lead to recover your child.
- Update law enforcement on reward activity and management of monetary donations.** As you set up and activate your reward information using websites, QR codes, fliers, or special accounts, update your primary law enforcement contact on financial activity or decisions. This will help them advocate for and protect your family while investigating leads generated from the reward, or provide the press with answers about finances related to the case.
- Clearly state the purpose of the offer.** Decide what you want the reward to accomplish, then make sure its purpose is well defined in the offer. For example, make your child's safe return a written condition of the reward. Providing thorough details about the reward can prevent disputes over whether someone complied with its terms. Unclear language can result in serious legal problems. Seek an attorney who may be able to offer free (pro bono) services to review and finalize the reward's terms and conditions.
- Realize that a reward offer may equate to a legally enforceable contract.** If a person meets your reward's requirement, they may be legally entitled to the reward and can sue to claim it. Also refrain from using your own money for the reward. Based on the offer's terms and conditions, you may be liable for the reward payment, and thus be sued for it. This problem can be exacerbated if your finances are drained because you need to take a leave of absence, resign from your job, or are out of work during the search for your child.
- Be careful in establishing the amount of the reward.** Do not offer more money than you can afford to pay. Decide on the amount of the reward and stick to it. If people think you might raise the amount later, they may wait for a more lucrative offer before calling in a lead.
- See if special reward funds already exist.** Sometimes state and local agencies, as well as the FBI, have funds available for a reward in cases involving a predatory abduction. Ask your law enforcement contact about the availability of such funds.
- Set a time limit for the reward.** The main goal of a reward is to generate immediate results so your child can be found as soon as possible. Initially, you may want to keep the time limit short. You could tie it to a significant event, such as your child's birthday, which may help generate substantial public interest.

"When establishing a reward with Crime Stoppers, ask for periodic balances as well as names of donors and the amount they donated. Also talk with them about what will happen if the reward goes unclaimed, or how the funds will be disbursed after it is claimed."

Elaine Hall

Avoid open-ended rewards that can result in liability years later. If needed, you can renew the reward for a longer period.

- Understand that monetary pledges are not as reliable as donations.** It is much easier to persuade people to pledge money toward a reward than to donate cash. You cannot be sure a pledge will be honored when the time comes to pay the reward. If you decide to accept pledges, obtain them in writing, pay attention to their expiration dates, and plan to dedicate significant time to making sure all pledges are (and remain) legitimate.

## Checklist: Managing monetary donations

- Ensure both you and your contributors know how donations will be used.** Donations can be used for a variety of purposes, depending upon need. Ask that they be earmarked for a specific fund – such as the reward, the search, or family support. If a fund is not noted, ask one of your volunteers to call the donor and confirm where it should be applied.
- Keep separate bank accounts for each fund so donors can be confident that proper records are being maintained and donations are being allocated for specific purposes.** Have both a lawyer and banker help you establish separate trusts or accounts, and oversee disbursements. Creating a trust fund – or at least establishing safeguards, such as requiring dual signatures on checks and maintaining accurate records – is crucial.
- Avoid having direct control over any funds received.** Do not solicit funds yourself; use volunteers for this purpose. Also, do not have signatory control over the funds. There have been instances in which individuals have attempted to extort reward money from parents by force. Protect yourself by giving a trustworthy source – such as an accountant or attorney – sole access to the funds.
- Maintain accurate records that show the source of donations and how money was spent.** Individuals with signature authority over the funds should keep proper records on income and expenditures. A list of donors should be maintained so thank-you letters can be sent. Copies of receipts for all expenditures should be retained in case questions arise. Ask a banker or accountant for pro bono help in establishing proper accounting procedures.
- Be honest with the public.** Be prepared for questions, which can turn into accusations, concerning the use of donated funds. Designate one person – either yourself or a trusted friend or family member – to answer questions about how funds are being spent. Also, never release information to the media about the amount of funds donated.
- Specify what will happen to the reward in the event your child is located before the money is spent.** Ensure there are written procedures for how the money will be dispensed if not used for the reward. For example, you could specify that all donations over a certain amount will be returned (if the donor is traceable), or that unused funds will be donated to an organization or agency that helped with the search. Excess funds from the reward should never be used for the family's personal expenses, since that was not the fund's purpose. Have an attorney help you determine how to best handle this issue.

## Being aware of extortion scams

In May 2021, the [FBI warned](#) of a trend involving scammers seeking to extort family members of missing persons. The scammers identify missing persons through social media posts, then gather information about the missing person and the family to legitimize their demands for ransom without ever having physical contact with the missing person. The extortionist obtains the family's contact information online and manipulates the family into believing their loved one has been abducted, is at risk of abduction, or is in imminent danger. They then demand a quick, untraceable ransom payment (via Bitcoin or other electronic transaction), with the amount often ranging between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

### If you find yourself the target of an extortion attempt related to your missing child:

- Immediately contact your local law enforcement agency or your local FBI field office ([fbi.gov](https://www.fbi.gov)).
- File a complaint online with the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center at [IC3.gov](https://www.ic3.gov).
- Keep all original documentation, emails, text messages, and communication logs with the subject. Do not delete anything before law enforcement can review or retain it for investigation.
- Tell law enforcement everything about the online encounters, despite how embarrassing they may seem. Specifically, you will need to provide them with:
  - » The name and/or username of the subject.
  - » Email addresses and telephone numbers used by the subject.
  - » Websites used by the subject.
  - » A description of all interactions you have had with the subject.

## Handling family finances in the midst of a missing child case

As an employee, your supervisor or manager may be understanding at first, but later require that you return to work or be let go so your position can be filled. It can be equally difficult if you are a business owner, or are self-employed, as you try to balance the needs of the search with your daily work. For most families of missing children, mounting financial concerns are inevitable. Consider the following:

"I know parents who just walked away from trying to find their child because of the heavy emotional and financial cost involved. It really takes a toll."

Dr. Noelle Hunter

- **Victim compensation funds.** Contact the U.S. Department of Justice's [Office for Victims of Crime](#) or your state attorney general's office to inquire about victim compensation funds. Such funds can cover lost wages and other crime-related expenses. More information is available in chapter 7.
- **Extended leave.** If you need to take a leave of absence from work, talk with your



employer to find out what programs may be available to assist you. Some employers allow employees to donate excess leave time to a colleague in need. Ask a family member, close friend, or a religious/spiritual advisor to speak with your employer on your behalf, if needed.

- **Bill payment extensions.** Talk to mortgage and utility companies, as well as other creditors, to see if you can be granted extra time to pay your bills.
- **Budgeting.** Ask a friend or an accountant to help you rebudget your finances or assist you in restructuring your debt, such as consolidating payments and/or refinancing your house.
- **Financial assistance.** Ask your state missing child/persons clearinghouse about local resources such as social services and emergency financial assistance funds that might provide short- or long-term support.

## Starting a nonprofit organization

As time passes in the search for your child, you may become frustrated and want to increase your level of activity. Some parents in this position establish a nonprofit organization (NPO). This can be a difficult and complicated process, so it is important to determine if there are existing NPOs in your community dedicated to issues involving missing children. If NCMEC has a regional office in your community, they may be able to assist you.

A nonprofit organization must have a broad public purpose (that is, it cannot be devoted to a single child). Although state regulations vary, federal regulations are in place to assure the public that contributions are well managed and used for the organization's stated purpose.

### A WORD OF CAUTION FROM PARENTS OF MISSING CHILDREN

Imagine undergoing the worst possible trauma and deciding that *then* would be a perfect time to start a new business. The startup and maintenance of a nonprofit organization can be incredibly challenging. Make sure you are surrounded by trusted friends or family who can do most of the work, especially at the beginning.

### The following should be considered when establishing a tax-exempt NPO:

- You need a purpose or mission statement, articles of incorporation, bylaws, an operating budget, and a board of directors. You also will need to file necessary documentation with appropriate state and federal agencies.
- You must know the differences between for-profit and nonprofit organizations to maintain the NPO's programmatic and fiscal health.
- You must keep meticulous files, including financial and corporate records, and understand that the files will be accessible to the public. You may also have to meet the standards of charitable watchdog agencies.
- You will need to develop a program that attracts enough interest and financial support for it to be sustainable.
- Consider using an existing NPO to serve as your fiscal agent.



## 5 | Personal and family well-being

*"I felt guilty all the time. I felt guilty about eating, since I didn't know if my daughter was eating. I felt guilty about sleeping, since I didn't know if she was someplace safe that night."*  
– Nacole Svendgard

As difficult as it may be, taking care of yourself is vitally important. It will feel like the last priority; but in reality, it is the first. Your child needs you to be strong and healthy to help bring them home. This will seem overwhelming, even downright impossible. But you can try, one day at a time, to do the best you can for yourself and your family. In this chapter, we – as parents who have been in your situation – offer these hard-learned ways to protect your personal and family well-being.



**"For years I didn't really care about eating healthier or exercising. It was all I could do to just get out of bed in the morning. But I began to realize I had a choice in how I could live my life. And I chose to survive."**

**Patty Wetterling**

Patty Wetterling, right, and husband Jerry show a photo of their son, Jacob, who was abducted at age 11 on October 22, 1989.

