



**missing children's  
network**

Keeping hope alive

# **Guidelines on How to Work with the Media**

# Working with the Media

Using print and broadcast media is one way of raising awareness and helping in the ongoing search for a missing child.

Families can work with the media in a wide variety of ways - The Missing Children's Network can help to facilitate communication between families and the media through web appeals, media slots and features.

The following guide attempts to inform families about the potential outcomes of using the media, and provides advice on how to get the most out of any interactions with the media, as well as offering practical guidance relating to how the media works, what rights you have, and how to deal with problems which may arise.

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6830 Park Avenue, suite 420, Montreal, QC H3N 1W7  
Telephone: 514 843-4333 Fax: 514 843-8211  
[missingchildrensnetwork.ngo](http://missingchildrensnetwork.ngo)



*Please note that the use of the masculine gender in this book also refers to the female gender and is used without discrimination and for the sole purpose of reducing the volume of text.*

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# Should I Use the Media?

## Using the media

Media appeals may be the quickest and most effective way of raising awareness of your missing child and helping in the on-going search for him. However, not everyone feels comfortable using the media. Different newspapers and magazines have different interviewing techniques and styles. While many journalists will be sympathetic, others may appear forceful, cold or aggressive or behave in other ways, which seem insensitive to what you are going through.



Some people simply don't trust the media or want their circumstances made public; others feel overwhelmed by the thought of dealing with journalists and being asked probing and personal questions about their missing child.

The Missing Children's Network is pleased to offer advice that will assist you to reach an informed decision, but the following may be helpful when considering your options:

### What are the advantages of using the media?

- People may report sightings or be able to provide other valuable information;
- Your missing child may see or hear any message you wish to send him and choose to make contact if he knows you are worried for his safety;
- You may get some comfort from feeling you are doing all you can to find your missing child;
- Other families in the same situation may come forward to offer support;
- Continuing coverage will keep the search fresh in people's minds.

### What are the drawbacks of using the media?

- Media interest may feel overwhelming, intrusive or frightening;
- You may feel that your privacy has been invaded;
- There is no guarantee that your story will be used;
- You may be asked questions you find insensitive;
- You may feel that you are losing control of an already out of control situation;
- Your missing child may not welcome the attention or wish to be "found";
- Publicity may put already vulnerable people at even greater risk by forcing them further away if they do not wish to be found;
- It can be very hard for someone who has been missing to then "walk back into his life" knowing that extensive publicity about him has been distributed in the local or national media.

Please keep in mind that once your child has been found, any information that has been published will remain on the web for a period of time. This may have an impact later on in the child's life, for example, when applying for employment and the employer conducts a Google search. Your child may resent you.

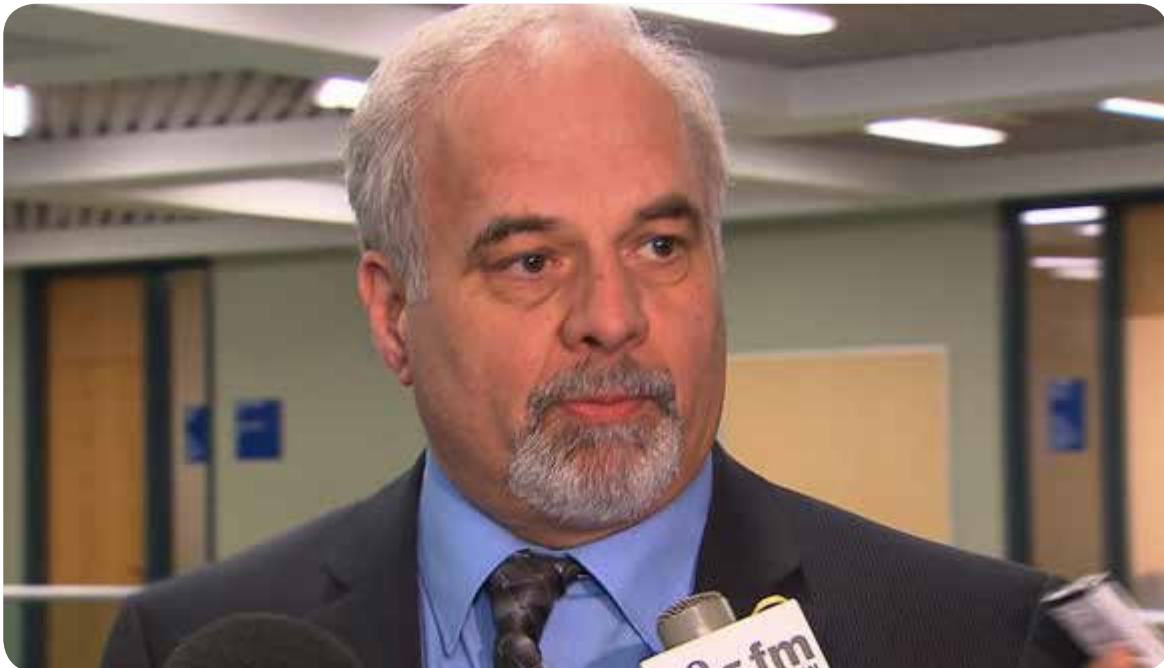
## **I don't think I can cope with dealing with the media personally. Is there an alternative?**

