

Perceptions and Realities

INTRODUCTION: WE SEE WHAT WE EXPECT TO SEE

James Tedisco's brother, Thomas, is an amateur magician with an interest in illusion. He is a good sleight of hand magician who has mastered basic vanishes. He gives the illusion that an object—for example, a coin—has been passed from the left hand to the right hand when in fact the object is retained by his left hand. When showing this vanish, Tom performs the move and then shows his right hand empty. He thus implies by this gesture that he has vanished the coin. It is a form of misdirection. He makes it look quite natural—as if the coin were actually passed. He actually retains the coin—in his left palm. Tom argues that this illusion is successful because his audience expects him to pass the coin from one hand to the other, based on past experience. Tom reinforces his audience's expectation by his natural moves back and forth with the coin. His move of palming the coin is not detectable to his audience. He has often reminded me of the basic tenet of vanishes: that present perception is built on past experience. Another way of stating this is that individuals see what they expect to see.

We are often reminded of Tom's visual illusions when confronted with educating parents, an interested public, teachers, and children about child abductions. Individuals cling to certain beliefs, based on past experiences, about what child is likely to be abducted, who is likely to be a child abductor, and the role that educators can play in confronting and eliminating child abductions. People see the issues surrounding child abductions the way

they expect to see them. Individuals base their opinions on illusions—not visual, but cognitive. They may believe that child abductors are “psychotic,” refuse to believe that child abductors are repeat offenders, and believe in seductive childhood sexuality.

The similarity of a magician’s vanishing coins to missing or vanished children is apt. People typically don’t see what is really there; they cling to illusions. In this chapter we will review some major myths and provide examples of their impact on treatment and reactions of victims. Specifically, we will address the following illusions or myths that relate to either abductors/abusers or victims:

An abductor is a psychotic human being, easily identifiable by children and adults.

There are no long-term aftereffects of abductions for those who are found.

It is only young, helpless children who are the prey of abductors.

Runaway children and adolescents are not targeted for abductions.

Parental abduction is not a serious matter and is not a form of child abuse.

Abductions don’t happen here to the people I know—they happen somewhere else.

We will highlight how these popular myths are so pervasive that they confuse individuals about child abductions and missing children. The mythology that is created about this topic can help to “explain away” child abductions or to diminish their damage to victims and to victims’ families and friends. Thus, these myths must be tested against reality and debunked.

MYTH: AN ABDUCTOR IS A PSYCHOTIC HUMAN BEING, EASILY IDENTIFIABLE BY CHILDREN AND ADULTS

People want to cling to the illusion that abductors are insane, bizarre, or psychotic. Exceptions to these myths are quite difficult for some to accept. Individuals do not want to believe that a “normal” person could abduct teenage children, espe-

cially their own sons or daughters. As Kenneth Lanning (1994) recently pointed out, individuals believe child molesters are sinister individuals who hang around school playgrounds waiting to lure children with candy.

The illusion that there is a "typical" abuser/abductor who can be identified by his blatant mistreatment of children or adolescents is an oversimplification of a complex issue. While it may be difficult for us to confront the reality that abductions are perpetrated by individuals who are familiar to us, who have family lives similar to ours and who appear to be caring and sensitive individuals, it is a reality.

Psychologists Kathryn Quina and Nancy Carlson (1989) have identified the following common features abductors share: (1) apparent normalcy, (2) repeat offenses, (3) use of a modus operandi, (4) motivation by anger and a need for power, and (5) victims of sexual abuse.

Apparent Normalcy

Sexual abuse and control are to a great degree a part of the abduction process.

Beneke (1982), upon his first meeting with convicted sexual offenders, reported: "The first experience I had was blinding: a feeling of identification. . . . They were not different from the men I knew. They could've been my brother, . . . my father, . . . my friends, . . . me" (41). The vast majority of abductors and abusers are individuals who, unlike the individuals Beneke described, never come to the attention of authorities, are even more likely to seem normal.