## Checklist: Regaining and retaining emotional and physical strength

- Each day, remember to eat and sleep.** The remembering part can be hard, but family and friends can help. You will feel out of time, space, and reality, but nourishment and rest are essential to keep you well enough to engage in the search for your child. If you find it difficult to sleep or eat, ask your physician for help.
- Try your best to attend to daily hygiene needs. Doing so will help you stay grounded.** Take a shower. Put on fresh clothes. Make your bed. Open curtains and blinds to let the light in. Accomplishing these things will help you meet each day with a clearer mind and be ready for action.
- Find productive ways to release your emotions.** Keep a journal, talk with a friend, take a walk, exercise, cook, clean, or work on ideas for the search. There are so many ways to take action and stay connected; let trusted friends and professionals help you discover them.
- Stay away from alcohol, drugs, and harmful medications.** They can prevent you from effectively participating in the search for your child. Moreover, these substances often induce or worsen depression and anxiety.
- Be kind to yourself. Do not blame yourself for your child's disappearance or allow yourself to shoulder blame from others.** Speak to yourself as you would speak to your child. Think unconditional love, guidance rather than guilt, and possibility rather than punishment.
- Do not feel guilty if you need to go back to work.** Remember that you are working to provide a home for your child to return to, and to provide resources for your family's well-being.
- Stay united with your spouse or partner, and close family members, in your collective work to find your child.** Try not to let the stress of the investigation drive a wedge into your family life. While it's human nature to be angry or hurt if others don't respond to your child's disappearance in the way you might expect, avoid judging them. Focus on your needs and what you can do to help in the search for your child.
- Encourage open communication during regular family meetings in a safe, caring, nonjudgmental environment.** Seek professionals to guide these events if needed. Your family is worth every resource you can enlist to stay connected.
- Share age-appropriate information with your missing child's siblings so they aren't caught off guard by breaking leads, news, or rumors.** Avoid grim details, but tell them enough so they feel informed and can come to you with questions. It's often what you don't talk about with kids that scares them the most. "We had family meetings to discuss rumors and to give our children language to respond with if someone blurted out something hurtful," Patty Wetterling recalls.

- Be open to establishing different routines for daily life, and for celebrating birthdays, holidays, and other events.** Retreat to places away from your home, where you and your other children can join friends and find relaxation away from the spotlight of the search and the media.
- Enjoy moments and places of peace, but try not to isolate yourself from people who care about you.** It will be difficult to balance time alone with time engaged with family and the search. Let people know where you are, physically and emotionally, so they can help you reengage if you feel drawn to isolate.
- Seek professional help if you need it – mentally, physically, or spiritually.** Yvonne Ambrose explains the trauma this way: “People diagnose us as having post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but there is no ‘post’ to the stress. The trauma is ongoing.” Don’t discount the intense psychological and physiological impact of what you are going through. Seeking professional help is not only a sign of your desire to be whole and strong for your child, but also essential to your survival.
- If appropriate, let your other children participate in the search, perhaps by distributing posters, fliers, or other materials.** You want to support their needs too, and this can make them feel a part of bringing their sibling home. In the chaos involving their missing sibling, they can feel neglected, even forgotten, and may be hurting in silence. Ask for support from friends, family, and professionals who can help you nurture your other children during this difficult time in life.
- Do not be surprised if you see behavior changes in your other children.** Bed-wetting, stomachaches, depression, anger, sullenness, quietness, and truancy are common reactions. Children, like adults, can have strong reactions to the disappearance of a loved one. On the contrary, some children may not show any change in behavior. An excellent resource, developed by OJJDP, is [What About Me? Coping With the Abduction of a Brother or Sister](#), written by the siblings of abducted children.
- Help your other children return to some type of normalcy by going back to school – but listen carefully to any concerns they may have both before returning and as they reengage with activities.** Ask the school if they can bring counselors into the classroom to discuss the situation with the other children, and encourage them to share any questions or worries with trusted adults. You also can ask your law enforcement team to arrange for an officer to visit the school. They can pair up with school counselors to discuss how to stay safe, get help, and support each other by being kind and supportive.

**FOR COUNSELING AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT, CALL 988 OR VISIT [988LIFELINE.ORG](https://www.988lifeline.org)**

Supported by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, this lifeline is available 24/7 via call, text, and chat to help those who need crisis support – of all kinds. Callers have access to trained counselors who can help anyone experiencing emotional distress. People worried about a loved one in need of crisis support can also contact 988.

- Protect your children from unnecessary scrutiny or attention.** The media may press hard to interview the family together, or even your other children on their own. But because they are dealing with significant worry, sadness, and uncertainty, be careful in exposing them to the media or allowing them to be at an event that could trigger psychological harm.
- Realize that you are human – and only one person.** Trying to provide emotional support for everyone in your family can overwhelm you – especially since life seems to pile on multiple problems at once. Getting through this will truly “take a village.” Use your resources, ask for help, and seek professional support in caring for yourself and your family. “Try not to avoid other crises impacting your family while searching for your child,” says Elaine Hall. “My mom had cancer, and looking back, I wish I would have spent more time with her.”
- Nurture that place in your heart that is so broken.** Take comfort in things that calm your senses. Music, candles, or the aromas from cooking; reading books that uplift and strengthen; the touch or embrace of loved ones; a warm bath, shower, or a swim. You might try writing in a journal, getting outside to feel fresh air on your skin, and watching the sun rise or set. Spending time with your dog, cat, or other beloved family pet can lift your spirits, bringing comfort and smiles. Engaging in prayer, meditation, or a mindfulness practice also can renew your strength. Do whatever gives you comfort.
- Never stop looking.** Set aside time for your missing child each day by making phone calls, writing letters or emails, working with your law enforcement team, or doing research – whatever it takes to stay connected and strengthen the search for your child.
- Remember: Missing children do come home.** And you are not alone.

“We know it’s hard, but do your best to take a deep breath. Take your time. Ask questions. Take comfort in knowing there are many people who can help. You are not alone in this.”

Parents of Missing Children

## Checklist: Reuniting with your child

Recovery can be a confusing and traumatic event for a missing child and the family. So planning for a safe and effective reunification can help greatly. Remember, though, that even after your child has been recovered, law enforcement's work will go on as they continue their investigation. It's important for you to remain available and involved to ensure they arrive at a conclusion in your child's case.

- Work with law enforcement to arrange for an immediate, complete medical examination of your child.** This ensures any urgent problems are treated. It also allows for the collection of critically important DNA and the documentation of any evidence of physical harm and sexual abuse.
- Understand that children who have run away or been lured away will have special needs or challenges.** They may view law enforcement as a threat and fear they may be prosecuted for their activities during the time they were missing. Youth who are lured away from home may also want to protect the abuser, as they've been deceived and brainwashed into seeing them as their protector.
- Request that a trained professional conduct a specialized forensic interview with your child to determine what happened while missing.** The selection of a suitable site for the interview, such as a children's advocacy center, is extremely important. The tone and content of questions asked are also important in order to help your child feel safe in providing honest and complete information. If child advocacy and/or forensic interviewing services are unavailable in your community, have your investigator contact the National Children's Advocacy Center at 256-533-KIDS (5437) or [nationalcac.org](http://nationalcac.org).
- Contact NCMEC for continued family support.** In addition to Team HOPE services, NCMEC's Family Advocacy Outreach Network (FAON) connects victims and families with mental health service providers in their communities who can provide brief, therapeutic intervention or long-term support on a sliding-fee scale or at no cost.
- Seek support for reunification in international parental child abduction (IPCA) cases.** The [Victim Reunification Travel Program](#), funded by the U.S. Department of Justice in partnership with NCMEC for IPCA cases, can assist left-behind parents in traveling abroad to participate in hearings and/or accompany their children back to the United States.

"People think that once you and your child are reunited it's all hugs and kisses and happily-ever-after. But that's really when the hard part starts. It's critical to connect with a survivor-led advocacy group. Before getting a good recommendation for one, we went through a lot of therapists who just didn't get where we were coming from – or where we needed to go as a family."

Nacole Svendgard

## MEET TEAM HOPE – AND BECOME A MEMBER

Team HOPE, a project sponsored by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, is composed of trained volunteers who have experienced the trauma of a missing or exploited child. They provide compassionate peer support to families as they cope with the myriad of issues involved in the search and recovery process for their missing child. Many of the parents who participated in writing this *Guide* have benefited from their assistance – and now volunteer for them. Call 866-305-HOPE (866-305-4673) or visit [missingkids.org/gethelpnow/support/teamhope](https://missingkids.org/gethelpnow/support/teamhope).



Members of NCMEC's Team HOPE

**“A lot of parents find their way through the trauma by doing good deeds for others – by helping the next person navigate the mine field.”**

**Nacole Svendgard**







## 6 | A framework for understanding missing children

### **AMBER Alerts and Endangered Missing Person Alerts: Frequently Asked Questions**

#### **What is AMBER Alert?**

The AMBER Alert Program is a voluntary partnership between broadcasters, transportation agencies, law enforcement agencies, the wireless industry, state lotteries, outdoor advertisers, and others to alert the public about the most serious child abduction cases. AMBER Alerts bolster the public's ability to participate in helping to find an abducted child. AMBER stands for "America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response." The program began in 1996, when Dallas-Fort Worth broadcasters teamed up with local police to create the alert as a solution-based legacy to the abduction and murder of 9-year-old Amber Hagerman in Arlington, Texas.

