



NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
**MISSING &  
EXPLOITED**  
CHILDREN®

# INVESTIGATIVE CHECKLIST FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

This checklist is meant to provide a framework of recommended actions, considerations, and activities to perform competent, productive, and thorough missing/abducted children investigations with the goal of better assisting families, victims, and the community.

## FIRST RESPONDER

- Activate body camera or vehicle mounted camera, if circumstances and policy allow.
- Interview parent(s)/guardian(s)/person who made the initial report.
- Confirm the child is in fact missing.
- Identify the circumstances of the missing episode.
- Determine when, where, and by whom the missing child was last seen.
- Interview the individuals who last had contact with the child.
- Identify the child's zone of safety for his or her age and developmental stage. Determine if the case involves a child with special needs. If so, see *Investigative Checklist for Law Enforcement When Responding to Missing Children With Special Needs*.
- Make an **initial assessment**, based on the available information, of the type of incident whether nonfamily abduction; family abduction; runaway; or lost, injured, otherwise missing, or a child with special needs.
- Children on the autism spectrum are at high risk. Immediately call for additional responders, search nearby bodies of water, and notify a supervisor.
- Obtain a **detailed** description of the missing child, abductor, and any vehicles used.
- Secure recent photos/videos of the missing child/abductor.
- Evaluate whether the circumstances meet **AMBER Alert criteria** and/or other immediate community notification protocol if not already activated. Discuss plan activation with supervisor.
- Advise the left-behind parent, in suspected family abduction, to call NCMEC and if any chance the child may be taken outside the United States, the parent should also contact the U.S. Department of State's Office of Children's Issues to report a potential kidnapping. Do not presume the child is safe.
- Determine the need for external, rapid deployment support, such as:
  - FBI's Child Abduction Rapid Deployment (CARD) team
  - Local or regional Child Abduction Response Teams (CARTs)
  - NCMEC's Team Adam
- Relay detailed descriptive information to communications unit for broadcast updates.
- Determine need for additional personnel including investigative and supervisory staff.
- Brief and update all additional responding personnel.
- Obtain and note consent to search home or building where incident took place **even if the premises have been previously searched by family members or others**.
- Conduct an immediate, thorough search of the missing child's home **even if the child was reported missing from a different location**.
- Inquire if the child has access to the internet and evaluate its potential role. Do not overlook activity on social media accounts or other online apps and platforms.

- Identify and separately interview everyone at the scene. Make sure their interview and identifying information is properly recorded. To aid in this process, if possible, take pictures or record video images of everyone present. Vehicle mounted or body cameras may be helpful with this task.
  - Note name, address, home/business phone numbers of each person.
  - Determine each person's relationship to the missing child.
  - Note information each person may have about the circumstances surrounding the missing episode.
  - Determine when/where each person last saw the child.
  - Ask each one, "What do you think happened to the child?"
  - Obtain names/addresses/phone numbers of the child's friends/associates and other relatives and friends of the family.
  - Determine if any suspicious activity or people were seen in the area.
  - Determine if any people were seen who seemed unusual, strange, or out-of-place.
  - Continue to keep communications unit apprised of all appropriate developing information for broadcast updates.
- Seal/protect scene and area of the child's home, including the child's personal articles such as hairbrush, diary, photos, and items with the child's fingerprints/footprints/teeth impressions. Determine if any of the child's personal items are missing. If possible, photograph/take videos of these areas.
- Interview other family members, friends/associates of the child, and friends of the family to determine:
  - when each last saw the child.
  - what they think happened to the child.
  - if the child had complained about being approached by anyone.
  - child's social networking accounts and usernames.
  - if the child utilizes chat apps on their cellphone.
  - if the child has mentioned meeting anyone online.
- Evaluate the contents and appearance of the child's room/residence.
- Ascertain if the child has a cellphone or other electronic communication device and obtain the most recent records of their use.
- Extend search to surrounding areas and vehicles, including those abandoned, and other places of concealment such as abandoned appliances, pools, wells, sheds, or other areas considered to be "attractive nuisances."
- Ensure information regarding the missing child is entered into the National Crime Information Center's (NCIC) Missing Person File **no more than two hours after receipt of the report** and any information about a suspected abductor is entered into the NCIC Wanted Person File. Ensure the entry includes a Child Abduction (CA) flag if appropriate.
- Treat areas of interest as potential crime scenes including all areas where the child may have been or was going to be located.
- Prepare missing child poster/flier with the child/abductor's photo and descriptive information. Distribute in appropriate geographic regions. Call NCMEC at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678) for assistance with this step.
- Determine if surveillance or security cameras in the vicinity may have captured relevant information.
- Prepare reports/make all required notifications.
- Review sex offender registries to determine if registered individuals live/work in the area or might otherwise be associated with the case. Call NCMEC at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678) to request assistance with this step.