This feature of apparent normalcy perhaps can help us to understand why individuals—especially children—may go with a stranger or noncustodial parent. Children often believe they can easily identify an abductor—someone who is sinister and offers "goodies." Children are taught to respect adults, especially adults' authority, and to only talk to people who look "nice." Indeed John Walsh, father of Adam Walsh, an abducted boy who was murdered, once stated that he wished he and his wife had spent more time encouraging Adam to respect his safety instead of respecting adults' authority: "If I had taught him to scream, he might be alive now" (quoted

in Gelman, 1984, 86). Victims' faith in their own judgment about other people can be shattered, and often survivors report that "they don't know who to trust anymore" (Quina and Carlson, 1989). They question what is normal and who can be trusted long into their adult years. Indeed, the abductor/abuser's apparent normalcy may lead an adolescent or young adult to question his or her own perceptions of the abuse—did it happen this way or did he or she imagine that this nice man or woman was so violent? This may be fueled by contact with an abductor who acts as if nothing has happened.

Children and adolescents quite frequently experience a split reality—other people in their environment tell them continuously how lucky they are to have such a wonderful parent or friend. They themselves may come to reframe the victimization, perhaps blaming themselves, perhaps believing that all children or adolescents have similar experiences.

Repeat Offenses with a Modus Operandi

In 1991, talk show host Oprah Winfrey urged Congress to adopt a national system of background checks of child-care workers to identify child abusers. She stated:

Nothing angers me more than to hear a story of a child being abused, assaulted, raped, murdered by someone who had a previous conviction for child abuse, plea bargained, was released and came out to molest and murder a four-year-old girl who lived across the hall—quoted in (*Family Violence and Sexual Assault Bulletin*, 1991, 19).

Winfrey was referring to the experiences of Angelica Mena, who was molested, strangled and thrown into Lake Michigan by a convicted, repeat child molester.

Winfrey's concerns are wellfounded. For example, Abel (1986) reported that 400 child molesters he had interviewed admitted to him to more than 67,000 instances of child abductions and child sexual abuses, representing an average of 117 child victims per molester. Other researchers have reported results similar to Abel's (e.g., Freeman-Longo and Wall, 1986;

Rosenfeld, 1985). And, most abductors/abusers have committed hundreds of abuses for fifteen years or more prior to their first arrests. The low likelihood of "being caught" and relatively nonstringent punishment once incarcerated reinforce repeat offending. Quina and Carlson (1989) reported that the average prison sentence for convicted child sex abusers is less than one year; for convicted rapists, less than five years. Christine Courtois (1988) argued that the child is

manipulated by the unequal power in the relationship, that is by the relationship with the perpetrator on whom she [sic] is dependent. The child is further coerced by the perpetrator's strong desire to keep the activity a secret, which has the purpose of minimizing intervention and allowing repetition. (6)

Part of the explanation for the repeat offenses concerns the abductor/abuser's modus operandi. Child sexual abusers exhibit consistencies in the cycle of frequency of abuse/abductions, the planning of the abduction/abuse, the approach to the victim—the "lure"—and the behaviors during the abduction and subsequent abuse. Burgess and Holmstrom (1974) identified two types of modus operandi that can apply to child abductors/abusers: the "blitz attack" and the "confidence" or "con" assault.

In the blitz attack, a stranger appears suddenly. Children's responses resemble reactions to any other sudden, unexpected, dangerous event in their lives: (1) they are in so much shock that it interferes with any defensive action they might take; (2) the shock of the stranger's behavior precludes seeing or remembering much of the incident, so that they may have considerable difficulty in recognizing and identifying the individual at a later time; and (3) they label the experience as an assault and themselves as survivors. They may direct anger inward as they self-blame for not defending themselves. A blitz attack may or may not include assault with a weapon.

In the confidence or con assault, however, an elaborate scheme is set up by the abductor/abuser. This is a psychological assault rather than physical assault. Lanning (1994)

describes this type of abductor as a “pied piper” who attracts children. Indeed child abductors, especially those who are pedophiles (an individual who prefers to have sex with a child; see chapter 3), usually identify with children better than with adults. This characteristic makes most abductors master seducers of children—they know how to listen to children.