#### **How do states participate?**

AMBER Alerts are not federally mandated; each state decides if and how it will develop and administer its own program. Recommended criteria for the decision to issue an AMBER Alert, along with best practices for program design, are provided by the U.S. Department of Justice. AMBER Alert programs are currently established in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Indian country, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and [many other countries](#).

#### **Are AMBER Alerts effective?**

As the presence and effectiveness of AMBER Alert programs have grown across the nation, they are proving a deterrent for those who would prey on children. Many perpetrators have released an abducted child after seeing an AMBER Alert.

More information about AMBER Alert programs and outcomes is available at [amberalert.ojp.gov/statistics](http://amberalert.ojp.gov/statistics).

### **What are the criteria for issuing an AMBER Alert?**

Although each state AMBER Alert program determines its own criteria for issuing alerts, most adhere closely to the [DOJ recommended guidelines](#):

- A law enforcement agency has reasonable belief an abduction has occurred.
- The abducted child is age 17 years or younger.
- The abducted child is believed to be in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death.
- There is enough descriptive information about the victim and the abductor for law enforcement to believe an AMBER Alert would assist in the child's recovery.
- The child's name and other critical data have been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database.

### **How does the public receive information about an AMBER Alert?**

AMBER Alerts are disseminated to cellular devices using wireless emergency alerts (WEAs), and to television and radio via the Emergency Alert System (EAS), which interrupts broadcasts to share the information. Both the WEA and EAS notify the public that your child is missing and share basic descriptive information that can help them recognize your child, the suspect (if known), and/or a vehicle (if involved in the incident). Additionally, AMBER Alert information can be shown on highway and toll road signs, lottery kiosks, digital billboards, social media sites, and public safety websites. NCMEC, through its Secondary Distribution Program, will also share AMBER Alert information with partnering outlets, such as transport companies, social media, Internet alerting partners, and nonprofit organizations that are able to reach a large number of people.

### **Are AMBER Alerts issued for all missing children?**

Every missing child case will not necessarily activate an AMBER Alert, even though law enforcement is actively and thoroughly responding to your child's case. There is a protocol and criteria used by police agencies to determine if an AMBER Alert will be activated for a missing child. The local law enforcement agency will make the determination in coordination with the state missing child/persons clearinghouse. AMBER Alert program personnel, working directly with the responding law enforcement agency, do their best to determine if an AMBER Alert will help the case. If so, they work to rapidly issue the alert as part of a larger process of investigative work that continues until the case is resolved. In some missing child cases, other methods will be used to alert the public as information becomes available. These methods still leverage broad and swift notifications, and help in not overusing AMBER Alert-related WEA and EAS messaging, which can desensitize the public and lead to alerts being ignored – or people even opting out of receiving them.

### **Can AMBER Alerts be issued across state and jurisdictional lines?**

Yes. If an abductor takes the child outside the jurisdiction of the issuing law enforcement

agency and crosses state boundaries, the AMBER Alert coordinator who issues the alert can contact other coordinators in the states they believe the abductor may be traveling to or through, with the request for them to issue AMBER Alerts for the case. Today, through better training, collaboration, and technologies that support public alert systems, we can see the power and success of multistate AMBER Alerts through such stories as this one: [“Citizen makes fateful call after multiple state AMBER Alert partners work together to recover missing Tennessee children.”](#)

### **Who can issue AMBER Alerts?**

Only law enforcement agencies can issue AMBER Alerts.

### **How do I find information about my state’s AMBER Alert Plan?**

Visit [amberalert.ojp.gov/amber-alert-contacts](http://amberalert.ojp.gov/amber-alert-contacts) to see listings from NCMEC and the AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program that provide contact information by state. Your investigator and/or family advocate can also answer questions about your state AMBER Alert Plan and its criteria, and ensure you have information on other ways (in the event an AMBER Alert is not the best alerting tool) that law enforcement and NCMEC share critically important information to the right people, at the right times, in your child’s case.

### **What if my child does not meet the criteria for an AMBER Alert?**

An AMBER Alert is just one tool law enforcement uses to find abducted children. Other alerts used throughout the country include the Endangered Missing Advisory/Alert (EMA), which uses many of the same tools as an AMBER Alert. An EMA notifies the public about the disappearance of an at-risk missing child and asks the community to assist in their swift and safe recovery. Other types of endangered missing advisories also may be available within your state. Talk with your investigator or family advocate about what is available for the best and most comprehensive response in your child’s case.

## **DON’T HESITATE – ASK FOR HELP**

If you need information about the categories of missing children, contact NCMEC at 800-THE LOST (800-843-5678). Ask for a NCMEC Case Manager, who can answer any questions you have.

## Endangered missing children

An endangered missing child is someone younger than age 18 who is believed to be in danger because of age, health, mental or physical disability, environment, weather conditions, because they are in the company of a potentially dangerous person, or facing other factor(s) that could cause possible harm or injury. An EMA is a tool available to law enforcement agencies investigating the suspicious disappearance of at-risk missing children or other endangered persons. EMAs provide immediate information to the public to aid in swift recovery.

## Family abduction

A family abduction occurs when a child is taken, wrongfully retained, or concealed by a parent or other family member depriving another individual of their custody or visitation rights. Family abductions are no less urgent, and may have the same potential for danger as stranger abductions or kidnappings. In fact, according to NCMEC, “Decades of research across multiple fields have illustrated the serious and harmful effects that family abductions can have on child victims and their families.” Additional resources pertaining to family abductions are available in chapter 7.

Keep the following in mind when talking to law enforcement about a known or suspected family abduction:

- Be prepared to show law enforcement any legal documentation that you have about a potential abductor, including custody paperwork (current, active, enforceable orders with a judge’s signature), divorce papers, co-parenting plans, and visitation agreements.
- Be forthcoming about family issues or concerns.
- Find more information on family abductions at [missingkids.org/theissues/familyabduction](https://missingkids.org/theissues/familyabduction).
- Seek legal resources pertaining to family abductions at [missingkids.org/gethelpnow/support/legalresources](https://missingkids.org/gethelpnow/support/legalresources).

### MYTH

Just because a child is with a biological family member does not mean they are safe. If you believe your child’s life is in danger for any reason, insist that law enforcement treats the case with urgency.

## Nonfamily abduction

A nonfamily abduction occurs when a child is taken by someone known, but not related, to the child, such as a neighbor or online acquaintance – or by someone who is not known to the child. Nonfamily abductions are the rarest type of case, accounting for 1 percent of missing children reported to NCMEC. While the term “nonfamily abduction” may connote children taken by strangers, in fact, these children often know their abductors.

### TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

Do not feel guilty about relaying to law enforcement your suspicions about someone you know. Keep an open mind and consider all the possibilities. Trust your feelings and share them with your investigator without reservation.

Nonfamily abductions pose significant challenges for law enforcement. Based on a 10-year analysis of data by NCMEC, attempted nonfamily abductions occur more often when a child is going to or from school or school-related activities, and after dinner time. Attempted abductions most often occur on the street while children are playing, walking, or riding bikes. Younger children at risk are more likely to be playing or walking with a parent or an adult, while older children are more likely to be walking alone or with peers. For older children, attempted abductions more often involve a sexual component. For comprehensive information on nonfamily abductions, visit [missingkids.org/theissues/nonfamily](https://missingkids.org/theissues/nonfamily).

## International parental child abduction

International parental child abduction (IPCA) cases present complex legal hurdles that should be met with swift federal response and well-informed law enforcement actions. When a child is wrongfully held in a foreign country, the situation is complicated by language barriers and differing legal systems that tend to favor the abducting parent. These tips will help:

- Because removing a child from your legal care in the U.S. is a federal crime under [18 U.S.C. § 1204](#), immediately call [your local FBI field office](#) to request an investigation.** Speak with the Crimes Against Children Coordinator, and “persist until they respond,” says Jeffery Morehouse.
- Call NCMEC at 800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678) to request their resources and assistance as you work through the following actions:**

- To potentially stop an abduction in progress, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CPB) directs parents to the [State Department Office of Children’s Issues](#) for [Prevent Abduction Program](#) enrollment and 24/7 assistance.

“You may have to educate your law enforcement agency on international parent child abduction (IPCA) cases. It is important to convey that IPCA actions are not a custodial dispute, but a federal crime.”

Dr. Noelle Hunter  
& Jeffery Morehouse

- To open an IPCA case, contact the U.S. Department of State Office of Children’s Issues at 888-407-4747 (U.S. or Canada) or +1-202-501-4444 (international), or email [PreventAbduction1@state.gov](mailto:PreventAbduction1@state.gov). You will be assigned to a country officer to coordinate a federal response. Additional information can be found here: [How the U.S. State Department Can Help if Your Child is Abducted Overseas](#).
- Local law enforcement is required to enter your child’s IPCA case into the NCIC database. If they don’t give this priority, NCMEC can help.
- Contact nonprofit organizations with IPCA advocacy experience in the country where your child is located. Be cautious of people and entities that approach you offering recovery services or other forms of unverifiable assistance.
- Attorneys experienced in IPCA cases can help you prepare paperwork, seek and prepare emergency custodial and return orders, and guide you through the process. The following organizations may have directories of attorneys who are able to help:
  - » American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers: [aaml.org](http://aaml.org)
  - » International Academy of Family Lawyers: [iafl.com](http://iafl.com)
  - » American Bar Association: [americanbar.org](http://americanbar.org)
- For additional resources, refer to the IPCA section in chapter 7.



