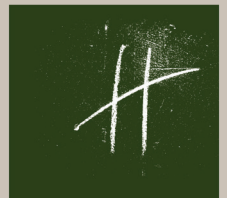


SUPPORTING CHILDREN DURING A KIDNAPPING

A family's guide



HOSTAGE
INTERNATIONAL

A FAMILY'S GUIDE

Having a family member kidnapped can be a deeply frightening and upsetting experience, particularly for children. Hostage International provides support and guidance to families during and after the kidnap of a loved one, and works with families to ensure that children also receive the support they need. While each case is defined by individual circumstances, this guide provides parents, guardians and carers with tips on how best to help, protect and care for any children affected.

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TALKING ABOUT WHAT HAS HAPPENED

It is essential to talk to your child about what has happened. Children are always quick to grasp when things are not right and are often affected, despite showing few outward signs of distress.

In a kidnap situation, they will be looking to you to gain as much information and understanding as possible about what has happened to their loved one. In the absence of facts, suspicions around what is unspoken can be more disconcerting than the truth. Lack of knowledge can increase a child's sense of vulnerability.

Take an honest and open approach to help maintain your child's trust, and alleviate any anxieties around uncertainty.

Be age-appropriate

How and what you tell your child should be modified according to their age and level of understanding.

Young children, under the age of six, are unlikely to have much understanding of what a kidnap or a hostage situation is. Aim to tell them a simple, less detailed version of the truth. They may well share that information inadvertently with their friends or teachers, so it should be a version you are happy for them to speak about.

Older children will generally have a greater ability to understand what has happened. Children in their late teens will often insist that you tell them everything.

Balance the need for strict confidentiality while doing your best to share as much as you can with them. Help your child understand how knowledge of the kidnap should be protected.

See page 6 for more information on confidentiality.

Be prepared and reassuring

Children of every age are likely to have lots of questions about the kidnap. Try to anticipate these questions in advance so you can be ready to answer these as calmly, truthfully and age-appropriately as possible. Explain traumatic events accurately but without graphic details. It is best not to give more information than your child asks for.

In the event of the kidnap of a loved one, children may also start to fear for their own safety. Reassure your child that they are safe and that everything is being done to keep them and the people at home safe. The situation that led to the kidnap will not happen to them.

Encourage them to talk about any concerns they might have, and to continue to ask questions.

Let them know that opening up about what they feel is a good thing and that feeling upset, scared, powerless or angry is completely normal.

Protect your child from what they don't need to know. Avoid discussing worst-case scenarios with them.

A child may feel the kidnap is somehow their fault, especially if it happened after an argument or misunderstanding between them and the loved one detained. Again, reassure them that the two incidents are entirely unrelated.

Watch and listen

As the kidnap situation continues, take time to watch and listen to your child to ascertain how upset they are, and how they are coping. If older children or teenagers want to watch television or read news online about a traumatic event, ensure that you or another responsible adult is always available to discuss what they are seeing and reading.

Talking in the right setting

Children are more receptive to hear and talk about difficult information in an informal setting. You may find it easier to talk to your child about what is going on while out on a walk, driving, cooking or playing.

Behavioural changes to look out for

A child that is not directly expressing their pain to their immediate family will almost certainly be feeling it and channelling it elsewhere. Every child is unique, but it is often the case that teenage girls, for example, tend to internalise pain, and boys can look to the outside world to vent and express it. Be mindful of these potential differences.

Older children or teenagers of both genders may start to stay out late and engage in anti-social behaviour, spend an inordinate amount of time gaming or on social media. Some of this behaviour may have existed prior to the kidnap, but might be exacerbated by the circumstances.

Younger children may exhibit distress through misbehaviour or tantrums, wetting the bed or refusing to speak.

Providing children of all ages with support and information can help them to channel their feelings in a way that might be less detrimental to their general well-being.

Confidentiality

Kidnaps are generally confidential. In times of fear and uncertainty, secret-keeping can be difficult, isolating and lonely, and even more so for children.

Young children will need to be told a storyline that you're happy for them to share with others. It is usually impossible to expect them to keep a secret.

Older children and teenagers can be asked to keep what they are told confidential, but may still need to let a small number of people know the truth at some point, such as that a family member has been kidnapped. You should discuss openly with them how and with whom this information can be shared - and ideally in consultation with those advising you on operational aspects around the kidnap.

Highly sensitive details, such as about the kidnap negotiations, should not be shared with children of any age, but this detail isn't necessary for them to be able to grasp the overall picture. For example, tell them that their father has been kidnapped and that experts are helping to bring about his release, that he could be held for some time, and that it is important for his well-being that the whole family continues to live as they did when he was there.

School, college and university

You don't always have to tell your child's school or educational establishment what is going on. School can be an important safe-haven, a sanctuary of normality for children in an otherwise highly abnormal situation. However, your child may wish to confide in a best friend or teacher, while you and they should bear in mind the pressures this might also place on those who are told.

You should carefully consider what is the best course of action for your family. Hostage International can lend advice here, and, if necessary, talk to people on behalf of your family.

THE POWER OF ROUTINES

For the well-being of children and your family in general, you must all try to stick to your normal routines as much as possible and continue to do the things you enjoyed before the kidnap, including celebrating holidays and festivals. Ensure regular meals are eaten as good nutrition can be especially important in times of stress. Children should continue with their extra-curricular activities. If necessary, a friend or relative might step in to help take them to those activities when you can't.

Taking their lead from you

Whatever the situation, your child will be more distraught and frightened if they see you and any other responsible adults around them not looking after themselves. Conversely, if children see adults coping well, they will cope better too.

Hostage International can support you. Looking after yourself will help you support your children.

