



Guidelines to Follow:

**A Resource for Families and
Friends of Missing Persons**

**By: Robert and Janet Cooke,
parents of missing
Rachel Louise Cooke**

Guidelines to Follow

Introduction

Robert and Janet Cooke's daughter Rachel was abducted on January 10, 2002. Unfortunately, no clues were found. Several law enforcement and volunteer agencies were involved in the search, investigation, flyer distribution, and many other activities to try and find Rachel.

Many processes were done right, and others were either not done or not done correctly. This document will point out both the good, the bad, and the overlooked steps.

This document is meant to be used as a guideline. Each missing person case is different. Use the best processes that match your individual situation.

The First 24 Hours

The first 24 to 48 hours of a missing person case are the most crucial. Whether a person is found alive is most probable during this time period. It is of the utmost importance that family, friends, law enforcement and others work together, work fast and do the correct things.

The most important thing to know is that a person does not have to be missing 24 hours before he or she is reported to law enforcement. The Cookes did not know this, which was very unfortunate.

The younger a missing child is, the faster the search must begin. A young child cannot take care of him or herself.

Please follow these steps:

- Make an initial search of your home and neighborhood, but try not to touch anything in the person's room or his or her personal items. Look in closets, under beds, in automobiles, culverts and anything else big enough to hold the missing person. Just be careful not to disturb any clues that may be present.
- Call your loved one's closest friends and family members to find out if they may know where the missing person is. Have the friends call everyone they know and ask about the whereabouts of the missing person.
- Call 911 or your local law enforcement phone number immediately and report the disappearance.
- Call some close friends and family to be with you. Keep the number of people small at first. Limit access to your home to this small group. Ask neighbors if other people may meet at their houses.
- Start making a list of neighbors, friends, family members, coworkers and others who know your loved one. Make a copy of this list and give it to law enforcement.
- Delegate responsibility. It will help reduce the stress you will encounter.
- Create a missing person flyer with the missing person's picture, a description of what he or she was last wearing, the last place and time he or she was seen, any physical traits, such as hair and eye color, height and weight, body markings, piercings, etc. Have your friends and family saturate the neighborhood and stores with the flyers within a five mile radius of the last place he or she was seen. Do not be surprised if the first law enforcement personnel to respond are not experienced in missing person cases. The authorities may take hours to respond

with someone with that expertise. In most cases, copies of the flyer will be donated if you ask. A special section on creating a missing person flyer or poster is included in this document.

- Keep a notebook of everyone's phone number involved from law enforcement, media, and other important people. Also log and date what law enforcement tells you; list anything they may take from your home.
- Have a family member or close friend answer your telephone. Hundreds of incoming phone calls are possible.
- Please remember this one important thing. You have the right to get your loved one back. You have the right to make recommendations and ask questions of law enforcement and others. They are all working for you and your missing loved one.
- If the missing person is 13 or over and there are no witnesses to the abduction, law enforcement will probably automatically think that she ran away or left on her own. Only you will know if she left on her own or not. Remember, you and your missing loved one have rights. Be empowered and be strong!
- A search will probably need to be started as soon as possible. Have your helpers call people to come search. This is not the time to hold back. It is not the time to worry about asking for things. Search organizations are listed at the end of this document.
- The media is your most important tool. Let them interview the family if at all possible. Nothing draws viewers like seeing the victim's family themselves making a plea to get their loved one back. Be short and precise with your statements and answers. Several minutes of videotape may be recorded during the interview, but only a few seconds may appear in the actual broadcast segment.
- Check the links provided at the end of this document for information on searches, missing person and victims' rights organizations. Do not hold back anything.
- The family is almost always suspected first. Try to not be offended by this. Cooperate with law enforcement. The sooner that law enforcement eliminates the family from any involvement, the sooner they can move on to other potential suspects.