Jeffery Morehouse, with son Atomu Imoto “Mochi” Morehouse

“I’ve had law enforcement say to me, ‘What do you expect us to do, he’s in Japan?’ and ‘He’s not missing, he’s in Japan,’ though I’ve had no contact with him and no location updates on him for the 12 years since he was kidnapped.”

“I’ve experienced general public responses of ‘At least you know he is safe, he’s with his mother,’ completely discounting that a federal and state crime occurred, and that a healthy parent does not kidnap her child to a foreign country, cutting him off from the only life and people he knows.”

**Jeffery Morehouse**



## CONFRONTING CULTURAL BIAS

Crimes against children of color, Tribal/Indigenous youth, and LGBTQ+ youth are often underreported and not seriously investigated. Cultural backgrounds, language differences, and even behavioral differences as gauged by cultural norms can negatively impact a family's ability to communicate and collaborate effectively with law enforcement. Children at the center of such cases are missing longer and recovered less frequently. One misconception – that such youth make riskier choices (e.g., engaging in sex for money) – prevails, without considering their lack of access to education, healthcare, housing, or good-paying jobs. The problem “is complex, deeply ingrained, and underpinned by institutional racism and bias,” said NCMEC Program Manager Tina Bigdeli, who spoke at AATTAP’s 2022 National AMBER Alert and AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium.

“Everyone’s heritage and values are different, so we should be aware of our biases, and how they affect our perceptions of others,” says AMBER Alert in Indian Country Project Coordinator Valerie Bribiescas, a Navajo Nation member and retired detective for the Maricopa County Attorney’s Office in Arizona. “We should just focus on the facts – and know that oppression is a reality for non-dominant groups.”

Whatever your background, if you have trouble communicating effectively with law enforcement, believe your child’s case is not getting the time it deserves, or feel disrespected, ask to speak with an interpreter. You can also seek help from a faith-based organization, a nonprofit focused on diversity and inclusion, an advocate from your law enforcement agency, or call NCMEC at 800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678) for assistance.

**“Not all parents of missing children are English speaking or understand American laws and cultures. How can we help those parents manage law enforcement agency shortcomings and be the CEO of the search effort for their children?”**

**Ahmad Rivazfar**



Ahmad Rivazfar and daughter Sayeh, an officer with the New York State Police. With them is a picture of Ahmad’s daughter, Sara Rivazfar, who was murdered by her mother’s boyfriend on September 22, 1988.

## The child who runs away or is lured away

In our always-and-everywhere-connected world, in which children and teens often have access to multiple digital devices, an alarming number of children are lured away from home by predators who gain their trust via social media, text messaging, dating apps, and in-game chats. When perpetrators are successful in luring children and teens through deceit and enticement, and make in-person contact, the child may become a victim of physical abuse, sexual exploitation, or gang activity.

Unfortunately, some law enforcement and members of the public regard these children as having made a choice to go, even if they were lured away. Remember: A runaway or lured-away child is a missing child. Always advocate to law enforcement that this is a fact, and your child's case should be given attention consistent with that of any missing child.

### Here are key things to know:

- If your child is older, law enforcement may believe they left willingly, and ultimately will return home. Persist in confirming that law enforcement has taken the full report, and has entered your child into NCIC immediately. This is a law enforcement requirement [codified in federal law](#).
- If your runaway or lured-away child contacts you, assure them that your love is unconditional. Whatever problem that exists can be resolved; you just want them home.
- The National Runaway Safeline provides trusted, compassionate individuals who are available 24/7 to help runaway children and their families. Contact 800-RUNAWAY (800-786-2929) or [1800Runaway.org](https://1800Runaway.org).
- Each state has a missing child/persons clearinghouse that can provide additional information and assistance; see [amberalert.ojp.gov/amber-alert-contacts](https://amberalert.ojp.gov/amber-alert-contacts).
- Follow your child's social media accounts, which they may use while missing. Share any new information with law enforcement the moment you have it.
- Work under the guidance of law enforcement to talk with the families of your child's closest friends to encourage them to share what they know about your child's whereabouts.

**"Don't fall for the phrase, 'Just a runaway.' If your child is under age 18 and out on the streets and alone, or with someone they shouldn't be with, they are at risk of being harmed – or worse."**

**Patty Wetterling**

**"In talking with detectives about runaways, I've heard, 'Well, she's 17 and with her boyfriend.' That's when I respond, 'Well, until she's 18, she's our responsibility.'"**

**Lieutenant Stacie Lick**

CART Coordinator,  
Gloucester County Prosecutor's Office, New Jersey

**"A runaway child is a missing child, and we must assume that the child is in danger and investigate it as such."**

**Charles Fleeger**

Texas Brazos Valley Network  
AMBER Alert Coordinator

## HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING

Child sex trafficking is a crime that often takes place behind closed doors. And while the Internet has been a positive change in our lives, it has also provided opportunities for individuals to harm our children. In 2022, 1 in 6 of the 19,000 reports made to NCMEC for children who had run away were determined likely to be victims of child sex trafficking.

It is important for parents to be aware of the physical and behavioral indicators that may present in children who are being lured, exploited, and/or trafficked.

To learn more about what to look for and how to get help, visit:  
[missingkids.org/theissues/trafficking](https://missingkids.org/theissues/trafficking).

## Missing from care

Children may run away from social services care or from a noncustodial placement. In doing so, they face serious risks to their lives and may become victims of many endangerments, including, but not limited to, child sex trafficking. Regardless of where a child is missing from, it is important for law enforcement to follow the same reporting requirements as they would for any other missing child. For more information, see [missingkids.org/theissues/missingfromcare](https://missingkids.org/theissues/missingfromcare).

## Children with special needs or who are critically missing/lost

The behaviors and actions of a missing child with special needs relating to physical, psychological, or cognitive ability can be very challenging. Understanding differences in behaviors of special needs children can help law enforcement plan and carry out their approach for locating your missing child.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT MISSING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Visit the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at [missingkids.org/theissues/autism](https://missingkids.org/theissues/autism).

If you have a special needs child who goes missing, contact law enforcement immediately and provide information about medications your child needs. Give law enforcement any information relating to your child's disability that may help them recover your child safely, such as whether your child is drawn to certain locations or strongly affected by certain sounds or behaviors.

Those involved in finding missing children with special needs (including law enforcement, search and rescue, and child advocacy professionals) have benefited from increased training, resources, and information about how to best respond in these cases.

For children with autism, a growing body of information and resources is available to aid in the search. Key points to be considered include:

- Wandering or running away from a safe environment.
- Exhibiting less fear of engaging in high-risk behavior, and often heading toward water or active roads and railways.
- Eluding or hiding from search teams in wooded areas or tightly enclosed spaces.
- Being unable to respond to rescuers.

## Tribal or Indigenous missing children

Jurisdictional rights and inadequate resources pose significant obstacles to quickly responding to a child who goes missing on Tribal land. This stems from Tribes' historically fraught relationship with the federal government, and in turn, issues of Tribal sovereignty. Criminal jurisdiction in Indian country depends on where a crime was committed, who committed it, the type of crime, and if any active memoranda of understanding exist. These issues are further compounded by:

- A lack of available funding for Tribal law enforcement staffing, training, and equipment to effectively investigate missing child cases.
- Expanses of difficult terrain that pose challenges for wireless, broadband, and roadway messaging infrastructure needed for emergency public alerting systems.
- A dearth of available data on crime in Indian country.

Efforts to change this, however, are currently underway thanks to [DOJ's Tribal Justice programs](#), [AMBER Alert in Indian Country](#), and [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons](#) initiatives. The Bureau of Indian Affairs ([BIA](#)) and the [FBI](#) are also working diligently to improve the response for missing persons and crimes against persons in Indian country.



Law enforcement officers from various agencies gather for an AMBER Alert in Indian Country photo session in Fort McDowell, Arizona.

### TRIBAL LAW ENFORCEMENT SUPPORT

Following passage of the [Ashlynnne Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act of 2018](#), an increasing number of the nation's 574 federally recognized Tribes are getting the training and technical equipment they need to protect their children. The Act – now supported by DOJ partnerships with the AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program and AMBER Alert in Indian Country initiative – was passed in response to the abduction and murder of [Ashlynnne Mike](#) on the Navajo Nation in 2016. The crime exposed major communication weaknesses and jurisdictional misunderstandings that were faced not only by the nation's largest Tribe – spanning 3 states and 27,000 square miles – but also by Tribes everywhere. The Act has helped improve collaboration between Tribes and their regional or state emergency alert coordinators.





## 7 | Resources and readings

Federal, state, Tribal, local, and nonprofit entities work with and support families of missing children and the law enforcement agencies working their cases. An array of resources are offered in the form of staffing, equipment, operational guides and best practices, training, and technical assistance vital to communities' readiness to respond when a child is missing. The following list is not exhaustive, but it can provide you with a solid base of resources for seeking assistance in partnership with your law enforcement team.

"I admire and support the crusaders who live the cause of protecting our kids, of helping families bring their children home. My daughter is now one of them!"