The con assault usually has as its first requirement gaining the confidence of the targeted child/adolescent. The target’s trust is used to manipulate her or him into physical and psychological vulnerability. The victim begins to notice a change in the behavior of the abductor from a nice person to an aggressor. However, by the time this realization takes place, the abductor has already assessed his or her potential for escape; many of the child’s options are thus eliminated. Trust is devastated after such a con assault. The key to continuing the con assault is to have the abuser convince the victim that he or she is a participant in the crime; that he or she shares the responsibility for the abuse or has no other alternatives. Quina and Carlson (1989) illustrate this psychological manipulation with a description from a reporter’s interview with a child molester. The reporter used the pretext of “learning the ropes” from an experienced molester:

The man, who bragged of abusing dozens of young children, advised him not to do it just once, because in time they might tell, to do it several times right away, because then they will start to believe they have participated and that they carry some of the responsibility. (25)

Many abductors refer to children as projects, objects, or possessions. Lanning (1994) offered the following typical comments from pedophiles: “This kid has low mileage”; “I’ve been working on this project for six months” (14). Child abductors are usually skilled in identifying vulnerable victims. They can watch a group of children for a brief period of time and then select a potential target. In many cases their target is from a dysfunctional family and may already be the victim of sexual and/or physical abuse.

Power and Anger, Not Sex

Very few abductors are motivated by sexual needs. On the contrary, abusers have noted in interviews that sexual satisfaction is absent in their abuse of children or adolescents. If any sexual satisfaction does occur, it is in conjunction with the humiliation of the victim and is inseparable from psychological needs (Doyle and Paludi, 1995). The abuser's primary motivation is the feeling of power, one that is rooted in dominance and humiliation of others who are less powerful (e.g., a child). One prime ingredient in sexual abuses is the element of aggression that is deeply embedded in the masculine gender role in North American culture (Doyle and Paludi, 1992).

For men who sexually abuse children, adolescents, or adults, aggression is one of the major ways of proving their masculinity, especially among those men who feel some sense of powerlessness in their lives. Diana Russell (1973) addressed this theme with respect to rape when she stated that rape is not the act of a "disturbed" man but rather an act of an "over-conforming" man. Russell's perspective can be extended to other forms of child abductors as well:

To win, to be superior, to be successful, to conquer—all demonstrate masculinity to those who subscribe to common cultural notions of masculinity, i.e., the masculine mystique. And it would be surprising if these notions of masculinity did not find expression in men's sexual behavior. Indeed, sex may be the arena where these notions of masculinity are most intensely played out, particularly by men who feel powerless in the rest of their lives, and hence, whose masculinity is threatened by this sense of powerlessness. (1)

Abductors/abusers may fuse aggression and sexuality. Research that examines men's sexual arousal as stimulated by graphic scenes of sexual violence suggests that men—even men who have never committed an act of sexual abuse—report a heightened sexual arousal from these scenes and an increase in their abuse fantasies (Malamuth and Check, 1981). Another disquieting research finding is that when nonabusive men were

shown depictions of sexual assault, they reported the possibility that they would even consider using force themselves in their sexual relations. Thus, sexuality is related at some level to an expression of aggression, and in turn aggression heightens men's sexual fantasies or actual sexual behaviors (Malamuth and Donnerstein, 1982). This finding does seem to suggest that one possible way to reduce the sexual violence in our culture against children (as well as adult women) would be to eliminate violent pornography.

Abductors are usually skilled at manipulating children. They use seduction techniques, competition, peer pressure, motivation techniques, and threats to get children to comply with their requests to engage in sex, steal, abuse drugs, or participate in prostitution or pornography. Part of the manipulation process involves lowering the inhibitions of children. This may be accomplished by showing sexually explicit material to children.

MYTH: THERE ARE NO LONG-TERM AFTEREFFECTS OF ABDUCTIONS FOR THOSE WHO ARE FOUND

Considerable research on missing children and sexually abused children and adolescents (see Conte and Berliner, 1988; Finkelhor and Browne, 1988) indicates the extent of psychological damage that can be caused by these forms of victimization. Salasin (1981) suggested that unlike physical abuse and neglect of children, where the evidence may be apparent, psychological problems are subtle and may not surface for some years. Psychological mistreatment is rarely addressed by the courts or by child protective services.

