

# What To Do If Your Kids Get Lost

CHECKLIST

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It's every parent's nightmare. You turn around and your child isn't there.

I remember getting lost in a Spanish Market when I was 5 but I didn't panic as my Mum & Dad had taught me what to do.

Anyone who's been a parent for long enough will have experienced the terror of not being able to find your child, whether it's at an amusement park, a shop, an airport, or wherever else kids can get lost - which can be anywhere, sometimes even right under your nose. In a report, the U.S. Department of Justice estimated that some 340,500 children a year become temporarily separated from a parent or a caregiver for at least an hour. And those numbers reflect only reported incidents, and not the thousands of times parents have lost a child for even a few excruciating minutes.

The good news? Most children are found quickly, often even before they realise a parent is looking for them. And possibly every parent's worst fear - abduction by a stranger or an acquaintance, where the child is taken far from home and harmed or held with the intent to keep them permanently - is VERY rare.

Still, with almost 1,000 children a day getting lost for over an hour or more, it's a good idea to be prepared if it happens.

Here are some tips about to keep your little Houdini safe and prepared if they get separated from you, and also the fastest ways to find them.

## **'Talk & Teach' Your Child Your Basic Rules.**

Beginning when your child is a toddler, you should 'Talk & Teach' them about the possibility of getting lost. Keep your tone light and don't appear over anxious as your child will pick on this and start to get anxious too. The most important thing is to have a plan, and to emphasise the importance of remembering it, so your kids will follow it in the event they get separated. Perhaps act out the scenario as a game to practice.

At the beach, for example, tell your child to find a lifeguard & then to stay put – not to move about as they are getting further lost. So many children go looking for their parents at the beach & the families all begin to look the same & they can get very far away from you very quickly.

Make sure that you explain to your child that you would never deliberately leave them behind so they don't become worried. 'Talk & Teach' your toddler to sit on the floor or the ground if they can't find you and to shout your name from there. Tell your older children that they can be no more than "three giant steps" away from you, or ask them to stay where they can see you.

You may find that you have 'a runner' on your hands and they won't even realise that you're not with them as they have gone off exploring until they're nowhere near you. Either way, tell your child that if you don't respond when they call out, rather than looking for a shop assistant or a security guard, they should stay put and ask the first "mummy" with a child they see to help them. Why a mum? Women with kids are statistically less likely to be predators and more likely to stay with your child until they find you. Uniforms can be confusing for young children some security guards are safe; others, who knows? When children get lost, you want to give them to choose the least-risky choice. Once children are school age they can identify an employee so 'talk & teach' your older child

to look for a person behind a cash register. Most employees in major stores are trained to know what to do."

Next time you are out shopping practice. Get your child to actually ask a shop assistant or a woman with kids for help, as this will really help to make these situations you've talked about real for your child, so when they do lose you, they know what to do and they don't panic.

- **Safety Checklist**

In crowded venues, such as theme parks and outdoor festivals, it's a good idea right from the beginning, to teach your child that if they're in a public place, they can choose: either they can sit buckled up in their buggy or they must hold your hand. Don't put up with their whining about this – this is important, so be firm and consistent in your attitude – better safe than sorry.

Still, if you know you have a child who likes to run off, perhaps you could use a safety leash which can help keep them from dashing into traffic or getting lost in a crowd just for this outing.

- **Teach your children**

To STOP - stand still and look around if they are lost, not to run around trying to find you. It is better that you go to them by retracing your steps.

If they can see you they should go straight back to you.

- **Lost Child Toolkit**

Put your phone number in writing. Even if your child can recite your mobile phone number, it's a good idea to write it where they can keep it in case they forget because they are stressed. You can buy all sorts of identity bracelets or you can make your own with a bracelet. Some parents even write their number on the tongue of their child's shoe, or on a cheap lanyard that their children can tuck into their shirt. Get creative but be mindful about keeping the information hidden from view.

- **Dress Brightly**

When I used to be a teacher, and we took kids on an outing, we always got them to wear bright red caps so that they were easy to spot in a crowded place. A bright colour may also detract predators, since they tend to avoid kids who draw attention.

Don't forget to differentiate your buggy or pushchair, especially if you're in a theme park as they can all look like dozens of others. The last thing you want is for someone to accidentally walk off with your buggy particularly if your child is sleeping inside. Tie on a bright balloon on it so it will stand out and your child will be able to see it if they are strolling round with you & get lost.

- **Take a "before" photo.**

Mobile phones are a fabulous way to take a picture of your child before you set off. Many theme parks have the technology to send a digital picture to every security officer's phone. And it will help if you can't remember exactly what your child was wearing because in your panic you tend to forget everything.

- **They've Gone! Now What?**

As difficult as it may be, try not to panic, and follow these steps.