Ahmad Rivazfar

### U.S. Department of Homeland Security

#### Child Exploitation Investigations Unit (CEIU)

[dhs.gov/news/2022/04/04/fact-sheet-dhs-efforts-combat-child-exploitation-and-abuse](https://dhs.gov/news/2022/04/04/fact-sheet-dhs-efforts-combat-child-exploitation-and-abuse)

The Department of Homeland Security's Child Exploitation Investigations Unit is part of the Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Cyber Crimes Center, which leads the nation in the fight against online child sexual abuse. CEIU detects and apprehends producers and distributors of child sexual abuse material and perpetrators of transnational child sexual abuse, identifies and rescues child victims around the world, and trains domestic and international law enforcement partners in innovative investigative practices. Its programs include:

- **The CEIU Victim Identification Program (VIP)** uses state-of-the-art technologies and traditional investigative techniques to identify and rescue child victims of sexual exploitation throughout the world.

- **The HSI Victim Assistance Program** supports child victims of abuse and sexual exploitation by providing emergency services and crisis response; and arranging short- and long-term direct services, such as legal representation, mental health treatment, and nongovernment organization support.

### **Prevent Abduction Program, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)**

888-407-4747 (U.S./Canada)

[help.cbp.gov/s/article/Article-827?language=en\\_US](https://help.cbp.gov/s/article/Article-827?language=en_US) or [cbp.gov/travel/international-child-abduction-prevention-and-return-act](https://cbp.gov/travel/international-child-abduction-prevention-and-return-act)

CBP's Prevent Abduction Program can help prevent international parental child abductions. CBP coordinates with the U.S. Department of State's Office of Children's Issues (OCI) on IPCA cases.

- OCI submits potential IPCA cases to CBP for enrollment into CBP's Prevent Abduction Program. IPCA cases must include a valid, enforceable U.S. court order indicating the child is prohibited from being removed from the United States.
- CBP creates travel alerts for a child at risk of IPCA and any potential abductor(s) involved.
- CBP continuously monitors Advance Passenger Information System (APIS) data in real time on passengers traveling to and from the United States using commercial carriers, vetting that information against the travel alerts.
- If a child at risk of IPCA or a potential abductor attempts to travel aboard a commercial carrier, their travel alert data will be matched against their APIS data, notifying CBP automatically.
- Once travel is identified, CBP notifies OCI and coordinates with CBP officers at the airport, seaport, or land border points of entry to intercept the child before departure.
- CBP personnel at airport, seaport, or land border points of entry further coordinate with local law enforcement to enforce the valid court order.

## **U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ)**

### **Federal Bureau of Investigation Violent Crimes Against Children Program (VCAC)**

[fbi.gov/investigate/violent-crime/vcac](https://fbi.gov/investigate/violent-crime/vcac)

The FBI's Violent Crimes Against Children Program provides rapid, proactive, and comprehensive assistance and direction to counter threats of abuse and exploitation to children when those crimes fall under the authority of the FBI. VCAC can help identify, locate, and recover child victims. It focuses on child abductions, contact offenses against children, sexual exploitation of children, trafficking, and international parental child abduction. FBI resources include:

- **Child Abduction Rapid Deployment (CARD)** teams. CARD teams are composed of law enforcement personnel who have experience investigating crimes against children, especially in cases where a child has been abducted by someone other than a family member. CARD teams provide on-the-ground investigative, technical, and resource assistance to state and local law enforcement.



- **The Endangered Child Alert Program (ECAP)** focuses on identifying unknown individuals involved in the sexual abuse of children and the production of child sexual abuse material. ECAP, a collaborative effort between the FBI and NCMEC, seeks national and international exposure of unknown adults (referred to as John/Jane Does). More information is available at [fbi.gov/wanted/ecap](https://fbi.gov/wanted/ecap).
- **The Violent Crimes Against Children International Task Force** is a select cadre of international law enforcement experts who work together to formulate and deliver a global response to online child exploitation. The largest task force of its kind in the world, it is composed of 68 online child sexual exploitation investigators from 46 countries. More information is available at [fbi.gov/investigate/violent-crime/vcac/international-task-force](https://fbi.gov/investigate/violent-crime/vcac/international-task-force).
- **The FBI Child ID App** provides a convenient place to electronically store photos and other vital information about your children. The app is free for Android and Apple/iOS devices. More information is available at [fbi.gov/news/stories/fbi-releases-new-version-of-child-id-app](https://fbi.gov/news/stories/fbi-releases-new-version-of-child-id-app).

### Office for Victims of Crime (OVC)

[ovc.ojp.gov](https://ovc.ojp.gov)

**Victim Compensation:** OVC administers the [Crime Victims Fund](#), which is financed in large part by fines and penalties paid by convicted federal offenders. Each year OVC channels millions of dollars to every state, U.S. territory, and participating Tribes to supplement state funding to support training and capacity-building programs for service providers. Funds are also used for crime victim compensation programs, victim assistance programs, and services to help victims in the immediate aftermath of a crime as they rebuild their lives. Crime victim compensation is the direct payment to a victim or their family to help cover crime-related expenses, such as medical treatment, mental health counseling, lost wages, or funeral services. This includes funds to reimburse victims for out-of-pocket expenses resulting from a crime. Every state administers a crime victim compensation program, with most having similar eligibility requirements and comparable benefits. To find your state victim compensation agency, visit [ovc.ojp.gov/help-for-victims/help-in-your-state](https://ovc.ojp.gov/help-for-victims/help-in-your-state).

**Human Trafficking Services and Task Forces:** OVC is the largest federal funder of services for human trafficking victims throughout the nation. For more information about its services, visit this interactive map: [ovc.ojp.gov/program/human-trafficking/map](https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/human-trafficking/map).

### THE ADVANTAGE OF VICTIM ADVOCATES

Victim advocates are usually co-located, or work in conjunction with, federal, state, Tribal, or local law enforcement or prosecutors' offices. Ask law enforcement to arrange for a victim advocate to come to your home to explain your rights, and the counseling, treatment, and related services available to you.

A list of crime victim service agencies can be found at:  
[ovc.ojp.gov/directory-crime-victim-services/](https://ovc.ojp.gov/directory-crime-victim-services/)  
 and  
[ovc.ojp.gov/help-for-victims/help-in-your-state](https://ovc.ojp.gov/help-for-victims/help-in-your-state).

## **National Institute of Justice (NIJ)**

[nij.ojp.gov](http://nij.ojp.gov)

## **National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs)**

[namus.nij.ojp.gov](http://namus.nij.ojp.gov)

The National Missing and Unidentified Persons System is a national information clearinghouse and resource center for missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases across the United States. NamUs provides technology, forensic services, and investigative support to help resolve these cases. Funded and administered by the National Institute of Justice, and managed through a contract with RTI International, all NamUs resources are provided at no cost to law enforcement, medical examiners, coroners, allied forensic professionals, and family members of missing persons. NamUs provides tools that empower family members of missing persons to enter and search case information, connecting them with criminal justice professionals who can help in the search for their missing loved ones.

## **Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)**

[ojjdp.ojp.gov](http://ojjdp.ojp.gov)

OJJDP's Delinquency Prevention and Child Protection (DPCP) division oversees efforts to protect children from violence, abuse, neglect, and other forms of victimization. The division focuses on protecting children from such crimes, responding to youth violence, and holding youth appropriately accountable to both crime victims and communities. DPCP administers programs related to crimes against children, including missing children, Internet crimes, and commercial sexual exploitation of children.

The following are four major initiatives that OJJDP funds to support missing and exploited children and their families:

- **AMBER Alert** [amberalert.ojp.gov](http://amberalert.ojp.gov)  
The AMBER Alert System began in 1996 when Dallas-Fort Worth broadcasters teamed with local police to develop an early warning system to help find abducted children. It was created as a legacy to 9-year-old Amber Hagerman, who was kidnapped while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas, and then brutally murdered. The AMBER Alert section in chapter 6 provides information on how AMBER Alerts operate. A list of AMBER Alert coordinators throughout the country is available at [amberalert.ojp.gov/amber-alert-contacts](http://amberalert.ojp.gov/amber-alert-contacts).
- **AMBER Alert in Indian Country (AIIC)** [amber-ic.org](http://amber-ic.org)  
The AMBER Alert in Indian Country initiative assists Tribal communities in developing programs to safely recover endangered missing or abducted children through the coordinated efforts of the Tribes and their local, state, and federal partners. AIIC provides training and technology to enhance response capacities and increase public participation in protecting children.
- **AMBER Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP)** [amberadvocate.org](http://amberadvocate.org)  
AATTAP's mission is to safely recover missing, endangered, and abducted children through the coordinated efforts of law enforcement, the media, transportation, and

other partners. AATTAP provides training and technology to enhance response capacities and capabilities, and increase public participation.

- **Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force Program (ICAC)**

[icactaskforce.org](http://icactaskforce.org)

The ICAC program helps state and local law enforcement agencies develop effective responses to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and Internet crimes against children. ICAC is a national network of 61 coordinated task forces representing more than 5,400 federal, state, and local law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies engaged in proactive and reactive investigations, forensic investigations, and criminal prosecutions. This includes forensic and investigative components, training and technical assistance, victim services, and community education. The program was developed to respond to the increasing number of children and teens using the Internet, the proliferation of child sexual abuse images available electronically, and heightened online activity by predators seeking unsupervised contact with underage victims.

## U.S. Department of State

### **Bureau of Consular Affairs (BCA)**

[state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-management/bureau-of-consular-affairs](http://state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-management/bureau-of-consular-affairs)

The BCA helps victims of domestic violence. Consular staff can help to identify domestic violence victim assistance, such as counseling referrals, domestic violence shelter information, and compensation resources that may be available in the local community, as well as resources if/when the child victim returns to the United States.