The Second 24 hours

- Make sure to ask for frequent updates from law enforcement assigned to the case. It is your right to be informed.
- Try to expand the list of family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, school friends, teachers, and others who knew the missing person. Tell law enforcement everyone that you can think of. Keep a list of any names that you give the police and tell them you want updates of any interviews conducted.
- Give law enforcement any recent calendars, notepads, and computer files that the missing person may have used. Once again, log the items in your notebook.
- Start thinking about offering a reward. Even as little as \$1,000 has solved cases. Ten thousand dollars would be the best amount to start with, if you can afford it. Try and have a separate reward fund bank account set up for contributions.
- Have caller ID and call waiting installed if you do not already have them. An automatic telephone cassette recorder is also a good thing to have. You may even consider having a second phone line installed.
- Take time to relax, exercise, eat and drink. You owe it to yourself and your missing loved one to stay sharp. Robert Cooke made a decision very early in his daughter Rachel's disappearance. Robert said, "What good will it do to sit in a chair and cry all day? I'm going to work hard and try my best to get Rachel back."
- Make another list of people in your loved one's life who may have useful information, such as doctors, dentist, and teachers. Also add to the list any medications that the person is taking. Give the list to law enforcement, but keep a copy of the list in your notebook.
- Remember, delegate responsibility. You cannot do everything yourself. Delegate tasks and ask for updates to make sure each task is done.

Continuing Efforts

After the first 48 hours, you should start to organize a long-term plan. Try and recruit others to help you with this task. Creating and posting flyers, keeping the story in the media, setting up a reward, and contacting agencies that can help are just a few of the jobs that will need to be done.

Keeping your missing loved one visible is very important. Producing a good missing person flyer and posting it in as many places as possible will help. Have a person with good computer skills create a flyer with the missing person's picture, statistics, what he or she was last seen wearing, where he or she was last seen, and any other information that is important to the disappearance or abduction. Have volunteers post them everywhere that is allowed. High school students are a great resource for this. Try and enlist one of their clubs, such as the PALS or National Honor Society, to help.

The media is so important to the visibility of your missing loved one; this document devotes a special section to it. See if a close friend or relative will volunteer to lead the media tasks. The formal title for this is Press Information Officer, but you may label the job anything you wish.

If a reward has not yet been offered, try and set one up. Usually five or ten thousand dollars can be raised quickly. We recommend that a special bank account be set up to accept any reward donations.

There are numerous agencies available to help. Some agencies will post your missing person flyers on the Internet and even FAX and e-mail them to churches, businesses and individuals. Other agencies can help with searches and victims' rights. A list of agencies and what they do is contained in the Other Resources section of this document.

Law Enforcement

Most people's experience with law enforcement may only have come when receiving a traffic ticket or when reporting a theft of some kind. When a loved one becomes missing, it is a totally different matter. You must work closely with law enforcement over a period of days, weeks, months, or even years. Both sides will request things of each other, and these requests should be met to obtain the mutual goal of bringing your loved one home.

As stated in the First 24 Hours section, it is up to you to convince law enforcement that your loved one did not leave of his or her own free will. If your child is under the age of 13, this task is not difficult. It will be more difficult to convince them that a teenager or adult did not run away or leave on his or her own. Remember this; they probably do not know the missing person, but you do. You know his or her habits and traits, and you should know if he/she left willingly or not.

Your main job is to provide information to law enforcement. Remember to give law enforcement the list you made earlier of people who know the missing person. This is very important. Do not feel bad for emphasizing certain possible suspects, such as ex-boyfriends, ex-husbands, ex-wives, and any possible enemies. Remember to keep a copy of the list in your notebook.

Any diaries, receipts, parking tickets, or other information may be important to the case. Tell law enforcement about any recent events or activities that were attended by the family.

Make sure that law enforcement has the missing person added to the National Crime Information Center, or NCIC. This database may be accessed nationwide by any law enforcement agency with a NCIC terminal. The FBI should also be notified. If your state has a missing person clearing house, your loved one should be added there as well.

Insist on receiving regular updates on the case. It is your loved one who is missing. You have the right to be kept informed. If you are not happy with the way the case is proceeding, talk to the officer in charge. If the officer in charge does not satisfy you, talk to his or her superior.

Ask law enforcement to help you contact local and national media. The more coverage the missing person receives, the better.