Psychologist Lenore Walker (1992) identified three domains that are affected by psychological damage resulting from abductions and sexual abuse: what individuals think (cognitive), how they feel (affect), and what they do (behavior). Young children and adolescents who have been victimized may not be able to verbalize the impact of the abuse on them until much later in their lives. With respect to the cog-

nitive impact, victims of abductions and abuse initially believe that the victimization will stop. When the abductor's behavior escalates, the victim begins to feel powerless. Subsequent to the abductor's continuing behavior, victims feel trapped. A sense of learned helplessness sets in—that no matter what she or he does, the victimization will not cease. Once individuals recognize that they were legitimate victims who were not to blame for their abduction and abuse, anxiety often shifts to anger.

With respect to the affective impact of abductions and abuse, among the emotional reactions reported by victims of abductions were anger, fear, anxiety, irritability, loss of self-esteem, feelings of humiliation and alienation, and a sense of vulnerability. In addition, most victims experience an immediate postvictimization generalized distress response characterized as a state of psychological shock (e.g., repeated reexperiencing of the trauma by intrusive waking images or dreams, depression and emotional numbing). Victims may not resolve the immediate distress but instead develop a chronic symptom picture that may persist for a considerable length of time.

Psychologist Mary Koss (1990) reported that several random community surveys have found that adult women who were victims of child sexual abuse had identifiable degrees of impairment when compared with nonvictims. For example, 17 percent of adult women abused as children were clinically depressed as measured by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale, and 18 percent were considered severely psychoneurotic. In their lifetimes victims were more likely than nonvictims to have had problems with depression, alcohol and other drug abuse, panic, and obsessive-compulsive symptoms (George and Winfield-Laird, 1986). In addition, a strong correlation between a history of violent victimization and suicidal ideation or deliberate attempts at self-harm has been reported (Kilpatrick, et al., 1985; Kilpatrick, et al., 1987).

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With respect to the behavioral impact of abductions and sexual abuse, children and adolescents try to escape their abductor/abuser. However, their attempts are frequently met

with increased violence and the threat of death, blame for the victimization, or death of their family members should they attempt to flee again. In fact, homicide is currently one of the five leading causes of child mortality in the United States (Goetting, 1990).

Another common response to children's attempts to flee is that the abductor tells the child that his or her parents do not love them or want them to come home. This strategy was used in 1972 by Kenneth Parnell when he abducted Steven Stayner. Parnell and an accomplice initially told Steven they were going to drive him home and ask his mother to make a church donation. Using this pretext, they got Steven into the car. Parnell frequently got out of the car and pretended to phone Steven's mother; he told Steven he had gotten her permission to keep Steven overnight. After learning that Steven had been punished recently by his father, Parnell played on this fact, telling Steven that his parents did not want him.

The victimized child is initially dependent upon the abductor for whatever reality is assigned to the experience (Summit, 1983). A sense of learned helplessness frequently follows such controlling statements—that no matter what they try to do, the victimization will not cease. Steven Stayner once stated, "I had hopes someday my parents would want me back . . . I used to have fantasy thoughts of family life, but as time went on they dimmed and dimmed."

Many children and adolescents respond to victimization by developing a dissociative disorder. A dissociative disorder includes various forms of memory loss and splitting of mind and body. The more serious the victimization and the longer it continues, the more likely the victim has learned how to dissociate as a psychological protection. Walker (1992) reported that in young children, especially those under five, multiple personalities may develop from the dissociation. In addition, a child may become preverbal, and if not permitted to express feelings related to the trauma, the child may continue in a chronic shock state (Bryant, 1992).

Jeanne Hernandez, in her 1992 presentation to the annual meeting of the Society of Behavioral Medicine, reported

that in her study of 6,224 ninth-, and twelfth-grade students in public schools in Minnesota, physically and sexually abused boys and girls reported eating disorders, especially bulimia. The abused adolescents with eating disorders reported lower self-esteem and more stress, anxiety, hopelessness, and suicide ideation than did their peers who were not abused.