### **Office of Children's Issues (OCI)**

888-407-4747 (U.S./Canada) | +1-202-501-4444 (international)

[travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction.html](http://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction.html)

The Office of Children's Issues is the central authority responsible for implementing the Hague Abduction Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. This international treaty provides a civil legal framework to promptly return children to their country of habitual residence after their wrongful removal or retention by one parent.

As IPCA cases are complicated, knowing which countries are treaty partners with the United States is important. OCI also assists in and provides information on preventing IPCA cases. More information is available at [travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/abductions/hague-abduction-country-list.html](http://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/abductions/hague-abduction-country-list.html).

For parents whose child was taken from the United States to a country that is not party to the Hague Child Abduction Convention, contact OCI to determine what other options are available. In these instances, attorneys can play an important role, such as representing a parent who fears a parental abduction may take place, or advising parents whose children have already been abducted to another country.

Contact the closest U.S. embassy or consulate for a list of attorneys in that foreign country. To find a U.S. attorney, visit:

- American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers: [aaml.org](http://aaml.org)
- International Academy of Family Lawyers: [iafl.com](http://iafl.com)
- American Bar Association: [americanbar.org](http://americanbar.org)

## **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)**

800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678) or [missingkids.org](http://missingkids.org)

NCMEC is a private, nonprofit corporation whose mission is to help find missing children, reduce the incidence of child sexual exploitation, and prevent child victimization. NCMEC works with families, victims, private industry, law enforcement, and the public to help prevent child abductions, recover missing children, and provide services to deter and combat child sexual exploitation.

NCMEC provides a wide range of services and resources for families of missing and exploited children, including:

- Distribution of pictures and posters of missing children worldwide. NCMEC can rapidly create and disseminate posters to help generate leads. To speak to a case manager, call 800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678). The case manager can coordinate with the investigating law enforcement agency, communicate with federal agencies to aid in the location and recovery of missing children, provide peer support and resources, and give families access to referrals for emotional or counseling needs.
- Team Adam, a free resource provided to law enforcement, provides rapid, onsite assistance to law enforcement agencies and families in critical cases of missing children. Team Adam consultants are retired law enforcement professionals who have a minimum of 10 years of experience at the federal, state, and local levels. Consultants deploy to sites where these cases are unfolding to provide on-the-ground technical assistance and connect law enforcement to a national network of resources. The program's unique access to NCMEC's resources provides departments with added tools to help address complex, media-intensive cases. To connect with Team Adam, contact NCMEC at 800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678).
- Information and technical assistance to members of the public. If you become aware of child sexual abuse material, online enticement of a minor, or other online exploitation of children, report it to the [CyberTipline](#).
- Training, technical assistance, and support to state missing child/persons clearinghouses, and state and local law enforcement agencies. NCMEC assists state and local law enforcement through both training and operational support in missing child cases, best practices for NCIC entries, and is federally authorized to assist with AMBER Alert secondary distribution.
- Peer support to parents and families. NCMEC's [Team HOPE](#) provides volunteers who have personally lived through an experience with a missing or exploited

child. They offer compassion, empathy, understanding, kindness, and friendship to victims and their families.

- Written resources, in English and Spanish, on topics relating to missing children, child sexual exploitation, safety, and prevention. Visit [missingkids.org/ourwork/publications](https://missingkids.org/ourwork/publications).

## Missing children nonprofit organizations specializing in IPCA

### **Bring Abducted Children Home**

657-464-3579 or [bachome.org](https://bachome.org)

Bring Abducted Children Home is dedicated to the immediate return of internationally abducted children wrongfully detained in Japan. The organization strives to end Japan's human rights violation of denying children unfettered access to both parents.

Email: [bachome@bachome.org](mailto:bachome@bachome.org).

### **Bring Our Kids Home**

973-878-1701 or [bringourkidshome.org/index](https://bringourkidshome.org/index)

Bring Our Kids Home is a parent-led organization seeking the immediate return of children kidnapped from the United States to India. The organization works actively on victim support, policy research, advocacy, and awareness campaigns.

Email: [info@bringourkidshome.org](mailto:info@bringourkidshome.org).

### **International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC)**

703-837-6313 or [icmec.org](https://icmec.org)

ICMEC works with countries committed to building or improving upon the systems to prevent and respond to cases of missing children, child sexual exploitation, or abuse. Through research, ICMEC identifies gaps in international child protection systems that leave children vulnerable, trains professionals to protect children from harm, and fosters conditions for systemic change. ICMEC connects parents and victims to [helplines and hotlines](#) that offer support services and ways to report illegal activity, including online sexual abuse material or imagery.

Email: [information@icmec.org](mailto:information@icmec.org).

### **iStand Parent Network**

606-356-8371 or [istandparentnetwork.com](https://istandparentnetwork.com)

iStand empowers parents to recover their children from international parental child abduction and wrongful retention, and advocates for domestic and international policy reforms that return children home. Emergent technologies, resource referrals, and domestic and international gatherings are used to learn from each other and create international awareness of the prevalence and reality of this growing problem.

Email: [istand@istandparentnetwork.com](mailto:istand@istandparentnetwork.com).

## The Coalition to End International Parental Child Abduction

[endchildabduction.org](http://endchildabduction.org)

The Coalition is composed of several organizations united to work to end international parental kidnapping of children through advocacy and public policy reform. The Coalition advocates for an end to IPCA; justice for abducting parents, aiders, and abettors; and legal and public policy reform to return children home.

THE AMBERADVOCATE

Visit [AMBERAdvocate.org/families](http://AMBERAdvocate.org/families)

Here you will find important resources, videos with advice shared from parents and helping professionals, and evolving information to support families of missing children.



## Other resources

### Missing Child/Persons Clearinghouses

Missing child/persons clearinghouses are state agencies often housed within, or operationally connected to, the state police, highway patrol, or a top-level law enforcement agency. To learn more about the services and contact information for your state's clearinghouse, visit [missingkids.org/gethelpnow/clearinghouses](http://missingkids.org/gethelpnow/clearinghouses).

### National Association For Search And Rescue (NASAR)

877-893-0702 or [nasar.org](http://nasar.org)

Established in 1972, NASAR is a nonprofit organization that represents all search and rescue volunteers using national accredited standards. NASAR understands that improperly conducted searches, in which untrained or unsupervised volunteers do not follow established protocols, will adversely impact your child's case.

### National Runaway Safeline

800-RUN-AWAY (800-786-2929) or [1800runaway.org](http://1800runaway.org)

The National Runaway Safeline operates 24/7 for a child who has run away or the family of that child. Staff are available to listen and offer confidential, nondirective, and nonjudgmental support that can guide the caller through solutions to improve their situation.

## Recommended readings

### ***A Stolen Life* by Jaycee Dugard** (Simon & Schuster, 2011)

This is the memoir of Jaycee Dugard, who was abducted in 1991 at age 11. Jaycee tells her personal story from the time of her abduction through 2011. She talks about her experiences, including how she felt after being found.

### ***Dear Jacob: A Mother's Journey of Hope* by Patty Wetterling** (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2023)

Patty shares the untold story of the 27-year-long search for her son Jacob after he was abducted on October 22, 1989. She details the investigation as it unfolds, discusses her family's struggles, and shows how she maintained her energy and optimism – choosing to focus on hope.

### ***I Know My First Name Is Steven* by Mike Echols** (Pinnacle Books, 1991)

The author describes the long ordeal of two children who were kidnapped by Kenneth Parnell and the trauma they faced. It is a true account of Steven Stayner's 7-year ordeal and his parents' commitment to bring him home safely.

### ***I Promise I'll Find You* by Patricia Heather Ward** (Firefly Books, 1994)

This heartwarming children's book tells the story of a mother who promises to do everything humanly possible to find her child should that child ever become lost or missing from home.

### ***Missing Child, Emergency Response, Quick Reference Guide*** (U.S. Department of Justice/Office of Justice Programs/Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2019)

This quick-reference guide for families offers instructions on what to do if parents believe their child is missing. Available at [ojjdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/media/document/254775.pdf](https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/media/document/254775.pdf).

### ***Tears of Rage* by John Walsh** (Pocket Books, 1997)

This book recounts the powerful and emotional story of John and Revé Walsh following the 1981 abduction and murder of their 6-year-old son Adam. The book also chronicles John Walsh's exhaustive efforts on behalf of missing and exploited children.

### ***The Crime of Family Abduction*** (U.S. Department of Justice/Office of Justice Programs/Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2010)

Written from the perspective of an abducted child and a searching parent, this guide offers insight into what it means to be abducted by a family member. It provides personal stories on what happens to a child who is abducted as well as the feelings of the searching parent, how to plan for a recovery, and helpful resources. Available in English at [ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/229933.pdf](https://ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/229933.pdf) or in Spanish at [ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/234086.pdf](https://ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/234086.pdf).

**What About Me? Coping With the Abduction of a Brother or Sister** (U.S. Department of Justice/Office of Justice Programs/Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2007)

Written by siblings of children who were abducted, this guide contains information to help children coping with a kidnapped sibling. It provides ideas on what siblings can expect in terms of the feelings they may experience, the events that may occur from day to day, and the things they can do to help themselves feel better. Written in child-friendly language, it is divided into sections that include home, family, law enforcement, media, school and work, and holidays and anniversaries. The guide also contains activity pages for children of all ages, including those who are too young to read. Available at [ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/217714.pdf](http://ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/217714.pdf).

