

Domestic Violence and the Fear of Parental Abduction

Domestic violence is a crime that can make victims feel powerless and continually under the control of their abusers. After leaving an abusive situation and distancing themselves from the risk of harm, many victims continue to feel controlled by fears that their ex-partner will come and take their child(ren) away. In some circumstances, abusive partners will actively use the child(ren) to try to emotionally manipulate the other parent (e.g., as punishment for leaving or to get their partners to come back). Abusive partners may also try to convince the courts that the victim is an unfit parent.

Why Might a Parent Abduct a Child?

A parent may make the decision to abduct their child(ren) for a number of reasons, including:

- Disagreement with a court decision about custody
- Disregard for authority
- Fear for the child(ren)'s safety
- Mental illness
- Desire to control or seek revenge against the other parent
- Paranoia about the other parent

Unless there is a direct threat to the child(ren)'s safety and well-being, it is important that children be allowed to have continuous and meaningful communication with both parents. Denying access to an ex-partner who has been abusive towards you in the past may not always be seen to be in the best interest of the child(ren).¹ However, **the risk of parental abduction should always be taken seriously.**

What You Can Do

Threats by your ex-partner to abduct your child(ren) should be taken seriously, but withholding access from your ex-partner may violate an existing custody or access order or lead a perception that you are being unreasonable. It is strongly recommended that you obtain assistance from a family lawyer, preferably one who is experienced with domestic violence, who can advise you on the next steps (e.g., obtaining a protection order, varying the existing custody order).

Understanding the dynamics of your relationship with your ex-partner, being aware of warning signs and taking steps to develop a safety plan can also help you regain a sense of control and feel more prepared about your child(ren)'s visits with your ex-partner.

¹ Janet R. Johnson and Linda K. Girdner. (Oct 2001). *Family Abductors: Descriptive Profiles and Preventive Interventions* Washington: United States Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Alternate formats may be available upon request.

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What Are Some Warning Signs I Should Watch For?*

If you have recently separated from a partner who has a history of controlling and/or violent behaviour towards you and you fear that your child(ren) may be abducted by the other parent, you should watch for the following warning signs.

Your ex-partner may:

- Be angry about a recent family court decision
- Make direct or indirect threats about removing your child(ren)
- Show high levels of hostility, anger, or resentment directed at you or your family
- Instigate many arguments about custody, access, or parenting issues
- Excessively criticize your parenting and raise concerns about the child(ren)'s safety while in your care
- Attempt to alienate your child(ren) from you or convince your child(ren) that you do not love or want them
- Have recently made sudden major life changes, such as quitting a job or selling their home

Also, consider if your ex-partner has family, contacts, or citizenship in another country.

*One or more of these indicators could show an increased risk of potential parental child abduction; however, their presence is not proof of a potential abduction. You must evaluate the risks in light of the circumstances and determine if there is a risk of potential abduction.

What Can I Do to Protect My Child(ren)?

There are several things you can do to help minimize the risk of parental child abduction. A first important step is to remember to **PARENT**:

- P** Put formal, detailed custody and access arrangements in place as soon as possible.
- A** Attempt to maintain a civil relationship with the other parent and/or their extended family to the best extent possible without compromising your safety and the safety of your child(ren).
- R** Reassure your child(ren) of your love and their importance to you without criticizing the other parent.
- E** Educate yourself about your parental rights and responsibilities.
- N** Notify your child(ren)'s school, daycare, or child care provider about any custody and access arrangements and ensure they contact you if something happens.
- T** Teach your child(ren) to be aware of their surroundings and how to recognize addresses, street signs or landmarks. Teach your child(ren) their home address, phone number with area code, and how to contact you or 911 if they need urgent help.

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Additional Steps You Can Take

- Make sure you have necessary information about your child(ren) and the other parent. This includes:
 - » descriptions or recent photographs of your ex-partner and your child(ren)
 - » information about your ex-partner's vehicle
 - » passport and citizenship information about your child(ren) and your ex-partner
 - » banking location of your ex-partner
 - » other residences or cabins that may be used by your ex-partner
 - » any information you have about places your ex-partner may go or areas they may be familiar with
 - » information about your ex-partner's habits or interests
 - » copies of any custody orders or agreements currently in effect
- Flag your child(ren)'s school and medical records and request that your child(ren)'s information be added to the Passport Canada System Lookout List.
- Keep a record of any technologies or online activity information used by your child(ren) and your ex-partner (e.g., cell phones and cell phone provider, Facebook accounts, Twitter accounts, other social media accounts, email addresses and email provider).
- Teach your child(ren) the difference between **Keep Secrets** (secrets that are fun, don't hurt anyone, and will eventually come out, like a surprise party) and **Speak Secrets** (secrets that may make the child feel uncomfortable, scared, confused, or sad, and that they are told never to tell). Speak Secrets need to be shared with you. Keep in mind that many dangerous situations involve some element of secrecy.

Immediate Steps if You Believe Your Child(ren) Has Been Abducted

- Attempt to contact the other parent. Document all contact, contact attempts or lack of ability to contact (in cases where parents are prohibited from direct contact due to domestic violence, safety issues or through a court order, utilize third parties to contact the other parent if it is permitted by the order).
- Report the child(ren) missing to law enforcement. **You do not have to wait 24 hours to report your child(ren) as missing.**
- Gather any important information about your child(ren) and the other parent, including any custody and access orders that are in place.

Contact MissingKids.ca at 1-866-KID-TIPS (543-8477) to speak with a trained caseworker for additional support and assistance.



Models in photo. Intended as illustrative.

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