Remember that the family is almost always suspected first. Try to not be offended by this. A good way to get law enforcement to move on to other suspects is to have everyone in your immediate family take a polygraph. The sooner that law enforcement eliminates the family from any involvement, the sooner they can move on to other potential suspects.

The Media

The media is your most powerful ally. They can reach more areas than anyone else, including law enforcement. Usually at the beginning of a missing person case, the media comes to you. Cooperate with them. If you are not up to doing an interview, have another family member or close friend do it. It is imperative that the word about your missing loved one gets out.

Give the media a picture or video of the missing loved one. Describe what he or she was wearing and where the person was last seen. Make a plea to the abductor to bring him or her back.

One of the drawbacks about the media is they will stop covering the story about your missing loved one when there is nothing new to report. When the case slows down, it is up to you to keep your loved one in the news. To do this, you will have to create new angles for the media to report on. This may sound dumb or unnecessary, but it is extremely important to keep the missing person visible to the public.

Keep a list of all media contacts in your notebook. Don't hesitate to contact the media or even send them press releases. Let them work for you and your missing loved one.

The Cookes created a large bulletin board with pictures of Rachel and items from her life. Then they opened up the "Rachel Board" to other family members and friends who wanted to post pictures and mementos of Rachel. The Rachel Board helped the media and others who did not know Rachel understand who she was. Pictures of the board appeared in the media for months after its creation.

Yellow ribbons or ribbons made of the missing person's favorite color are an eye-catcher. They are easy to make, and making them gives people who can't physically search something to do to help out.

A candlelight vigil is something that everyone seems to suggest. The Cookes had a prayer service for Rachel the second week that Rachel disappeared, but they waited until Rachel's birthday to do a candlelight prayer and birthday service. The crowd wrote messages to Rachel on helium-filled balloons, and the balloons were released all at once.

Anniversaries are important. Try and arrange media events to coincide with the anniversary months of the disappearance or abduction. Rachel's birthday was on May 10, 2002. Her candlelight prayer and birthday service also marked the four-month anniversary of when Rachel disappeared.

One month after Rachel disappeared, an event called "The Ride for Rachel" was held. Large groups of people met at one location and were given a stack of flyers and a map. The participants left in cars and on motorcycles and drove to various areas. They posted flyers in places that did not have one posted and replaced older out-of-date flyers.

The making of buttons, bumper stickers, and t-shirts also draws attention. Usually companies that make these items will either donate them or sell them at cost.

If you hold a benefit to raise money and create media attention, try to tie it in with an interest or activity important to your missing loved one. The Cooke family chose a Run/Walk for Rachel benefit because Rachel was an avid runner. Donations from businesses poured in for food, drinks, and other items necessary for the event. It gave people a chance to exercise, while at the same time honoring Rachel and raising reward fund money.

Check with your local cable company or an independent media company to see if they would be willing to create a public service announcement or PSA. The PSA is a short videotape that contains information about the missing person and the circumstances of the disappearance or abduction. The PSA can run periodically on a cable information channel or other community service channels.

Don't ignore using radio stations. Radio has a captive audience of people driving to and from work, shopping and other places. Use radio to announce events that you want people to attend such as searches and fundraisers. Teenagers listen to certain stations. If your child is a runaway, we suggest targeting those stations with announcements.

Television morning shows are another good media source to use. Like radio, they are easy to get on, and many people watch them while eating breakfast or getting ready for work.

Remember to try and keep your missing loved one in the news. There might just be that one news report that reaches just right person. That person may be the one that can help bring your loved one home.

The Search

After an initial check of your house and yard, it is best if you let someone else take over the searches. Law enforcement will probably do an initial search after they interview your family. It is best if you do not participate in that search. The best use of your time will be to answer questions and point out possible areas to search.

If volunteers are allowed to participate in the search, you can help out with this. Have your friends and family call people that they know to help with the search. Law enforcement will instruct the volunteers in what to do.

Ask law enforcement to provide you with a map of areas that have been searched. You may need this information later.