Shame is a common response by children to sexual abuse. They develop a self-image of being dirty or ruined. Children may label a male abuser's ejaculation as "peeing on me," an act children typically view as "dirty." This feeling of shame often interferes with seeking help or telling anyone about the abuse, because they fear other people will also think they are dirty and respond to them with disgust (Carlson and Quina, 1989).

In recent years, mental health professionals have recognized that psychological symptoms that result from victimization are different from those from other mental disorders (Eth and Pynoos, 1985; Rosewater, 1987; Terr, 1990). The 1980 edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American Psychiatric Association for the first time included a diagnostic category of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a commonly seen psychological reaction to trauma. The features of a PTSD diagnosis include reexperiencing the traumatic events through flashbacks, nightmares, exaggerated startle response; hypervigilance to cues of further dangers; and disturbances in personal relationships. Abducted and abused children are at a nearly fourfold increased lifetime risk for any psychiatric disorder and at a threefold risk for substance abuse (Scott, 1992).

Research has suggested that abducted children who are found and returned to their families often remain psychologically tied to their abductors and continue to show psychological impairment. Steven Staynor reflected on this issue after he was returned to his family eight years after his abduction. He stated: "I returned almost a grown man, and yet my parents saw me at first as their seven-year-old. . . . Everything has changed. . . ." (quoted in Gelman, 1984, p. 82).

The age of the child must be considered as an important factor in the nature and severity of injuries resulting from

victimization. For example, there is a greater vulnerability of small children to death and serious harm as a result of inflicted blows. In addition, there is a higher likelihood for older children and adolescents to contact sexual-abuse-related HIV infection, since older children suffer more penetrative sexual abuse (Kerns and Ritter, 1991).

Thus, there are severe aftereffects of an abduction that continue into the individual's adult life. These aftereffects are seen in the child's and then later the adult's health, emotional, and spiritual development, as well as what Alice Miller (1981) has termed "soul murder" or the killing of feelings.

MYTH: IT IS ONLY YOUNG, HELPLESS CHILDREN WHO ARE THE PREY OF ABDUCTORS

In 1984, executive law in New York State created the Missing Children Register, which is maintained by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services. In 1992, a total of 27,553 cases of missing children were reported in New York State through this register. This represented an increase of 6 percent over 1991. Of the individuals reported missing 88 percent were thirteen or older. There have even been reported cases of abductions of young women and men in their early and mid-twenties. One case that received a great deal of attention concerned the abduction of Karen Wilson, a twenty-one-year-old legislative intern at the capitol in New York State during the 1986 session, who is still missing. The single largest group of cases in 1992 in New York State involved white girls aged thirteen to fifteen. This statistic is common in other states as well.

David Finkelhor and Jennifer Dziuba-Leatherman (1994) presented the national statistics taken from several sources in order of magnitude of victimizations of children. The forms of victimization are those for which there were scientifically defensible national estimates. According to the 1990 National Crime Survey (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1991), the rates of assault, rape, and robbery against twelve to nineteen year olds are two to three times higher than for the adult population as

a whole. Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman's statistics help illustrate the diversity and frequency of children's victimizations. As the researchers stated, "Almost all the figures . . . have been promoted in isolation at one time or another. Viewed together, they are just part of a total environment of various victimization dangers with which children live" (176).

Why are abductions of children more common than those of adults? While there are no easy answers to this question, there have been some generalizations reported. For example, the weakness and small physical stature of most children put them at greater risk for victimization. Children are not able to retaliate or deter violence and victimization as perhaps those with more power and strength. In addition, the social tolerance of childhood violence and victimization plays an important role. Many of the crimes against children are considered outside the purview of the criminal-justice system. For example, law enforcement officials lack the authority to rescue sixteen and seventeen year olds from street culture and assist them in obtaining needed psychological and medical care. This situation relates to the issue of persons-in-need-of-supervision (PINS). PINS are individuals under sixteen, who do not attend school as required by law, or who are incorrigible. It is important to expand our definition of someone who is likely to be abducted and abused to include these adolescents. Legislation has been introduced and is now awaiting passage in the New York State legislature to expand the age of PINS to eighteen. This issue will be addressed in chapter 7 when we discuss legislation throughout the United States.

