

the future can be verbalized. Again, the adult and the person providing support must ensure a balance in the amount of time focused on the missing loved one and the time focused on other family members when hope for the future is being discussed. Over time, the anniversary of the missing date becomes the vehicle by which the family re-news their quest to find the missing person, and to be sure that they have not been forgotten by family, friends, the community, and the law enforcement officials. The one way that the family can be sure that their loved one lives on is in assuring that his or her memory is not forgotten.

### **CREATE LONG-TERM COPING STRUCTURE THAT INTEGRATES BOTH PERCEPTIONS**

As long as individuals believe that the missing will return, they will utilize this dual belief system. As time passes, it will become the norm for the family to picture two possible futures, and discuss the loved one alternating between the two perspectives of the future as 'still missing' or 'when he/she has returned'. While this allows the family to function, make

decisions about the future, and perhaps even move ahead with the life of the family, the more comfortable the family is with a coping pattern utilizing a dual belief system, the more difficult it will be for that family to accept the possibility that the loved one will not return, even in the face of evidence.



### **SPECIAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN**

Previously in this chapter some of the needs of the children in the family of the missing person have been discussed. This section will present other important needs that children experience not only as children, but throughout their life time. The supports that are suggested in this chapter

are offered for children, and for adults who were children when the female family member went missing. For many now adults, these needs still have not been met.

We will discuss the needs of children within the family of the missing following the topics described above.

### **Re-Establish Structure**

It is important that the person providing support not assume that they understand what normal functioning is for the family of a missing person. The perfect family succeeds in establishing a structure based on effective communication, cohesiveness in the internal relationships, and a collective sense of unity in the face of outside dangers. There are very few perfect families. To assist a family to achieve normal functioning, the person providing support must understand what normal-functioning was for this family before the loved one went missing. To further expand on this idea, it is also necessary to know what the children consider normal functioning, as their perspective may differ from that

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of the adult. Straightforward questions to children about the family's communication patterns, internal relationships, and their sense of belonging to a family unit will provide this information.

As discussed earlier, the emotional and physical structure of the family must be re-established. In the case where the family structure was weak before the loved one went missing, introduction of a strong sense of structure will be beneficial to this family beyond the context of the missing person. In looking at emotional and physical structure, we see the needs are expressed differently by the children than they were by the adults.

### **Emotional structure –**

Depending on their age and development, children may not have the capacity to label and describe their feelings. Therefore, their perception of the family's emotional structure may be expressed more through their reactions to people and situations than through verbal communication. One example is the feeling of being totally disconnected from the family. The

child may feel left out, ignored, and/or emotionally abandoned. The expression of this feeling may be physical withdrawal and isolation from the family or acting-out behaviour with the result of gaining attention. Even if that attention is negative and disciplinary, the child sees it as attention. Another example is the need on the part of the child to find a safe place amid the chaos of the family. Safety usually involves another 'being'; a person (real or imaginary), pet, or toy that becomes personified as human. Safety with this entity is usually established in private play initially, but will be exhibited more and more openly and in front of others as this new found safety begins to balance the child's fear of the actual situation. This may also include fear for personal safety as the child seeks to avoid what happened to the missing person happening to them. Again, as the adult appears to be ineffective at protecting or finding the missing family member, a child may seek out some other entity as a protector or, conversely, for whom they can play out the role of protector.

Children may also become overwhelmed as they recognize the multiple losses or changes that have occurred. Their world has completely changed and stability no longer exists. Without strong support and reinforcement of that which is stable, the child may again react through withdrawal or acting-out behaviours.

It is important to understand that all children from infant to later adolescence react in some way to the family's response to a loved one gone missing. A pre-verbal infant reacts to the physical changes in their care-giver as a result of the situation; increased heart rate, change in body taste and body odor, change in pitch of voice, change in nurturing/holding behaviour. Again, the infant will become fussy (acting-out) until it feels overwhelmed at which point it may become lethargic (withdrawal). Toddlers may become very clingy, demanding attention and then isolate themselves when feeling rejected or ignored. They are reacting to what is happening in their environment more than to the event of the missing person. School-aged children

begin to express through their vocabulary (though limited) and their play. For children, play is the way to process high intensity situations. They can play out as many different endings to an event as they want, as they are trying to process what is actually happening. The play may become aggressive and/or isolated. However, a school-aged child that refuses to play is in great emotional jeopardy and professional assistance should be sought as soon as possible.