Audiences empathize with the fear and anguish people feel when someone close to them goes missing and will generally respond with compassion. You don't have to be a great speaker to make an appeal. However if you feel unable to deal with journalists yourself, consider asking a close friend or family member to act as your spokesperson. It is important that the designated spokesperson act as a buffer between the media and the searching family, as the media attention can sometimes be very overwhelming for the searching family. Always ensure with this person that your wishes as the searching family are respected.

If you are unsure or confused about dealing with the media, the Missing Children's Network is always happy to help by offering impartial advice and making practical suggestions.

### **SUMMARY**

Whether or not to use the media is a very personal decision. It is certainly the quickest and most effective way of reaching a large and diverse audience to ask for help, information and possible sightings. Nonetheless, the experience of having to deal with journalists, answer questions, disclose personal information about both your missing child and yourself, as well as being thrown into the media spotlight, may not be one you feel you can handle. The Missing Children's Network will support your decision either way. Though some cases will attract a large amount of media attention, other cases can be very difficult to gain any media interest at all. While this can be frustrating, the Missing Children's Network can support you in ensuring the local search is effective and coordinated, with or without the interest and support of the mainstream media.



# The Media: First Steps

## I want to use the media. Where do I start?

Few of us have any idea of how to deal with the media because we've never had any reason to. These days there are so many different forms of media that it can seem like a huge, confusing maze. One of the most important first steps is to get the media interested in running an appeal to try and locate or get information about your missing child. Who do you call at a newspaper or television station? What do you say when you get through to the right person? Which are the best sites to make an appeal online? How can the Missing Children's Network help you reach as many people as possible?

### First Steps

- It is important to decide whether publicity will be the best thing for you and your missing child. You should consider what impact publicity may have on your life, on those around you, and on the well-being and safety of your missing child;
- If you choose to use publicity to search for your missing child, ask the Missing Children's Network to create a poster and implement a web appeal;
- Always first discuss with your investigator your plans to use the media. Determine what information should be shared and what is best kept private;
- Choose a photo of your missing child that is a clear image of his head and shoulders; it is highly recommended to circulate only one photo of the missing child;
- Give careful consideration before providing precious images for use by the media as the memory of the image may remind you of the time they were missing.

