



When a Child is Abducted by a Parent, Trauma Lingers

By City Attorney Mara W. Elliott

Child abduction is one of the scariest byproducts of troubled relationships, inflicting unnecessary trauma on youngsters and often imperiling their lives.

When my Office has a chance to track down missing children and bring them home, we make it our highest priority.

As a safe place for domestic violence victims, the San Diego Family Justice Center (FJC) has significant experience working with parents whose children are abducted. In these complex and frightening cases, the abuser takes the child to exert power and control over their partner, often a custodial parent tormented with the thought of never seeing the children again. Every hour is agony.

In two recent cases, the FJC worked with local, state, and federal authorities to track down missing children and bring them home.

In the first case, a woman came to the FJC to seek help after being attacked and assaulted by her husband. The abuse had been going on for years.

Her second visit to the FJC was to meet an attorney for legal assistance. While there, she learned that her then-estranged husband had abducted their young children. She feared he planned to remove them from the country.

In these types of cases, FJC staff works with the San Diego Police Department, District Attorney's Child Abduction Unit, Child Welfare Services, the U.S. State Department, law enforcement from other regions, Homeland Security, Border Patrol, Transportation Security Administration, and National Child Abduction Registries to find the children. In the above case, through a massive coordinated effort, the children were found safe and reunited with their mother.

The second case happened early in the pandemic, when a woman contacted the FJC for help to obtain a restraining order. Shortly afterward, her child was abducted. Again, we worked with a network of local and state agencies in a multiple-week-long effort to locate the child and bring the child home safely. Nothing is more gratifying than reuniting a parent and child.

During the terrifying time when a child is missing and the outcome is uncertain, the FJC staff helps the custodial parent navigate the confusing maze of law enforcement agencies, supporting them through the ordeal of having to repeat painful stories numerous times.

And our work does not end with the reunification of children with their rightful parent. The FJC

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helps out by offering financial and legal assistance, finding a safe place for them to live, and more. Most importantly, we provide counseling that both the mothers and children need to help them overcome the lingering fear and trauma from the abduction.

For the best possible outcome, we rely on our community partners, including Free to Thrive, Center for Hope and Strength, the San Diego Center for Counseling, the Family Resource Center, and the District Attorney's Victim Advocates.

As the isolation due to the pandemic drags on, victims of domestic violence remain at risk. Many are trapped at home with their abusers. Job loss, economic uncertainty, illness, and fear of illness add to already-stressful home situations. We worry about victims who may not be able to leave the house or make a phone call without being overheard.

Domestic violence may be harder for others to see during this pandemic, but the calls the FJC is receiving are even more urgent.

Our office remains committed to looking out for the welfare of the most vulnerable in our communities, especially families enduring violence at home.

If you or someone you know is experiencing violence at the hands of an intimate partner, please know that the FJC and City Attorney's Office are still here for you. Please call the FJC at (619) 533-6000 during business hours, or the crisis hotline at (888) 385-4657 after hours. We are ready to listen and we are ready to help.

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