To a child, the parent/adult is their emotional stability and provides the emotional structure for the family. The adult's reaction to a loved one gone missing becomes the basis of the children's learned response to crisis. The adult's reaction also provides a sense of assurance or fear to the children. When a parent begins to seek inappropriate support outside of the family, or turns to self-destructive behaviours such as drinking, drugs, or over/under eating, children will withdraw as the adult no longer seems safe. If the parent stops showing support to the children, or stops providing basic care for them, they will

begin to care for themselves and each other, and begin to exclude the parent from their family structure.

The key emotional support for children in all of these instances is the establishment of safety. Children must feel safe to thrive and grow. Adults often admit to the fact that they abandoned the children in the pursuit of finding the missing loved one. If the parent is unable to provide a sense of safety, another extended family member must fill that role. Interaction with the children should be in their own home, and play must be encouraged and monitored. The person providing support must also be able to explain to the child in age/development appropriate language why the parent and environment are in turmoil. The person providing support must also, to the extent possible, encourage the adult's interaction with the children. Without the parent's interaction, the relationship between the children and the person providing support may begin to replace the former family unit.

**Physical structure** – All families have some level of

dysfunction; this is normal. When a situation occurs such as a family member going missing, these dysfunctions become exaggerated. Without corrective action, these dysfunctions begin to grow in impact and create other dysfunctions. When the dysfunction within a family begins to outweigh the family's ability to function, children often see this as losing their entire family. To the child the new normal, the new mission or purpose of the family, is about the event of the missing person. There is nothing else to do at home but the activity of finding the missing member. The children begin to blame the missing loved one for 'messing everything up'.

As was discussed earlier, the most basic establishment of physical structure is through the creation and reinforcement of daily routine. The creation of the schedule or time-line is the tool best suited to accomplish this. The person providing support should follow that information. For an adult, establishing a schedule, and therefore a structure, provides a guideline for behaviour. For a child, this structure provides security

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and safety. Children who are in school should continue attending school as part of that structure. However, their teachers and counselors must be provided with relevant information so they are able to provide appropriate support for the child within the school setting. Even so, schools cannot be expected to have the capacity to provide for the specific mental health needs of the child. These needs are best met by a professional. Children should also be granted access to the adults they most trust within the school, to provide an extra sense of security.

### **ACCEPT THE TEMPORARY ABSENCE**

The temporary atmosphere immediately following the absence of the family member is one that threatens the child's sense of security at home. For the child, the chaos and turmoil that is created when adults are reacting to the absence of the loved one may be more difficult to experience than the absence itself. Exposure to law enforcement personnel, their uniforms, equipment (guns, hand-cuffs, etc.) and their personalities may be extremely

jarring to a child. If the law enforcement personnel appear to be a threat to the child's security of home, a distrust begins to develop that may well follow the child into adulthood. Often, law enforcement personnel do not include the children when interacting with the family, further alienating them.

The attitude of the law enforcement personnel is also observed and reacted to by the children. Many times law enforcement personnel assume that the missing person has simply walked-away. This often leads to a less intense reaction on the part of the personnel. Children see this as a lack of caring or concern by the personnel. Conversely, it may be protocol for law enforcement personnel to treat everyone, including the adult family members, as suspects until proven otherwise. This attitude is also seen as threatening by the children. This threat comes from the very people they have been taught to trust; law enforcement personnel. While these personnel are doing their job, they may not realize how their behaviour and questions

are interpreted by a child whose loved one is missing. If possible, law enforcement personnel (or their representatives) should take time to explain their presence and behaviour to the children, reinforcing a basic level of trust. If this is not possible, an adult family member should fill this role, and, whenever possible, encourage the law enforcement personnel to interact directly with the child.