Do a quick, superficial search. Your child probably isn't far. Stand still for a moment and think about what might have caught your child's attention (the candy floss stand, the stand with the goldfish, the game with the giant stuffed bears?), and quickly check that area. If you're near water, a swimming pool, a pond, a fountain, or any other body of water, always check there first. While you may have heard that it's unwise to call your child's name - that a nearby predator could use it to their advantage - most experts say it's okay, and attracting attention can actually be a deterrent to predators. Your child is probably within earshot, so it makes sense to call out their name, especially since the chances of abduction are very, very slim.

- **Create Your Meeting Place**

When visiting a shopping centre, amusement park or other high-traffic public places, you should always make a clear plan for your children to follow in the unlikely event that they are separated from you. Choose an easy to find, central location as your designated meeting spot.

- **Using A Whistle**

Some parents take a whistle with them when they go into the woods, or go camping. If you use this idea, take out your whistle and blow three short blasts (think "come here now"), pause, then blow three short blasts again. Rest and repeat. Don't sound like a bird: Make a sound that will stand out from the other noises of the forest, park or woods.

- **Get Help Quickly**

If you don't find your child after a minute or two, look for the closest employee, security guard or tour guide and explain the situation. Do it quickly even if it means you have to leave the immediate area, or send someone else if you can. Most theme parks, play areas and children's farms have a missing-child action plan which instantly mobilises employees to guard exit doors and start searching toilets fitting rooms, and aisles, no child leaves the building without someone from the store questioning the adult and the child.

- **Call the police.**

If you haven't found your child after five to ten minutes, get the police involved, safety experts say. The first three hours are the most critical to locate a missing child. Give them a good description of where you last saw your child and in what kind of clothes. "Stay calm and remember that calling the police doesn't mean the worst has happened," says psychologist Rebecca Bailey, Ph.D., co-author of 'Safe Kids, Smart Parents.'

Trust your instincts if they are telling you to call the police. If you genuinely think your child may have been abducted, by a stranger or a disgruntle Ex, time is of the essence. Try to stay calm and seek help quickly.

### **Crucial Info to Teach Your Child at Every Age**

How to talk with your child about strangers

1. Start with basic body safety. ...
2. Discuss the concept of strangers. ...
3. Point out adults that your child can trust. ...
4. Go over do's and don'ts. ...
5. Teach them your guidelines for using public toilets....

#### **Under 4**

- Their first and last name.
- Your full name. If they only know you as "Mummy" or "Daddy" you can't be contacted easily.
- 'Talk & Teach' them NEVER to go with a stranger. NEVER to get into a car or to accept anything from anyone that they don't know.

## **5-7 YEARS**

- Teach them your mobile phone number. You can be reunited more quickly if you get separated.
- A "safe list." Instead of saying, "don't talk to strangers," list three to five people who are always okay for your child to talk to.

## **8 YEARS AND UP**

- Create an easy-to-find meeting place -- the more specific the location, the better - if you get separated.
- Encourage them to go with a friend, or an older sibling, to the toilet to help remember the way back, also there's more safety in numbers.
- 'Talk & Teach' them to beware of grown-ups asking for help, and to never approach a car. Tell your child to yell loudly if anyone tries to make them go somewhere.

### **Read safety books to your child that are reassuring.**

Daisy Gets Lost By: Chris Raschka

A young dog experiences the fear of being lost and the joys of being found when she becomes separated from her owner.

### **Lost My Dad By: Taro Gami**

A small boy loses his Dad while browsing in the toy section of a department store.

### **Sam Gets Lost by Mary Labatt**

Sam sneaks out of the back seat of Joan and Bob's convertible to do some exploring. After creating excitement on downtown sidewalks and losing track of Joan and Bob, Sam is finally reunited with her owners. Sam doesn't believe she was lost at all --- Joan and Bob were!

## **The Berenstain Bears Learn About Strangers**

This classic First Time Book from Stan and Jan Berenstain. Sister has gotten into a bad habit of talking to strangers, and now it's up to Papa, Mama, and Brother to show her the important rules of safety

Linda's Day at the Beach by Judy Yogev. A summertime story about a little dog who got lost on the beach.

## **Arlo Gets Lost by Wendy Wax**

Windy days are kite days and Arlo and his friend Jack are having fun flying theirs all the way 'to Jupiter and Mars.' But when a gust of wind blows Arlo's kite into a tree, he wanders off by himself to find it. Suddenly thunder booms, the rains pour down and poor Arlo is all alone, lost in the woods. Will Arlo be able to use his wits and his special armadillo skills, to get back home again?

## **Pig Gets Lost by Heather Amery**

This is one of a series of stories featuring Poppy and Sam, their dog Rusty, Curly the pig and Woolly the sheep, as they go about their lives on Apple Tree Farm.

By being prepared you and your child will feel more relaxed if they happen to get lost. So, put 'Talking & Teaching' your child about staying safe on your list of 'to do' things this week.