### How do I contact the media?

- The first step is to choose the media outlets you are going to approach. Your reasons for contacting a particular outlet might be based on circulation, readership, familiarity, personal preference or that of the peer group of your missing child;
- If you prefer to contact media outlets directly, the contact details of any publication including telephone numbers and email addresses will be available on their web page;
- A telephone call may produce a quicker response than an email. The best person to speak to at a newspaper, radio or television station is the News Editor or any other journalist on the News Desk. If you don't immediately get through, ask for the name of the appropriate person, their direct line and request that they call you back as quickly as possible. If they don't, keep trying until you get through to them;
- Phone both local and national television and radio stations and ask them to publicize an appeal for your missing child as soon as possible;
- The Missing Children's Network operates its own website which receives on average more than 34,000 hits every month, as well as active followers on both Twitter and Facebook. We are happy to organize an appeal on your behalf but you are also welcome to create your own Facebook page or Twitter campaign. Again, keep in mind the permanence of information that is published on-line; you will not be able to remove it;
- Circulate an email to everyone in your address book and ask them to share the information with their own personal network of contacts;
- Although you don't have to get permission from the police to work with the media, it can be easier to manage the search effort and co-ordinate information if you have their full support.

## How do I get the media interested immediately?

- It's an unfortunate reality that the media will be more inclined to publish an appeal for certain missing people more than others. The media are more likely to run your story if they think their readers will empathize with the particular circumstances. There may be less interest if the person has gone missing before or has a history of mental illness or addiction;
- Newspapers and magazines often base their stories on an angle. Did your missing child have any special talents? Did he go missing from a specific place or close to the date of a particular event or anniversary? Is his disappearance totally out of character? Do you suspect he may be in a particular area? What message do you want to convey to him right now?
- Social media tends to be more inclusive because there isn't any obvious "readership" profile – a very wide and diverse range of people use social networking sites. If a newspaper or television station does not seem interested in running an appeal, don't be discouraged. Publicity on a combination of the Missing Children's Network's website, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other chat forums will reach thousands of people who may be able to help.

### SUMMARY

Having contacted your chosen media, the ideal outcome is that you manage to get through to the News Editor and they agree to run your appeal quickly and sensitively. Unfortunately that doesn't always happen. Editors are often frantically busy or working on a deadline and may not call you back right away or even seem that keen to help in the search for your missing child.

Try not to feel disheartened or take it personally if one particular publication or station doesn't show the level of interest that you would like. It might just be that the story doesn't fit their "readership profile" in terms of the age, history or gender of your missing child. However there may be another publication whose readers will be able to empathize more with you and who will be happy to run an appeal. Social networking sites are another way of reaching a huge audience and enabling anyone with information or possible sightings to respond to you immediately.

# Working with Journalists

## Journalists want to come and interview me. How can I prepare myself?

As with every profession there are both good and not-so-good journalists! The most important criteria is that you feel comfortable with both the person you will have contact with and the publication he represents. If something doesn't feel right, do not agree to an interview. At a time when you are hurting and confused, it makes sense to gain as much knowledge as possible about how the media works in order to minimize additional stress and make it work for you.

Please keep in mind that nothing is ever "off the record" and that anything you share with a journalist even when the camera is not recording may end up in the news.

## Coping with the spotlight

- As much as it may work in your favour when searching for your missing child, interacting with the press can feel very intimidating if you are not used to it. It's a good idea to try and set basic ground rules for dealing with journalists based on what you do and don't feel comfortable with;
- It may be a good idea to have someone with you who is more removed from the situation and less emotional to allow them to step in and answer questions if necessary, and provide support;
- If you have reported your missing child to the police, they may suggest or be able to help you arrange a press conference on neutral territory;
- Never open your home to the media without restrictions or boundaries. It's important for your own well-being to try and maintain some privacy;
- You may only feel comfortable being interviewed outside your house or in one room only. If you are not happy being interviewed at home, consider asking a close family member or friend whether they would be prepared to let you use a room in their home to meet members of the media;
- Be aware that if you choose to involve the media, you will automatically come under a degree of scrutiny yourself and this can feel intrusive. People may recognize or approach you on the street, supermarket or at your child's school;
- A poster appeal created by the Missing Children's Network can act as a media pack to give to journalists to save you having to repeat information every time you have contact with the media.