Another way in which the children may react to the temporary environment that is created by the adults is through a desire to help. Just as is true with adults, the child needs to do something to feel included, and to have a sense of control over the situation and their environment. By being included in the activity, the child also has a sense of what to expect, rather than being unprepared for the changes which will continue to occur within the family and the environment.

Open discussion and communication within the family and between family members is another means by which to include the children, and reduce

their anxiety. This is discussed in more detail below.

### **FILLING THE ROLES OF THE MISSING PERSON**

Children very often find themselves filling the roles of the missing person. They may have been assigned some of the chores or tasks that the person used to do as a necessity to maintain the daily functioning of the family. They may find that the adult compares them to the missing person, and may see this as an indication that the adult wants them to be more like the missing family member. The child may observe the painful reactions of the parents, and believe that the parent will feel better if they act more like the missing. Or, because the missing person is receiving so much attention, children may act like the missing one in an effort to also receive some of that attention.

As discussed earlier, it is never healthy for the children to try to become the missing person. When they are assigned roles and responsibilities that once belonged to the missing one, it should be done with the

explanation that these things need to be done, and the child is being chosen to do them because they are the best qualified, based on who they are. They should also be encouraged to do the task differently, or their own way as much as possible. However, the child's performance of the task should never be compared to the performance of the missing person.

When a child attempts to assume or fill the identity of the missing person, every effort should be taken to reinforce the child's own qualities and uniqueness. It is important to help the child understand that, during this crisis, he or she is valuable to the family, and their role is necessary for the family to stay strong.

### **REVIEW PERSONAL BELIEFS OF THE 'STATUS' OF THE MISSING PERSON**

Children should be encouraged to talk about what they believe has happened to the missing family member, as well as their reaction to the changes in their environment. Children often find themselves protecting the feelings of the parent by not expressing what they truly

think and feel. Through open communication the children are better able to normalize and understand the behaviour of the adult, and the family can begin to learn new coping skills as a unit. As attention continues to be focused on the missing loved one, strong communication within the family allows the children to believe that their needs are equally important. As discussed previously, family time, when done consistently, serves as a point of communication. The person providing support should encourage and advocate for this open communication.

In addition to their individual beliefs as to the status of the missing person and their beliefs about other members of the family, children also react to and are influenced by the attitudes they face outside of the family. The community at large has its own opinion about the missing person, often based on how the event has been presented by the press, media or gossip. The family may receive overwhelming support from the community or critical judgment. The attitude of the adult community is mimicked by their children who interact

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with the children, primarily in school. Whether positive or negative, it is impossible to protect the children from these community attitudes. It is important, then, to help the children understand the attitudes and have a safe place to talk about their reactions to these attitudes.



Play therapy is an excellent tool to allow children to work through their thoughts and feelings about the event. In addition, children of all ages also benefit from peer support groups or interaction of some sort with other children

of missing persons families, to compare and normalize their experiences and reactions. If formal support groups are not available in the area that the children live, internet chat rooms and telephone buddies are available. HOWEVER, it is imperative that a responsible adult check out these contacts and question their security procedures to ensure the safety of participants from predators masquerading as a child.

As time passes and the loved one remains missing, the children's beliefs about the status of the missing, and their relationship to him/her changes. As the child grows and moves on with his or her life, leaving the missing person behind, they begin to feel some guilt in doing so. This guilt is reinforced each time that they recognize that their parent still has a dual sense of future; one of when the missing person returns, one in which the missing has not yet returned. The child may feel guilt that they are not including the missing family member into their future. While most children believe that they will see the missing person again, at some point they

accept the fact that they won't know their loved one when they do. Support, again, comes from interacting with other children of missing persons families to normalize and process these thoughts and feelings.

### **FEEL THROUGH THE PAIN OF THE ABSENCE, UNCERTAINTY/ FEAR AND GUILT**

**Pain of absence** – Children of families of missing persons often adopt behaviours which help them to avoid feeling the pain of the absence. They are at high risk for alcohol and/or substance abuse later in life. They may also engage in workaholic behaviour. Children may also attempt to block their memories of the missing person.

