



INTERNATIONAL PARENTAL ABDUCTION



The Human and Social Cost

Parental child abduction is a tragedy that affects some of society's most vulnerable individuals. When a child is abducted across international borders, the difficulties are compounded for everyone involved. Parental child abduction not only jeopardizes the child, it has substantial long-term consequences for the left-behind parent, the family, and society.

Consequences for the Child

Children who are abducted by their parents are often taken from their familiar environment and suddenly isolated from their extended families, friends, and classmates. In an effort to evade law enforcement, the taking parents may relocate them frequently and/or take them out of school unexpectedly without time to say goodbye. They may miss months or years of school. They may be prevented from making close friends, and their only close relationship may be with the taking parent. They may even be separated from their siblings during the abduction. Taking parents sometimes change children's names, birthdates, and physical appearance in an effort to conceal the child's true identity. Abducted children may be told that their other parent is dead, does not want them, or has not tried to get them back.

An abducted child is at risk of serious emotional and psychological problems. Research shows that recovered children often experienced a range of problems including anxiety, eating problems, nightmares, mood swings, sleep disturbances, aggressive behavior, resentment, guilt, and fearfulness. Even as adults, individuals who were abducted as children may struggle with identity issues, with their own personal relationships, and with parenting.

If and when the child is reunited with the left-behind parent, they may find that they no longer have a relationship with that parent or even a language in common. They may be distrustful of the left-behind parent and question why that parent did not try harder to get them back. They may find that the left-behind parent has remarried and that they have a new, unfamiliar step-parent and siblings. Children who were abducted while very young may not even remember life with the left-behind parent.



Consequences for the Left-Behind Parent

For left-behind parents, the trauma begins when they return home to find that the other parent has left and taken the children, or when they allow the children to travel abroad to visit the other parent, only to find that they do not return. Left-behind parents encounter substantial psychological, emotional, and financial problems. They may be paralyzed by helplessness and the sense that they have no idea where to start in the process of recovering their child. When the child has been abducted across international borders, the left-behind parent may face unfamiliar legal, cultural, and linguistic barriers.

Left-behind parents experience a wide range of emotions and symptoms, including betrayal, sadness over the loss of their child and/or their marriage, anger against the other parent, anxiety, sleeplessness, and severe depression. The emotional stress does not necessarily end when the child is returned, because parents may worry about re-abduction and their personal security as well as struggle to restore a relationship with their child. The financial pressures of fighting abduction only add to the anxiety.

The financial costs to left-behind parents can be substantial. Left-behind parents may lack the financial resources to travel abroad and to visit their child overseas, even if the taking parent permits access. They may lack sufficient funds to hire an attorney in the United States or abroad, especially an English-speaking attorney who is familiar with the legal issues pertaining to international parental child abduction. Left-behind parents may lack the funds to hire translators and interpreters or to seek professional counseling. The financial demands of a protracted legal battle to recover an abducted child can devastate a family financially.

Although international parental child abduction has far-reaching consequences, its significance is not widely understood. Left-behind parents may have difficulty finding the support that they need and getting legal assistance.