Spending time with your children

Adult attention, care and support will be essential to any child's ability to manage the situation. You and other adults around them can help your child simply by spending time with them having fun, watching films, playing games and reading to them. If this isn't always possible, you should explain to your child, gently, why not. You may also need to tell them why you or any other adults around them seem upset, angry or to be acting out of character. Younger children, especially, won't always understand why an adult's behaviour might have changed, and they might blame themselves for that change. You can reassure them otherwise.

Allow children to be children

While it may seem inevitable that exposure to something as traumatic as a kidnap will force any child to “grow up fast”, you should do your best to allow your child to remain a child throughout.

Avoid burdening children with additional responsibilities in the absence of a family member. In some cultures, it is not unusual for the oldest boy to be told “you are now the man in the family” in his father’s absence. This can put a lot of strain on children who are already suffering from a traumatic family situation, and can create unnecessary tensions with siblings.

Show confidence in them

Try to show ongoing confidence in your child and in their safety.

Given the circumstances, you may well feel inclined to be over-protective at times and want to shield your child from what’s happening around them. You may also find yourself becoming fearful of letting them go about their normal activities. Keeping track of their whereabouts and activities more than you did before, while understandable, can lead to instilling greater fear or anxiety in your child.

Some activities that can help

Activities that can help your child cope in an ongoing kidnap situation include:

- Keeping a diary or notes on what is happening
- Writing letters to the hostage
- Engaging in creative activities can be a therapeutic distraction, such as drawing or colouring books - including adult colouring books for older children
- Reading is also beneficial as it allows children to take time out in a different world.

Hostage International can provide a list of age-specific book suggestions.

SOCIAL MEDIA

In the event of a kidnap, social media can pose a number of challenges for the family of a hostage. The kidnappers, media and other members of the public might try to get hold of a friend or family member's social media account to target your family. Loved ones may be exposed to distressing reports and rumours about the kidnap. In some cases, you may be subjected to online harassment or cyber-bullying.

Children and young people have grown up using social media and often use it to communicate with their friends or simply to express how they are feeling at any given point in time. It can therefore be difficult to ask them to close their accounts entirely.

You can help in the following ways:

- Talk to your child about why it is important for them to increase their privacy settings, limit online access to their profile, photos and other personal data, and think carefully about what they post.

- Discourage your child from writing about the kidnapping on their social media accounts.

- Help them understand why this could be dangerous for the hostage, or distressing for them should what they write be used in newspaper articles or media reports. They may also receive comments about their posts that are upsetting or hurtful.

- Warn teenagers to treat with caution any information they see via media channels about the kidnap, and avoid responding to anyone who contacts them about the kidnap. You should tell them to let you know about any such approaches immediately, for the protection of the hostage.

Hostage International is available to help and can assist in trying to ensure that any distressing online images or videos are removed. Cases of cyber-bullying, if it occurs, should be referred to law enforcement.

**SIGNS THAT YOUR CHILD MAY NEED
ADDITIONAL SUPPORT**

Remember that signs of stress exhibited by children impacted by a hostage situation are, for the most part, entirely normal. However, there are times when your child might need additional therapeutic support, beyond the love and support provided by you, family and friends.

Indications that your child could need extra help include:

- Your child thinks it is their fault that their parent or relative has been kidnapped
- They appear unusually or increasingly withdrawn and quiet, or alternatively angry and aggressive
- They may have a heightened state of nerves and an inability to relax, concentrate or sleep.

If these symptoms continue or become exacerbated, professional help might be needed.

Hostage International can help you identify the right type of professional support for your children through our established network of mental health professionals.

WHEN A HOSTAGE RETURNS HOME

Fortunately, most cases are resolved successfully and the hostage returns home. Even so, it is likely that relationships within the family will have changed because of the kidnap. All family members may find they need help re-negotiating their relationships. This can take time, patience and understanding.

The adjustment can sometimes be hardest for teenagers and young children who may have been shielded from certain details of the kidnapping. They may struggle to understand why all this has happened. They may blame themselves. They might also be angry towards the hostage for missing birthdays or holidays.

These are natural feelings, which you can recognise and work through, with external support and counselling if needed.

In the first few weeks, help prepare your child to expect to see potential symptoms of trauma exposure, which most hostages experience following release.

Symptoms can include restlessness, insomnia, nightmares, lack of appetite, anger and confusion to name a few. These symptoms are a normal reaction to the trauma of being kidnapped and are often temporary.

Hostage International can help prepare you and your children for what to expect following the return of your loved one.

WHAT IF THINGS DO NOT END POSITIVELY?

For as long as the outcome is unknown, it is important for all of you, adults and children alike, to continue to believe in and hope for a successful conclusion to the kidnap. In the vast majority of hostage situations, the hostage is released.

In the unlikely event that a hostage doesn't return, a deeply painful situation will likely be compounded by the obvious distress inflicted on any children involved. At such a time, it is essential that family members and loved ones come together to begin the healing process. Again, external help may be needed at some point.

There are no quick fixes, but children are generally very resilient, and experience shows that children who are loved and supported by their families in a stable environment will grow that resilience and find a way forward.



Further support

Hostage International can provide, and signpost to, further resources and information to help support families and children.

For more information about Hostage International or to find out how we can help, please visit our website: **www.hostageinternational.org** or email us at **info@hostageinternational.org**

Having a family member kidnapped can be a frightening experience. You will need support, information and advice.

This guide offers practical pointers on how to cope and where to look for further information.

It is aimed at families of hostages abducted outside of their own country, but some things are relevant in other cases.

Each kidnap is different and each family's needs are unique.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach and this document is for guidance only.



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