For some children these are learned behaviours, based on observing how their parents and other adults coped with the situation. Other children may participate in these behaviours as self-medication. Appropriate role modeling by adults, as well as providing the children opportunities to talk honestly about their thoughts and feelings during the event teaches them how to work through the pain of the absence in a healthy way.

**Uncertainty and fear** – Out of their experience of the missing person, the children develop an uncertainty as to who to trust. The adult appears to be unable to protect or locate the missing loved one. In the process the adult appears to withdraw from or abandon the child. The child, therefore, begins to lose trust in their primary care-giver. When this basic level of trust is eroded, children find that they are unable to establish trusting relationships throughout their lives. If police and other law enforcement personnel appear to the children to be a threat, they may find it difficult to trust and interact positively with authority figures later in life.

Fear is a significant part of the children's experience. Often, they fear that whatever happened to their loved one will also happen to them. In addition, all of the examples of perceived lack of safety presented above result in feelings of fear. Suggestions have already been presented as to how to establish a sense of safety. The person providing support should utilize this information.

**Guilt** – Perhaps surprisingly, feelings of guilt are not common

among the children of missing persons families. Unless they were directly involved in the event of the loved one gone missing, children do not blame themselves for the situation or for the chaos it may have caused.

### **CREATE LONG-TERM COPING STRUCTURE**

While children do not maintain the same dual sense of future that the adult holds, they do create for themselves structures or patterns of thinking which assists them to cope into the long-term future. When considering children of all ages, we find that these patterns begin in childhood, and continue into adulthood, if the family member is still missing.

Children create their coping structures through adapting the relationships they have with the people affected by the loved one gone missing. The first of these relationships is the one they have with the missing person. Children may vacillate between believing the missing person is alive or dead. This is different than the parent/adult's coping which utilizes a dual sense of future. Children are not concerned with

the possibilities of the future as much as how to perceive the missing one in the present moment. However, regardless of whether the children believe the missing person is alive or dead, they continue to count the missing as a current member of the family ('I have a sister/brother'). Children also may hold on to personal items of the missing loved one for as long as they are missing, even if they are attempting to block out all memories of the missing family member. Additionally, some children maintain relationships with the close friends of their missing loved one, as a means by which to keep their memories of them alive.

Children of all ages become aware of the impact that the person gone missing has on their own sense of self. Searching behaviour may become part of who the child grows to be, and part of their life. For some, there is a continued need for resolution of the case. One of the struggles that occurs is seeing how current missing persons cases take priority over the case involving their family member. Over time, the children may even come to believe that their case

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is not as important as current ones. These children may find that they become absorbed in the information about current cases so as to compare it to their own, or they may ignore these cases completely so as to avoid the feelings which might be uncovered. Regardless of how the continuing search manifests in the children's life, it has significant impact on their relationships as well.

Another long-term concern children have as they age and prepare for the future is the possibility of projecting their fear and sense of lack of safety onto their children. Adult children talk about their desire not to be over protective of their own children, while at the same time wanting to insure their children's safety. The effect of the missing family member has the potential of generational impact. In addition, if the child has turned to drugs, alcohol or other self destructive or avoidant behaviours, the generational impact of this coping is also substantial.

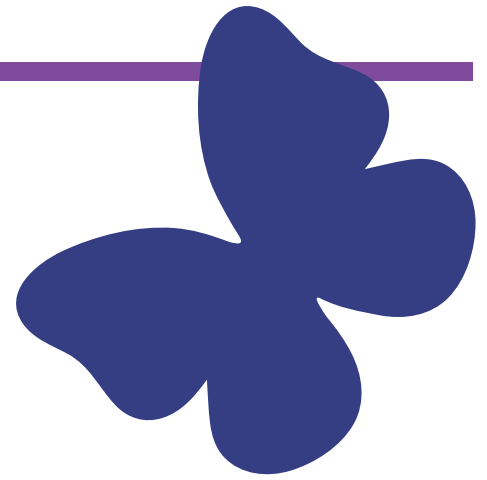
Regardless of the relationship (with the missing person, with self, with others, with

