

Viewing a Crime in Progress

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How to Help Safely!

Someone sent me a video clip of a segment from the TODAY show called "Protecting Your Kids." The clip showed several simulated abduction scenarios in which a security specialist played the role of a child abductor and a seven-year old girl posed as the potential abductee. The purpose of the staged scenarios, which took place in broad daylight on a heavily-trafficked New York City street, was to see if people passing by would take action, and if so, what action.

The little girl was screaming and yelling for help and carrying on very convincingly as the "abductor" attempted to drag her off; but time after time, no one stopped or intervened in any way. It was frightening how many people wouldn't get involved. According to the show's host, it took hours before anyone actually confronted the "abductor" and tried to help the little girl.



The "Bystander Effect." This is a perfect example of what is called the "Bystander Effect." Experts have found that most people in a crowd become frozen with fear and denial if they happen to view (or hear) a crime in progress and are unlikely to take any action to help the person in trouble. If just one person responds, however, that seems to unfreeze everyone and others will usually join in. This is exactly what happened in the video clip.

To be fair to the onlookers, in several of the scenes shown on the clip it did look simply like a father was disciplining his unruly daughter. While many just walked right by, some people did stop or turn around but were clearly confused as to the severity of what was happening. In others scenes, however, the child yelled "You're not my father" and/or "Please help me." Here there was no doubt as to what was happening, and finally, two young men charged the "abductor."

If you hear some one yelling for help, whatever the circumstances may be, you do need to heed it!



***No absolutes exist
in crime scenarios
and no advice can
address every
variable.***

***Each situation
should be
evaluated
individually and
responded to in
the way you
instinctively judge
best.***

***If you hear someone
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whatever the
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do need to heed it!***



How to help. Here are four tips for providing assistance to someone in trouble without jeopardizing your own safety:

- ✓ **Stay on the Scene.** You may not feel capable of getting into a physical confrontation with a person you observe committing a crime, so just stay on the scene and try to evaluate exactly what's going on.
- ✓ **Call 911.** From a discrete distance, look directly at the "perpetrator" so he knows he's being observed and let him see you call 911 on your cell. Yell something like *"I don't know what's going on here, but I've called the police,"* and keep making noise. This will also alert passersby that something is wrong and may enlist their support. If you don't have a cell phone (tsk, tsk), yell to a passerby to call 911 and give a brief description (*"Call the police, I think someone is being attacked, kidnapped, robbed, etc."*).
- ✓ **Take a Picture.** If you have a camera cell phone, stay at a safe distance from the action and take pictures for the police. If you don't have a camera phone, pretend you do. The important thing is to let the perpetrator think he's being photographed; this may be enough to deter the crime. Though hard to do, try to make a mental note of what the people involved look like. If a car is involved, try to get the car's license plate; even 3 digits can be enough to put a make on the car.
- ✓ **Involve Others.** Try to involve others on the scene (*"I think that child is being kidnapped"*) to take action with you. A group has far more stopping power than an individual.

Safety Tip: If you find yourself in trouble, the best thing to yell is something like "Call the Police, I'm being attacked" or something empowering to YOU (and discouraging to an attacker) like "Get your hands off me" or "Back Up!"

Teach your children, if they find themselves in an abduction scenario, to yell clearly what the problem is so people observing the scene will know without doubt that intervention is needed: "This isn't my Dad/Mom etc., "I'm being kidnapped" or " Call the police."



Bottom line: don't walk away until you're satisfied there's nothing criminal going on ... and get help if there is!

