

There were 49 cases of parental child abduction in 2004 (swissinfo)

A missing child is every parent's worst nightmare but stranger danger is rarely the problem. Most missing children are either runaways or kidnapped by a parent. Although runaways can very quickly become vulnerable to exploitation, it is still extremely rare for children to be abducted and harmed by strangers, police say. the case of parental abduction. That's why it's important to spread the message wide."

Chasing up leads

Fredi pools information with other similar European sites, maintaining close contact with partner sites and celebrating their joint successes. In one parental abduction case, Fredi was the key in finding a missing child. A woman saw photos of a mother and her little boy on the site. Soon afterwards she spotted the two of them in Spain. "She approached the mother, telling her what she was doing was wrong and that she should bring the child back," Diane recalls. The child was subsequently returned to Switzerland.

Very often, the work is fruitless but the Burgys persevere. "Unfortunately there are many cases where there is no trace for years but we search, we study parallels and possible leads in the world of prostitution and pornography." The longer a runaway is alone, the more danger he or she is in, Diane says. "Most runaways return physically unharmed, emotionally they might not be unharmed". Of course there is a difference between an older teenager who may be often absent from home for hours and a two-year old child who suddenly disappears." As soon as the police have the information, they will respond accordingly, Sollberger says. "It's very important to react quickly when there may be criminal involvement or when the child is at risk of an accident. "These cases are treated with high priority". Thomas Sollberger, Bern cantonal police Switzerland.

In November 2005, three children from one family, aged nine, seven and six, were unlawfully taken by their father from their home in Switzerland. The children - two boys and a girl - are Rwandan and may have been moved to Belgium. The story is repeated almost on a weekly basis. In 2004, the Central Authority for Dealing with International Child Abduction in Bern dealt with 49 new cases of parental kidnapping. The mother was more often the culprit in these cases - 57 per cent of the time. Most of the children concerned were under the age of seven. The abductions often arise from a custody wrangle between separated parents, usually of different nationalities. In most of the cases, the central authority used the Hague Convention to try to resolve the situation. However, there is little it can do when children are taken to non-member states or when their whereabouts is unknown.

Unsolved cases

Switzerland had a series of missing children cases in the 1980s, which remain unsolved to this day. Thomas Sollberger of Bern cantonal police says that most subsequent missing children cases have been solved when the child returned home unharmed. Sometimes there's a completely logical explanation for the disappearance of the child, Sollberger explains, and they are quickly located in a friend or neighbour's house. But other missing children are less easy to trace. One couple from Fribourg have devoted themselves to the cause of missing children for the past decade. Diane and André Burgy spend all their free time maintaining their website www.fredi.org and doing related work. The work includes research, press reading, site maintenance, contact and assistance to parents. "If it's not too far, we also go and

visit them," says Diane Burgy. Diane believes the website plays an important role in getting the message out. "The police prioritise contact with other police but we reach out to the public. A child who is reported missing could be seen by anyone."

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