

Re-Framing Family Abduction

by Liss Haviv & Janet Brodsky, LICSW

Take Root has developed a child-centered approach to defining family abduction that differentiates it from other custody conflicts in several important respects:

First, a welfare check on the child cannot be carried out. In the case of domestic abduction, the child is **hidden...**hidden not just from their searching family members, but, by extension, from the **entire justice system**. In the case of international abduction, the child may be living in plain sight; however the host country may be uncooperative with efforts to assess or intervene in the situation.

The reason a welfare check is critical is that **family abduction means a child is in isolation with a distressed caretaker**. This is true *regardless of the taking parent's motivation for fleeing with the child*. Simply put, parents do not abduct their children during periods of emotional well-being. For this reason, family abduction must **always** be seen as a practice that puts children at risk. For victims of domestic violence, where the harm in staying may far outweigh the harm in leaving, better solutions must be found through the justice system to make abduction unnecessary for the child's survival.

Another distinguishing element of family abduction is that **the child is typically forced to live an artificially manipulated life** (though sometimes without their even knowing it) where their sole filter for information is one person. The child is often deceived about the left-behind parent: They might be told the parent and siblings died in a car crash. They might be told the parent was so dangerous that the abducting parent fled to save their lives. Or the child might be told that the left-behind parent didn't want them. Take Root has identified three main umbrella category explanations about the left-behind parent's absence that we call **The 3-D's: Dead, Dangerous, Disinterested**. There ARE times a child is being hidden because the "dangerous" D is true, but, as pointed out in Take Root's Grey Paper *How Children Experience Abduction*, the child in such situations still has many of the same experiences as children abducted for other reasons.

Often, though, the reasons the child is given to explain the absence of their missing parent are false. But **the child has no options for independent reality-testing** – they have no information other than that provided by their abducting parent. Take Root points out that a child accepting what their taking parent tells them when there is no evidence to the contrary – when, in fact, everything in their accessible environment supports what they have been told by that parent - is healthy, normal behavior. Therefore, it is to be expected that abducted

children will become indifferent, hostile, fearful towards or grieve the loss of the left-behind parent.

Real examples of 3 –D's given to Take Root members

Missing parent is DEAD

- was killed in a car accident
- committed suicide
- also includes complete omission - cases in which the child is told nothing at all about missing family and either doesn't remember or knows better than to ask... Does Not Exist.

Missing parent is DISINTERESTED

- walked out on you
- gave you to me
- sold you to me
- never loved/wanted you

Missing parent is DANGEROUS

- crazy
- abusive
- mean
- bad
- a drug addict
- a prostitute
- plotting against us
- planning to hurt you
- planning to separate us
- a thief
- demonized
- a Nazi