

Preventing Child Abduction

Nearly 800,000 children under the age of 18 are reported missing each year in the United States, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The American Journal of Nursing reports 10 mothers a year have had their infants snatched from their own homes.

Top 5 Tips for Preventing Infant Abduction

- 1. Don't advertise the fact that you have a baby.**

"For starters, avoid hanging banners and balloons in your front yard welcoming a new baby," says Joyce Jackson, child safety expert and author of "How To Protect Your Child from Sexual Predators." "Predators have been known to scour neighborhoods for these signs. Running birth announcements in the newspaper also carries the same risk."
- 2. Don't blog about your baby online.**

"Many people also create websites or photo-sharing sites so friends and family can stay updated on their news, but perusing these sites is the most common way criminals discover you have a new baby," Jackson says. "If you can't resist, make sure you don't publish any revealing information like your address or full name -- don't even publish your baby's last name."
- 3. Lock up tight.**

Make sure all windows in your house have locks or latches on them, and don't let strangers inside the house or close to your baby (that includes the Fed Ex guy or pizza man). And place a baby monitor in every room of the house.
- 4. Stay in sight.**

When you're in public, don't take your baby to unfamiliar areas where you could potentially be alone with a stranger (think parking garages or side streets). "And always keep your infant within your personal space," Jackson says. "If you have to use a stroller on the subway or bus, even in line at the grocery store, make sure your baby is turned to face you, and not outward."
- 5. Use a baby sling.**

"This is a very natural way to keep your infant close to your body," Jackson says. "It also says to would-be criminals, 'You'll have to get through me to get to my baby.' The bottom line is, criminals are going to take a baby that's easy to get to. So by presenting yourself as a confident parent, you'll likely scare off attackers."

Cases of kidnapped babies taken from public places like homes, parking lots, and shopping malls have doubled -- even as tighter security has cut the number of newborns stolen from hospitals and health centers by half.

What Moms Can Do about Preventing Child Abduction

"Safety Chick" Kathleen Baty gives moms pointers for decreasing your children's odds of becoming a victim.

Watch who you associate with. The majority of abducted children are taken by someone they know. That's why you have to be especially careful about who you surround yourself with and who you let into your home. Before you hire a carpet-cleaning company, for instance, make sure they do background checks on employees before letting a worker into your house.

Use common sense. Make sure to lock all doors and windows every night.

Create a "perimeter of safety" around your house. Install sensor lights. Criminals don't want to be seen. If there's a spotlight that goes on when they enter your yard, that could be a deterrent.

"Stalk yourself." Take a walk around your house and see what strangers can see. Can they see into your drapes or blinds? Make sure no one can see into your children's rooms, especially. You don't want someone to be able to see where your child sleeps from the street.

Get an alarm system in the home. You want to know the second someone is entering ... not wait to find out until they're at the foot of your bed or in your child's room.

Get alarmed screens. That way, you can still open windows and get fresh air in the day, but if the screen is cut or removed, the alarm will go off. These would have been especially helpful in the Elizabeth Smart abduction, because he came in through a window.

If you want to go the extra mile, create a "safe room" in your house. Baty recommends a walk-in closet that doesn't have windows. Install a bolt lock high enough on the door that your kids can't reach it, and keep a baseball bat and a plugged-in cell phone in that room at all times. Program the number of your local police department into that phone.

Make sure your kids know if there is a burglar in the house, everyone should meet in the "safe room." Then, if an emergency strikes, lock yourself in and call the police.

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