**You're Not Alone: The Journey From Abduction to Empowerment** (U.S. Department of Justice/Office of Justice Programs/Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2008)

This guide presents stories from those who survived a child abduction and how they have grown and developed after their traumatic experiences. Written by survivors of child abduction, it provides information to help other survivors cope with their own experiences and begin their journey toward a better future. The guide also contains blank space where readers can write their thoughts and feelings about each story. Available in English at [ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/221965.pdf](http://ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/221965.pdf) or in Spanish at [ojdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/pubs/237774.pdf](http://ojdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/pubs/237774.pdf).







## About the parents and their children

Throughout this *Guide*, you have heard from the parents of cherished children – Desiree, Dylan, Jacob, Jessika, Mochi, Morgan, Muna, and Sara – children abducted by a stranger, kidnapped overseas by a parent, lured online by a sex trafficker, or fatally injured by a trusted adult. You have read about the anguish, challenges, and ordeals each parent faced following their child’s disappearance. For that, we are humbled and honored that they chose to share their painful experiences while providing you with invaluable, hard-won advice. They also want you to know this: You are not alone.

These eight parents – Ahmad, Colleen, Elaine, Jeffery, Nacole, Noelle, Patty, and Yvonne – graciously provided their time, thoughts, ideas, emotions, and guidance to updating this fifth edition of the *Guide*. Individually, they each relived their experiences in order to equip you with the critical knowledge, insights, and resources to help you navigate the uncharted, often-difficult journey of locating your child with the help of law enforcement.

While words cannot adequately express our gratitude to these eight inspiring individuals, we hope this *Guide* will make them proud of their contributions to it – to strengthen the wisdom and fortitude of families seeking answers – and their loved ones.



## Yvonne Ambrose

Yvonne Ambrose is an anti-human-trafficking advocate, mother of a beautiful daughter taken from her by traffickers, and a voice for change. Yvonne was met with the horrible reality of sex trafficking in 2016, when her daughter, Desiree Robinson, was taken advantage of by a trafficker intent on stealing her innocence and exploiting her, posting inappropriate pictures of her, and selling her on Backpage.com. On December 24, 2016, Desiree was taken to meet a “John” who responded to the Backpage.com ad. When she tried to protect herself and leave, the “John” raped and brutally murdered her.

Since this horrible act, Yvonne has dedicated her life to getting justice for Desiree and all other Jane Does in the world who don’t have a voice. She has become a sought-after speaker, advocate, and educator for victims, survivors and their families, and others who want to learn more about the dangers of sex trafficking. She has shared her daughter’s story with numerous media and production groups, and through numerous human trafficking awareness discussion panels.

In 2017, Yvonne gave powerful testimony before a Senate committee during a hearing to amend the 1934 Communications Act to increase protections for the ability to take civil action and make criminal prosecution in cases of sex trafficking of children, and cases where children are taken by force, fraud, or coercion. Her testimony helped fuel the unanimous passing by all 65 Senate cosponsors of the [Allow States and Victims To Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act \(SESTA\)](#).



Desiree Robinson



Yvonne Ambrose and daughter Desiree Robinson

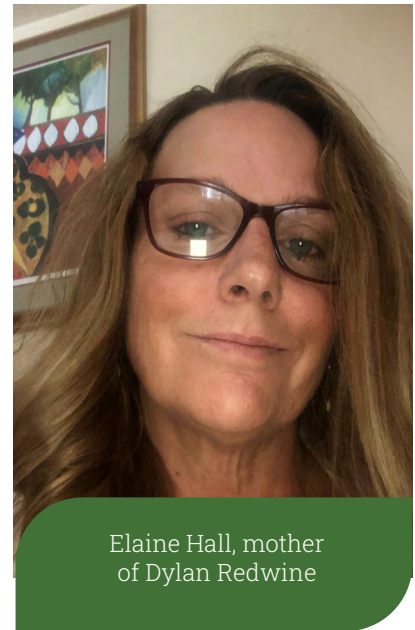
In 2018, Yvonne witnessed the signing of SESTA at the White House. She spoke about the importance of this legislation on that day, stating, “To lose your child who has been trafficked, which is modern-day slavery in our country, and to get that call on Christmas Eve that your one daughter, your oldest child, has been brutally murdered because she said, ‘no,’ because she did not want to be a part of this, is the worst thing.” Yvonne has made it her life’s goal to spread awareness about the horrors of online sex trafficking so that children won’t fall victim to predators who profit from exploiting our children.

Yvonne describes her daughter as “a beautiful, young girl born and raised on the South Side of Chicago, with a smile to brighten any room. She had a bright future with hopes of being a physician in the U.S. Air Force.” She also recalls one of Desiree’s favorite quotes: “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

## Elaine Hall

Elaine Hall is the mother of Dylan Redwine. In 2012, 13-year-old Dylan went to visit his biological father near Durango, Colorado, and never returned to his Monument, Colorado, home. On November 19, 2012, Elaine's former husband texted her to ask if she had heard from Dylan. Panicking, Elaine grabbed her oldest son, Cory, and made the six-hour journey to Durango. Elaine worked with various law enforcement agencies to search for her son. Tragically, Dylan's partial remains were found in June 2013, just a few miles from his father's home.

Elaine was steadfast and determined to seek justice for her son's murder. She learned about the laws and legal structure in La Plata County, where Dylan went missing. She initiated meetings with all who could help – sheriffs, detectives, investigators, the FBI, district attorneys – anyone who would listen. She realized she had to take the lead and become her son's advocate to find the resources needed to achieve her goal. Without her perseverance, that goal might not have been realized.



Elaine Hall, mother  
of Dylan Redwine



Dylan Redwine

In July 2021, after a lengthy battle, Elaine's ex-husband was found guilty of second-degree murder and child abuse resulting in death, and was sentenced to 48 years in prison. "While justice was served for my son, the daily pain of living without him will never go away," she says. "I have learned so much through this process and would not wish this on anyone. But through it all, I have become a voice for other families, and have the persistence to work diligently with law enforcement agencies to find missing children. To anyone facing such an ordeal, please do not be afraid, intimidated, or feel it is not your place to speak up. You must be your child's voice when theirs is silenced."

Visit Dylan's Facebook tribute page at [facebook.com/FindMissingDylanRedwine](https://facebook.com/FindMissingDylanRedwine).

## Dr. Noelle Hunter

Dr. Noelle Hunter is cofounder of the nonprofit group iStand Parent Network Inc., which helps parents and families reunite with their internationally abducted children. In December 2011, Noelle's 4-year-old daughter, Maayimuna "Muna" N'Diaye, was abducted from her Morehead, Kentucky, home by her noncustodial father, who smuggled her out of the United States to live in his native Mali, West Africa. Noelle began a relentless quest to bring her beloved "Muna" home.

The Mission4Muna campaign garnered international attention, as well as high-profile support at home. Expressing her indescribable pain and heartbreak, Noelle staged protests in front of the Embassy of Mali in Washington, DC, pleaded with the United Nations members to help return her daughter, and worked with a Kentucky congressional delegation to pressure the Mali government to return Muna to her rightful home. "Until she's home, I won't sit down, I won't shut up, I won't be quiet," she attested.



Dr. Noelle Hunter, mother of Muna



Maayimuna N'Diaye, "Muna"

Thanks to a global network of Mission4Muna supporters, Muna was finally able to return home in July 2014. Inspired and strengthened by the positive outcome of advocacy work, Noelle formed the iStand Parent Network, which joins forces with other parents, advocates, and friends of internationally abducted children to prevent such crimes and bring them safely home.

Muna – a beautiful young woman and a skillful artist – vividly recalls most of her experiences, which she now shares in her role as a youth ambassador for the iStand Parent Network. She serves as a friend and mentor to other youth survivors of international parental abductions. For more information, see [istandparentnetwork.com](http://istandparentnetwork.com).

## Jeffery Morehouse

On Father's Day 2010, Jeffery Morehouse dropped off his son, Atomu Imoto "Mochi" Morehouse, for what was to be a weeklong visit with his mother. He has not seen or heard from his son since. While passport and travel restraints were in place for Mochi (since his noncustodial mother was a Japanese citizen), efforts to keep him from becoming a victim of international parental child abduction (IPCA) failed. Although IPCA is a federal crime under [18 U.S.C. § 1204](#), and Jeffery's sole custody order was recognized as legal by Japanese courts in 2014 and 2017, Mochi remains kidnapped and cut off from communications with his father.



Jeffery Morehouse

"Imagine being a child whose mother steals you away to a foreign country. Then she tells you that your father does not want you anymore, or that he is dead. Your whole life will be built on a foundation of lies," Jeffery says. "This is not what a healthy, nurturing parent does." Every day is filled with triggering reminders of his son – "a familiar phrase, a look, or smell can remind me of life before my son's abduction. Then I realize he's still missing. The nightmare continues. The search continues."



Atomu Imoto Morehouse,  
"Mochi"

An award-winning filmmaker, Jeffery volunteers much of his time to serving as Executive Director of Bring Abducted Children Home (BAC Home), a nonprofit organization dedicated to the immediate return of internationally abducted children wrongfully detained in Japan. BAC Home aims to end Japan's human rights violation of denying children unfettered access to both parents, and works to increase public awareness about the crisis of IPCA. Jeffery is also a founding partner in The Coalition to End International Parental Child Abduction ([endchildabduction.org](#)), which unites organizations in their efforts to combat IPCA crimes through advocacy and public policy reform.