At some point and time law enforcement will end the search even if they don't find anything. If you are not satisfied that enough area has been searched, you have the right to continue the search on your own. There are several volunteer search organizations available to help. Check the information in the Other Resources section of this document.

If you want to conduct your own search, the Laura Recovery Center has documented how to organize and perform a search. That document may be found on their web site: <http://www.lrcf.net/LRCFoundation.org/LRCManual/index.html>. The most important things to do in a search are to mark potential evidence (don't touch it) and to keep good records on what areas were searched, on how well they were searched, and on what was found.

Other Resources

REFERENCE MATERIALS

When Your Child is Missing: A Family Survival Guide

This 93-page Guide was prepared with the assistance of individuals who know firsthand the pain, suffering, and hope of families with missing children.

How To Safeguard Your Children

JJC

P.O. Box 6000

Rockville, MD 20849-6000

<http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org/missing/guide.html>

<http://www.legal.firn.edu/justice/tips/child.html>

The Laura Recovery Center Manual

Conducting a Search for a Missing Child

Laura Recovery Center Foundation

307 B-1 South Friendswood Drive

Friendswood, Texas 77546

<http://LRCFoundation.org>

SEARCH ORGANIZATIONS

The Texas EquuSearch Mounted Search and Recovery Team

4013 FM 517, Suite B Dickinson, Texas 77539

281-309-9500

<http://www.texasequusearch.org>

San Antonio's BLACKSUN Search & Rescue Canine Team

11732 F.M. 1957

San Antonio, TX 78253

210-679-7449

<http://www.blacksunrb.com/search.html>

Travis County Search And Rescue

Emergencies or Missing Persons 24-hour pager: (512) 307-8467

Please leave your phone number with area code. Or send a brief text message to the alpha numeric pager by emailing us at emergency@tcsar.org

<http://www.tcsar.org>

Child Watch of North America - National Headquarters

7380 Sand Lake Rd., Ste. 500

Orlando, Florida 32819

407-290-5100

Hotline – 1-888-CHILDWATCH

<http://www.childwatch.org>

Child Find of America
Hotline: 1-800-IAM-LOST
<http://www.childfindofamerica.org>

MISSING PERSON ORGANIZATIONS (all ages)

Laura Recovery Center Foundation
307 B-1 South Friendswood Drive
Friendswood, Texas 77546
281-482-5723
<http://LRCFoundation.org>

Gabriels Gifts
3333 Eastside
Suite 125
Houston, TX 77098
<http://www.gabrielsgifts.org>

Child Protection Education of America, Inc.
410 Ware Blvd. Suite 712, Tampa, FL 33619
866-USA-CHILD
<http://www.find-missing-children.org>

Rhino Kids
2911 Dutch Branch
Sumter, South Carolina, 29154
646-219-2438
<http://www.rinokids.com>

Child CyberSearch
Hotline: 1-888-326-5352
<http://www.childcybersearch.com>

Child Search
P.O. Box 73725
Houston, Texas 77273
281-350-KIDS (5437)
<http://www.childsearch.org>

The Nation's Missing Children Organization, Inc. & Center for Missing Adults
2432 W. Peoria Avenue Suite 1283
Phoenix, AZ 85029
602-944-1768 / 1-800-690-FIND
<http://www.nmco.org>

MISSING PERSON ORGANIZATIONS (under 18 years old)

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

Hotline: 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)

<http://www.missingkids.org>

Missing Children...HELP Center

1-800-USA-KIDS

<http://www.800usakids.org>

THE POLLY KLAAS® FOUNDATION

P.O. Box 800

Petaluma, CA 94953

Hotline: 1-800-587-4357

Office: 707-769-1334

<http://www.pollyklaas.org>

The Heidi Search Center

7900 N. IH 35

San Antonio, Texas 78218

210-650-0428

<http://www.heidisearchcenter.org>

OPERATION LOOKOUT®

6320 Evergreen Way, Suite 201

Everett, WA 98203

1-800-LOOKOUT ext. 1234

<http://www.operationlookout.org>

More contacts available: <http://www.rachelalert.org/links.html>