

Stranger Danger: An assessment of the effectiveness of child abduction education

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High profile child abduction cases create fear in parents and communities. When a case such as the bizarre kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart, or the abduction, murder, and sexual assault of 5-year-old Samantha Runnion, reaches the public awareness the response frequently is that something must be done to prevent such tragedy from affecting another family. High-profile cases have sparked the creation of policies (such as Megan's Law), organizations (such as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children), and educational programs designed to teach children prevention skills (e.g., Safe Street).

Since the 1980's, educational programs designed to teach children skills to avoid victimization have increased as awareness of crimes against children has grown. Nearly two-thirds of American children report taking part in such victimization prevention programs (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995). Because these programs are so common, it is important to assess their effectiveness in the classroom, to ensure they represent a valuable use of education time and dollars.

There is little evidence to date supporting the effectiveness of "traditional" abduction prevention programs. These programs take a variety of presentation forms and tend to focus on three main themes: teaching children that strangers are dangerous even if they look nice--a concept commonly termed "stranger danger", learning about lures, and escaping from abductors. While the number of studies looking at this question is admittedly small, in no reported study have children shown the appropriate skill, knowledge, or behavior necessary to avoid abduction (Bromberg & Johnson, 1997).

In contrast to traditional programs, more research has been conducted regarding Behavioral Skills Training (BST) methods. This is an empirically-driven approach that emphasizes instructions, modeling, rehearsal, praise, and corrective feedback. Although BST programs do not emphasize "stranger danger" per se, they do teach children how to respond to the lures of strangers. Studies examining single-child BST training indicate that these programs are effective in teaching abduction prevention skills to children, however they are labor-intensive, and there is no clear evidence supporting long-term maintenance of skills (Bevill & Gast, 1998; Bromberg & Johnson, 1997). When BST methods have been applied in larger group settings, only moderate support for their usefulness has been found. Research examining the effectiveness of classroom based BST programs shows that while these programs outperform traditional programs (as well

as no program at all), there are always significant portions of children who fail to exhibit the appropriate abduction prevention skills. Additionally, there is no evidence for long-term maintenance of skills (Bevill & Gast, 1998; Bromberg & Johnson, 1997).

Because traditional programs appear to be ineffective in teaching prevention skills, and BST seems to show at least some moderate success, researchers have advocated for the implementation of BST training programs in preschools and kindergartens. For example, Bromberg and Johnson (1997) argued "The investment in time, money, and effort needed to conduct behavioral skills training programs is likely to yield important gains in protecting our nation's children," (p. 630). However, as argued below, in the context of children's actual risks, as opposed to their perceived risks, BST programs may not be likely to yield such "important gains."

While kidnappings generally garner much media attention, they are actually very rare. Stereotypical kidnappings represent the most dangerous form of non-family abductions, often highlighted in media reports of abductions. According to recent national estimates, there are approximately only 115 stereotypical kidnappings each year (Finkelhor, Hamer, & Sedlak, 2002). Thus, the risk of stereotypical kidnappings is roughly 1 in 600,000, about the same as the risk of being struck by lightning. Furthermore, most stereotypical kidnappings involve adolescents, not young children. Children 5 years and younger, who are usually the targets of school-based prevention programs, are least likely to be the targets stereotypical kidnappings (Finkelhor, et al., 2002). These young children are at the greatest risk not of stranger abduction, but of family abduction, which occurs much more often than non-family abductions for children of all ages. And stranger abduction prevention programs are not effective for family abductions (e.g., by a non-custodial parent).

Given the low-prevalence of stranger abductions, we should reconsider the conclusion that BST programs will yield "important gains in protecting our nation's children." Educators should judge whether expensive, time-consuming BST programs, with little or no evidence of long-term success, are really a worthwhile endeavor in light of the rarity of stereotypical stranger kidnappings. Additionally, educators should reconsider the current implementation of traditional programs. With limited time and resources, it may be more beneficial to focus safety education on more relevant risks children face such as bullying, bicycle accidents, and abuse in the home. Abduction prevention education programming may be developed in the future to be targeted at older children who are at a greater risk of abduction and whose greater cognitive capacities may allow them to benefit from programming to a greater degree than young children. Further, future research is needed on prevention skills that go beyond the scope of simply responding to the lures of strangers, which may be applied in more diverse settings. Until these programs are developed, educators and policy makers need to rethink abduction prevention education programs as a strategy to reduce kidnapping.

References

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