subsequent generations, with God), the child must develop coping skills that allow them to develop these relationships in healthy ways. Most children learn these skills from their parents/ adults. However, in the situation of a missing loved one, the adult may not be the healthiest role model, or may not be available to the children. Many children end up seeking therapy for these issues later in life, or simply take on mal-adaptive behaviours. They are able to verbalize characteristics of themselves that they attribute directly to the missing situation; lack of confidence, inability to trust, and an inability to establish intimate relationships are examples. Providing mentoring, life skill coaching or counseling and traditional coping mechanisms for the child as they grow through childhood are excellent resources to mitigate these outcomes. The responsibility to suggest these supports and to see the necessity for them will probably fall to extended family members, elders and traditional teachers, and the larger community.

### **MISSING OR DECEASED? ESTABLISHING A PERMANENT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LOVED ONE**

As mentioned above, without the dual sense of future held by the adults, a child struggles with the issue of whether the missing person is alive or dead. A common feeling among children is that 'missing is always there, dead is something from which you can move on'. If the loved one is still considered missing, there is nothing to validate their existence. When someone is dead there is a certificate to validate them. When a family member is missing, there is no symbol for remembrance. If someone is dead, there is a marker, headstone or some recognized place for remembering. The person providing support may assist the child in helping to create these symbols. One example would be requesting a periodic written statement from the police that says the case is still open and the family member is still considered missing which provides documented status of the person. Annual birthday celebrations (rather than memorial services) acknowledge the life of the missing without





suggesting that their life is over. A public plaque, garden, bench or tree in honour of the loved one provides a symbol of their life, without giving credence to whether they are living or dead.

Whether the missing person is alive or dead, the child also needs for their loved one's life to have value or meaning to this point. There are a variety of ways for this to be accomplished such as scholarship funds to the development of programs, volunteer activities and organizations to support other families. For a child, continuing the search insures that the loved one is not forgotten, and establishes a mechanism in the loved one's name to insure that their life has meaning.

In summary, how the child responds and reacts to the missing situation depends in large part on their perception of how well the parent/adult can protect them or the missing person. The effects of these perspectives, if not addressed in childhood at the time of the event, have significant long-ranged impact on their ability to trust authority, establish intimate

relationships, and even in rearing their own children. While children do not maintain the dual sense of future that their parents utilize to cope, they may experience guilt at moving on/growing, leaving the missing female behind. The act of searching may continue in some form throughout the child's lifetime.

#### **IF THE MISSING CHILD WAS ABDUCTED BY A FAMILY MEMBER**

If the missing person is a child, and is abducted by a family member (or a close family friend), the motivation is very often not about the welfare of the child. Unfortunately, issues of custody are often more about issues of control between the adult family members involved. For the person providing support it is good to remember that in this situation there is only one victim and that is the child. Child welfare is an issue of well-being and is under the jurisdiction of human or protective services. Child custody is an issue of control and is under the jurisdiction of the legal system. For the parent whose child is missing due to abduction by another family member, support

should follow the suggestions in the previous sections; work to Re-establish Structure, Release the Child that Was / Accept Child that Is, Resolve the Pain of the Absence, Uncertainty and Fear, Reassess the Role of Guilt, Acknowledge the Developmental Expectations of the Child's Future, and Re-establish a Single Perception of Future as discussed above. Another major support to the parent is to assist them to learn about the 'system', and how to utilize it to help in this situation.

#### **IF THE MISSING CHILD WAS ABDUCTED BY A NON-FAMILY MEMBER**

Abduction by a non-family member is not about control but about the exploitation of the child. The same information provided above should be followed to support the parents and family of a female child in a non-family abduction. The next chapter provides information on supporting this family when the child is located, and when the child is located and returned.