Jeffery has testified for and briefed the U.S. Congress numerous times and advocates for improvements in federal and state legislation. In October 2022, he briefed the United Nations Human Rights Committee in Geneva on parental child abduction for its review of Japan. He believes it is vital for parents of internationally kidnapped children to strategically engage in raising awareness about this agonizing human and family rights crisis. To learn more about Mochi's kidnapping and Jeffery's advocacy work, visit [bringmochihome.wordpress.com](#) and [bachome.org](#).

## Colleen Nick

Colleen Nick is the mother of Morgan Nick, who at age 6 was kidnapped from a Little League baseball game while catching fireflies with friends. Since that day (June 9, 1995), finding Morgan has been the top priority for Colleen and her family. Without hesitation, she closed her personal business and began the fight to bring Morgan home.

In 1996, Colleen formed the Morgan Nick Foundation and serves as CEO. Since that time, she and her foundation have assisted thousands of families in crisis, successfully providing intervention, support, and reunification assistance to missing children, missing adults, and their families. The foundation actively provides prevention education programs for children, schools, and law enforcement. Colleen was also instrumental in the adoption of AMBER Alert in her home state of Arkansas.



Colleen Nick, mother of Morgan Nick

Colleen is a nationally recognized advocate for missing children and adults. She has spoken to numerous groups, including the FBI's Training Academy in Quantico, Virginia; the National Homicide Investigators Symposium; and at National Missing Children's Day with former Attorney General Janet Reno. She has also visited the White House to meet with U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush to explore new resources in the ongoing fight for missing children.



Side-by-side age-progression photos of Morgan Nick made by NCMEC

As a consultant with the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), and an Associate with the National Criminal Justice Training Center of Fox Valley Technical College, Colleen travels around the nation to train law enforcement about missing and exploited children. She is the co-founder of NCMEC's Team HOPE, a peer support mentoring program for families of the missing. Additionally, she served on NCMEC's Board of Directors for 17 years and on the Arkansas Crime

Victims Reparations Board for 15 years. She is currently an advisory board member for the Criminal Justice Institute, which oversees the statewide network of Child Abduction Response Teams (CART) in Arkansas. Colleen's passion and unwavering hope motivate her daily fight for America's missing. As she explains, "Hope is not a strategy; it is an action." Learn more at [morgannickfoundation.com](http://morgannickfoundation.com), and watch the documentary "[Still Missing Morgan.](#)"



## Ahmad Rivazfar

Ahmad Rivazfar, born and educated in Tehran, Iran, emigrated to the United States in 1976. After joining the U.S. Navy, he became a pilot and earned his wings on March 30, 1979. That day would also be special for another reason: He learned that he and his wife were expecting their first child. After a brief return to his native Iran, where the political landscape had dramatically changed (putting a strain on his marriage), he and his wife divorced in 1985 after returning to the U.S. By that time they had three children: daughters Sayeh and Sara, and son Arash, who lived with their mother in Pensacola, Florida (despite Ahmad's protestations about her ability to properly care for them). Ahmad, who lived in Rochester, New York, worked several jobs to afford the monthly 20-hour journey to see his children.



Ahmad Rivazfar and daughter Sayeh, a New York State Police Officer, with a photo of Sara Rivazfar, murdered by her mother's boyfriend on September 22, 1988

After discovering that his daughters had reported being physically and sexually abused by friends of their mother, who suffered drug and alcohol problems, Ahmad attempted to gain custody of his family. Soon, however, he learned something terrible had happened to his daughters, and drove 1,200 miles nonstop to be present during the investigation. Upon his arrival in Florida, Ahmad was taken to identify 6-year-old Sara's body. He then visited Sayeh in the hospital. Both girls had been violently assaulted, with only 8-year-old Sayeh surviving. "That was a very dark time in my life," Ahmad says of the crimes committed by their mother's boyfriend on September 22, 1988. Ahmad was granted custody of his children, with Sayeh later calling him the family's "rock."

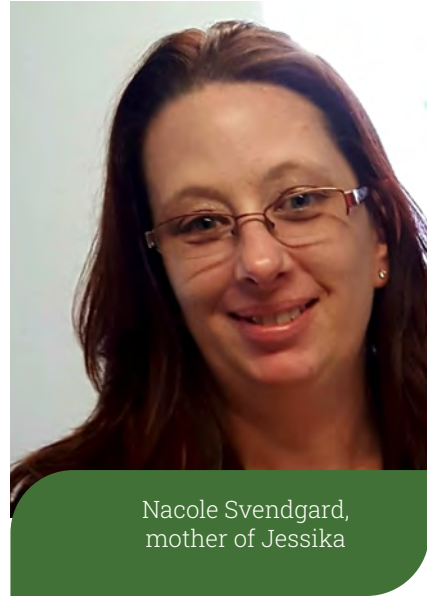


Ahmad Rivazfar with his family

Sayeh channeled her trauma into helping others, becoming a New York State Police officer in 2001. In 1996 Ahmad became a Team HOPE volunteer for NCMEC, and the next year started a foundation with other parent-survivors who lobbied for the [PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008](#). Ahmad believes his heritage played a key role in the girls' reported abuse not being taken seriously, and for "being treated like I was the criminal during the investigation." In 2010, Ahmad and his friend, Ed Smart (father of kidnapping survivor Elizabeth Smart), successfully completed a 2,600-mile bicycle ride from Rochester to Los Angeles to increase public awareness about America's missing children. For more about the Rivazfar family tragedy, see [statetroopers.org/blog/181-a-survivor-and-a-fighter-state-trooper-sayeh-rivazfar-shares-her-story-of-overcoming-horror-to-reach-her-goals](#).

## Nacole Svendgard

Nacole Svendgard has been a passionate advocate for social and legal change related to child exploitation and child sex trafficking since 2010. That year, Nacole's 15-year-old daughter, Jessika, ran away from their Washington State home after being concerned about a bad report card (despite the fact she was a high achiever). She soon found herself at a women's shelter in Seattle, where she met another young woman who enticed her to join her and accompany a man who said he could take care of them both. But the opposite happened: For several months, Jessika was exploited and trafficked for sex. Not knowing Jessika's whereabouts tormented Nacole. Her family struggled because they did not know how to navigate the law enforcement process. Also, not knowing how to appropriately handle the family's reunification with Jessika made things even harder.



Nacole Svendgard,  
mother of Jessika

Feeling judged by her peers and out of step with her surroundings, Jessika was lured away again by her abuser, but was found 108 days later during a law enforcement sting operation. By then, Nacole said, she had "learned the hard way about the search process' shortcomings." To help parents and children navigate its "minefields," Nacole began advocating for more law enforcement training about child exploitation, and for more support to be provided for exploited youth and their families.

Nacole and Jessika joined forces to address more effective recovery techniques, testifying in state and federal courthouses across the nation to ensure passage of more than a dozen bills for increased victim rights, harsher punishments for sex offenders, and accountability for websites (such as the now defunct Backpage.com) engaged in promoting the illegal selling of underage sex.



Jessika Svendgard

On April 11, 2018, the [FOSTA-SESTA bill](#) was signed into law, making it illegal to knowingly assist, facilitate, or support sex trafficking. Nacole has continued to fight for those "who do not have a voice" by serving on NCMEC's Team HOPE and speaking publicly about her family's ordeal.

She recently told Jessika, "I could not be prouder of the woman, mother, and advocate that you have become. Your resiliency has been inspirational, and a light to your family and other survivors." For more on their story, visit [amberadvocate.org/amber-feature/aa48-feature/](https://amberadvocate.org/amber-feature/aa48-feature/).

## Patty Wetterling

Patty Wetterling is the mother of Jacob Wetterling, abducted at age 11 on October 22, 1989, by a masked gunman near their home in St. Joseph, Minnesota. “Jacob was smart and kind – a wonderful brother to his older and younger siblings,” Patty says. Jacob’s abduction took away a sense of safety for parents and children throughout the Midwest.

Fighting for the safety of all children, Patty and her husband, Jerry, cofounded the Jacob Wetterling Resource Center, now known as the Zero Abuse Project, and for decades have dedicated themselves to educating communities about child safety measures aimed at preventing abduction and exploitation.

On September 1, 2016 – almost 27 years after his abduction – Jacob’s remains were found, and his abductor was charged with murder. While the Wetterling family’s hearts were shattered by the news, they continued focusing on being beacons of hope for others.



Patty Wetterling,  
mother of Jacob



Jacob Wetterling with his family

Serving as a consultant with the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and an Associate with the National Criminal Justice Training Center of Fox Valley Technical College, Patty has presented countless victim impact sessions to law enforcement about AMBER Alert and long-term missing programs across the country. She has been a keynote speaker at conferences addressing crimes against children and child sexual abuse.

Patty cofounded and is past director of NCMEC’s Team HOPE. She also served as chairperson of NCMEC’s Board of Directors from 2012 to 2015. Learn more about the Jacob Wetterling Resource Center by visiting [zeroabuseproject.org/victim-assistance/jwrc/](https://zeroabuseproject.org/victim-assistance/jwrc/).