Another reason why children are at high risk for violence and victimization is that they have comparatively little choice with whom they associate. Consequently, they may be with high-risk offenders and at jeopardy for victimization. Thus, a child who lives with a custodial parent is not free or able to leave. A child is obliged to live with other people and to go to school with other people—in what Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman (1994) describe as high density, heterogeneous environments.

All of these examples suggest a frightening fact that children know all too well: Children do not always have access to people and organizations in their culture that help protect them from violent people and victimization.

MYTH: RUNAWAY CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS ARE NOT TARGETED FOR ABDUCTIONS

The absence of choice that children have who are in violent situations is no different for runaway teens, despite the myth that adolescents are immune from abductions and other sexual violence because they left their homes by their own volition. Runaway teens are also dependent on others for survival; they are not able, for the most part, to take care of themselves. Thus, adolescents are also socially and psychologically immature, as are children.

Dependency and immaturity are used by abductors to get teens to become part of the street culture. The adolescents may engage in criminal activity to avoid being victimized by abductors, or they may engage in pornography or prostitution or take drugs as part of the abductor/abuser's "hold" on them. Other criminal activities in which runaway adolescents engage include shoplifting, robbery, and larceny.

While the illusion is that in most cases adolescents who run away from home are "acting out," or are rebelling against parents, the reality is that these teens in many instances are sexually and physically abused by family members (Silbert and Pines, 1981). Thus, adolescents' running away may be an escape attempt, not a rebellious gesture. Should they encounter an abductor/abuser, the impact of further victimization is devastating. Furthermore, there is research evidence that suggests that a history of repeated victimizations increases the likelihood that an individual will also eventually become a perpetrator of crime, violence, and/or abuse (Hanson and Slater, 1988; Windom, 1989). Many abductors use runaway teens as accomplices to their own crimes.

MYTH: PARENTAL ABDUCTION IS NOT A SERIOUS MATTER AND IS NOT A FORM OF CHILD ABUSE

Noncustodial parent abductions account for a large percentage of the total statistics regarding missing children. Edward Goldfader of Tracers Company of America, a professional searching organization, estimates the number to be as high as 95 percent.

In some cases, noncustodial fathers are not allowed by their exwives to see their children, despite the fact that the court has granted them visitation rights. Thus, the child is sometimes used as a pawn between the parents in marital or divorce disputes. Children abducted by noncustodial parents suffer considerable psychological and emotional distress. In some cases, the children may even be further victimized by sexual or physical abuse.

Children who are abducted by noncustodial parents, similar to those abducted by strangers, lose trust in their world and feel emotionally abandoned by the adults—their parents—who are most important to their protection and recovery. They are also driven further into regression, alienation, powerlessness, shame, embarrassment, humiliation, self-blame, and self-hate (Bryant, 1992).

Incestuous relationships between the noncustodial parent and the child may occur. Children are thus further manipulated into silence—about the abduction and then about the sexual abuse. As Christine Courtois (1988) stated:

The child is manipulated by the unequal power in the relationship, that is, by the relationship with the perpetrator on whom [they] are dependent. The child is further coerced by the perpetrator's strong desire to keep the activity a secret, which has the purpose of minimizing intervention and allowing repetition. (6)

If boys and girls do disclose information about the incestuous relationship, they are typically met with disbelief and rationalization of the perpetrator's behavior. Thus, most children do not tell.