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# Supporting families of the located

## A LOVED ONE IS LOCATED

### WHEN THE PERSON IS LOCATED

When the missing person is located, the family is confronted with new challenges. Coping now involves the process of re-integrating the missing one into the family. This is a two-fold task as the person has to adapt to the new family structure, and the new family structure has to adjust to include the missing loved one. The longer he/she has been missing, the more difficult this process will be. The family will also need to develop new coping skills if the family member is located but does not physically return to the home or family. This may occur due to involvement by protective/foster care services, a behaviour reform or rehab environment, or due to legal/criminal confinement, for example. Or, the family member may choose to not return. Further, the method by which the person went missing will have a significant impact on the family's ability to adjust to the family member being located, or being located and returned. The most common methods by which a person goes missing are that he/she walked away, or they were abducted. All of these situations present unique opportunities to provide support.

If the family member walked away (or ran away in the case of a child) and has returned, it is recommended that the family and individual seek professional counseling or at least neutral mediation. This can be provided by a professional, a respected elder, or traditional healer. The loved one that returns is different than the one who walked away. The family that he/she is returning to is different than the family before they went missing. The family structure and the missing person have to adapt to these changes as they reintegrate. Trust has to be re-established between the loved one and their family as they address why he/she chose to leave, and why they chose to return. There is also the concern of family members that he/she may choose to leave again. It may also be true that the individual uses the threat of leaving again to manipulate the family. This process of adapting occurs whether the missing person is simply located or if he/she has been located and has returned to the family. Having a neutral person such as an elder who is respected by all parties, or a professional to assist in this

reintegration allows for the setting of rules, boundaries and guidelines for everyone involved.

No matter how the loved one went missing the adjustment to each other begins at the first interaction between the individual and family members after he/she is located, or located and returned. If the missing loved one is located but not returned to the family, the focus of the conversation for the first thirty minutes should simply be the expression of 'I love you. I'm glad you're back. I'm glad you're safe'. The person providing support may need to work to help them maintain this focus. Family members naturally want to know what has happened to the person while they were missing, and will want to ask about this. It is important to understand that the individual may have been involved in activity that they feel guilt, embarrassment, or even fearful about. They may be afraid of being judged, or they may have been traumatized by the activity. It is important to let the individual talk about their experience when they are ready. When they are ready to talk about their experiences,

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## A LOVED ONE IS LOCATED

the located loved one needs for the family to validate their experiences immediately; to openly discuss, validate and process the experiences of the person while they were missing. It is imperative for the family members to validate not only the person's experiences, but how those experiences have changed them. It is also important to be sure that the family will not judge missing loved one for what may have happened to them. The person providing support must explain these points to the family and missing person, and help them to follow these guidelines.

The family and the individual, at the time of this first interaction, may both be reeling with uncontrolled emotions; anger, fear, relief, love, frustration, humiliation, powerlessness. The first few moments of this encounter will set the tone for the new relationship. To set the appropriate, healthy tone the guidelines presented above should be followed.

### WHEN THE MISSING PERSON IS LOCATED

#### Re-establish structure

The physical structure for a family which has had a family member gone missing, and is located (but not returned) may undergo very little change, particularly if they have been following the information for physical structure presented in Chapter 1. They, of course, would abandon their physical activity of searching for the loved one. The roles, structures and schedule that the family has adopted while the person was missing can now be continued and perhaps even refined to more permanently exclude the daily presence of the located loved one. If there is a possibility that he/she may eventually return, they will need to fit into what is now the new normal for the family, rather than the family trying to return to its former patterns. Until that happens, the primary change in the schedule will be the inclusion of visitations with the located loved one, if that is going to occur.

If the loved one is in an agency setting the family will need to

follow the visitation rules of the agency. In a sense, the family must have the permission of the agency in order to interact with their loved one. The family may experience anger toward the individual for causing the situation that includes the agency involvement and/or anger for the agency which has control over their interaction with their loved one. Support comes in allowing the family to verbalize this anger about the person and about the agency, and discussing how to better accept the current situation. This often comes from actively attempting to see the situation differently and finding the positives in the situation. If the individual will eventually be returned to the family, this can be seen as a time when plans can be made by both parties to ease the reintegration of the person back into the family.

The loved choosing to stay at another location (with threats of leaving again), is an indication of some unsettled discord, and visitation will need to be negotiated and planned directly with them. The family and the loved one are equals in this negotiation. One way to support