## SUPERVISORY OFFICER

- Obtain briefing and written reports from the first responding officer and other personnel at the scene. Call and report the case to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC).
- Decide if circumstances meet the protocol in place for activation of an **AMBER Alert** and/or other immediate community notification systems, if not already activated.
- Determine if additional personnel are needed to assist in the investigation.
- Establish a command post away from the child's residence.
- Review responding officer recommendations for additional resources. Consider further support from:
  - State/Territorial Police
  - Missing Child Clearinghouse
  - Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)
  - Specialized Units
  - Victim-Witness Services
  - United States Marshals Service (USMS)
- Confirm all the required resources, equipment, and assistance necessary to conduct an efficient investigation have been requested and expedite their availability.
- Ensure coordination/cooperation among all law enforcement personnel involved in the investigation and search effort.
- Verify all required notifications are made.
- Ensure all agency policies and procedures are in compliance.
- Be available to make any decisions or determinations as they develop.
- Use media including print, radio, television, and the internet/social media to assist in the search throughout the duration of the case.
- Collaborate with your agency's communications team (PIO/PAO) to disseminate information appropriately to the public. Designate a representative to coordinate public communications if your agency does not have one.

## INVESTIGATIVE OFFICER

- Obtain briefing from the first responding officer and other on-scene personnel.
- Verify the accuracy of all descriptive information and other details developed during the preliminary investigation.
- Initiate a neighborhood canvass using a standardized questionnaire.
- Obtain a brief, recent history of family dynamics.
- Determine if social services or child protective services have been or are currently involved with the family.
- Correct and investigate the reasons for conflicting information offered by witnesses and other individuals.
- Provide relevant items and materials secured from the scene(s) to specialized units and external support agencies as need to aid in searches.
- Review and evaluate all available information and evidence collected.
- Secure the child's latest medical and dental records and items suitable for DNA collection.
- Contact landfill management and request they delay or at least segregate garbage and dumping containers from key investigative areas in cases where it is suspected there may be imminent danger to the missing child.
- Develop and execute an investigative plan.
- Conduct a criminal history background check on all principal suspects, witnesses, and participants in the investigation.
- Determine what additional resources and specialized services are required.
- Ensure details of the case have been reported to NCMEC. If the child is missing from placement, NCMEC is to be notified within 24 hours. The investigating agency, child welfare agency, and NCMEC are to maintain close liaison for the exchange of information and technical assistance.
- Prepare and update bulletins for local law enforcement agencies, missing child clearinghouse, FBI, and other appropriate agencies.
- Establish a phone hotline for receipt of tips and leads. Consider establishing an email address and other methods of electronically receiving leads as well.
- Establish a leads management system to prioritize leads and help ensure each one is reviewed and followed-up. Request support with this from NCMEC if needed.

This checklist is adapted from and to be used as a supplement to *Missing and Abducted Children: A Law-Enforcement Guide to Case Investigation and Program Management*. That guide contains additional recommended checklists and materials and may be downloaded free of charge at [MissingKids.org/ourwork/publications](http://MissingKids.org/ourwork/publications). To request a free copy or assistance for specific cases, call **NCMEC at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)**. This project was supported by Grant No. 2019-MU-MU-K012 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. This document is provided for informational purposes only in support of NCMEC's mission to serve as a resource center for law enforcement, families, and the public to help find missing children, reduce child sexual exploitation, and prevent child victimization and does not constitute legal advice or professional opinion about specific facts. Information provided in this document may not remain current or accurate, so recipients should use this document only as a starting point for their own independent research and analysis. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice. Copyright © 2004-2020 National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. All rights reserved. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® and are registered trademarks of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. The AMBER Alert logo is a registered trademark of the U.S. Department of Justice. NCMEC Order #88.



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