Research does suggest that 90 percent of parents who take their own children illegally are emotionally unstable or abusive, with approximately one-half having criminal records (Huttinger, 1984). The majority of noncustodial parent abductions occur before custody has been determined. Children often live under cruel circumstances, almost paralleling the life of a fugitive, with frequent changes of residences and names. As Abrahms (1983) noted in her aptly titled book, *Children in the Crossfire*, children abducted by noncustodial parents quickly “turn into cooperative hostages. They can’t bear to be punished, and ponder the consequences of resistance.” Tommy, for example, was dragged to seven states and was intimidated on a daily basis. He subsequently stated:

I told my stepmom I wanted to go back to my real mom. My stepmother told me to wait until my father came home, and then he whipped me with a belt and said he didn’t want me talking about Mom. It made me scared, so I stopped. (quoted in Abrahms, 1983, 35)

We will address this issue of noncustodial parental abductions further in chapter 5.

MYTH: ABDUCTIONS DO NOT HAPPEN HERE TO THE PEOPLE I KNOW—THEY HAPPEN SOMEWHERE ELSE

Most individuals believe that child abductions could never touch their lives—that they happen to other people who live far away, but never to people like themselves. One explanation for this myth concerns the “just-world hypothesis” (Lerner, 1980). Individuals who believe in a just world believe bad things happen only to those who somehow bring on or somehow deserve the consequences of their acts. We raise our children to believe in the “golden rule”: that if we are good to other people, they will treat us nicely too. Notwithstanding that in many cases this tenet is true, some people believe that if anything bad happens to an individual, then they caused or at least contributed to this bad event in their lives—“That’s what you get

when you hitchhike,” “I was a bad son; my father had to punish me.” People thus try to find a personal reason for an individual’s selection as a victim of violence. Why? Because the alternative realization is frightening: “It could happen to me or to someone I love.”

We want to shield ourselves from the truth that sexual victimization does not distinguish between “good” people and “bad” people and that we too could be victims of violent acts. Thus, the just-world hypothesis is a protective mechanism; it shields us from a range of fears. We have to confront the reality that we are not special; we are not protected from harm.

Children and adolescents may believe in the just-world hypothesis because of the particular stage of cognitive development in which they are operating. For example, adolescents have a belief in their own uniqueness that is expressed in a subjective story they tell themselves about their “special qualities.” This subjective story is referred to by David Elkind (1967) as the “personal fable.” The personal fable is frequently translated into a conviction that they are not subject to the dangers suffered by others. Consequently, adolescent boys and girls may avoid using seat belts, drive too fast, binge and purge, dispense with using contraceptives, or avoid training in issues related to child abductions and missing children—all out of the conviction that “nothing bad will happen to me; I’m special.”

This egocentrism disappears when girls and boys have role-taking opportunities that will help to replace the subjective story with an objective one. Such role-taking experiences include kidnap resistance training. Families and teachers may reinforce the personal fable through the myths they cling to regarding child abductions, especially the just-world hypothesis.

Had it not been for the kidnap resistance training that twelve-year-old Rebecca Saverese received in school, Lewis Lent, Jr., might never have been captured. Rebecca used the “Run, Yell, and Tell” training she had received through the DARE classes at her school in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, to free herself from the potential abduction by a man alleged to be responsible for several abductions on the East Coast. Without this

training, Rebecca might not be around today to tell her story and more children might have fallen victim to Mr. Lent's activities. We will return to this issue of training in subsequent chapters.

The just-world hypothesis and personal fable are supported by silence surrounding child abductions and sexual victimization in this culture. The silence enhances our illusion of invulnerability for nonvictims. It is because none of our children and adolescents are safe that the silence must be broken.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have identified myths or illusions society may cling to concerning missing children and those who have been sexually abused and co-opted by abusers. These "cognitive illusions" or myths are well ingrained in our culture. Most insidious are their influences upon the self-images of the children and adolescents forced to endure abduction. These myths create levels of guilt, shame, and confusion in those abducted, their families, and their friends. They deter all of us who are caring citizens in our society from being ever vigilant to do our part to protect not only our children but all children from this devastating form of child abuse.

In the next three chapters, we present children's and adolescents' accounts of their experiences with child abductors. They break their silence. Their stories are important for those of us who are developing policies and curricula, for those who counsel victims of child abductions and sexual abuse, and for those representing children and teens in court proceedings.

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