## Understanding the technicalities

- Not all publications will agree to it but it's worth asking for what is called "copy approval" – a guarantee that the journalist will permit you to read the finished article before publication and allow you to raise any concerns that you may have;
- Bear in mind that all reporters have deadlines. The later in the day the interview takes place, the more likely it is that the article will not appear until the next day;
- Be aware that any photographs of your missing child given to a journalist will become public property. While you will obviously need to provide one or two so that people can see what your missing child looks like, it is advisable to protect both your own and their privacy by not allowing journalists free access to take anything they choose from your photograph albums;

- Any quote you give during the interview can be used for publication. If there is anything you DON'T want included in the media, make a mental note to avoid even mentioning it. Likewise it can be useful to note down any facts you consider vital for the appeal and definitely want published;
- Be aware that if the media does wish to run an appeal, they may approach other people for additional information about your missing child;
- The media may also present the story in a different way to what you expect, using a different angle or including a sensational headline;
- You have the right to decline an interview with any newspaper, magazine or television station and you do not have to provide an explanation for doing so;
- If you don't like or feel comfortable during your initial contact with a particular journalist, explain the situation to his Editor and ask to deal with someone else you feel more at ease with.

## SUMMARY

The best way of making the press work for you in terms of publicizing your appeal quickly and in the manner you want it to appear is to develop a friendly relationship with journalists who want to interview you.

However the importance of maintaining boundaries and not being persuaded into doing or saying anything you don't want to, cannot be over-emphasized. **Answer what you consider to be fair and relevant questions in as much detail as you choose but a simple "I don't want to go into that" should stop any line of questioning you are unhappy with.** Trust your instincts. If a journalist makes you feel ill at ease, you are under no obligation to be interviewed by them or allow them into your home.





# Interviews

## Where will interviews take place and what kind of questions am I likely to be asked?

One of the first decisions you will have to make is whether or not you are comfortable with the idea of being interviewed by journalists in your own home. Some people may find the familiarity of being on their own territory reassuring. To others, the idea of having strangers in their personal space at a time of great distress may feel intrusive. A compromise might be the more neutral space of the home of a family member or friend, or a public space such as a café or park. Either way, a journalist is going to ask you several questions. There will not only be basic ones to establish a physical description and the age and gender of your missing child, but also more emotive ones. These may include “Has your child gone missing before?”, “What do you think happened to him?” and “Do you believe he is still alive?” Below are some of the things you are likely to be asked immediately:

### What information will I be asked to provide?

- Your child’s date of birth, full name and any names he is known to use;
- A physical description of your missing child and of the clothes he was wearing when last seen;
- The place he was last seen if known;
- The most recent colour photographs you have;
- Details of any identifying features such as tattoos, birthmarks, piercings, scars;
- As much personal information as you are willing to provide;
- A contact number for people to call with possible sightings.

### What information should you disclose?

- Any information you disclose to a journalist may become public. **How would your missing child feel if details of his relationships, sexuality, financial problems, health or criminal record were made public? Was this information given to you in confidence and would your child wish it to be known generally?**
- You may be asked questions about his physical or mental health such as “Was he depressed?” or “Had he been diagnosed with any illness?” If you don’t want to go into detail, one possible answer is to simply say that he takes medication on a regular basis or has been “unwell” to describe any mental health issue;
- Bear in mind how your missing child might react if he heard your appeal. Try to make the message to him, positive and encouraging instead of one that might cause him to feel shame, guilt, resentment or pressure;
- Remember that you do not have to answer any questions that seem inappropriate or make you feel uncomfortable;
- Answer what you consider to be fair and relevant questions in as much detail as you choose but a simple “I don’t want to go into that” should stop any line of questioning you are unhappy with;
- It may be a good idea to have someone with you who is more removed from the situation and less emotional to allow them to step in and answer questions if necessary, and provide support.

## SUMMARY

While it is obviously important to provide details that could help identify your missing child, you don't have to make public, every aspect of your relationship with him or the facts of his life. If there are things that you would prefer to keep private, it's fine to do so. If there are things that you are worried that the media may sensationalize, it's fine not to disclose them. If your child needs regular medication, it's possible to express concern about this without explaining the reason why or revealing any physical or mental health issues your missing child has which may make him even more vulnerable.

If you do not feel able to meet journalists alone or in your own home, it's perfectly acceptable to ask someone else to be with you or to schedule interviews over the phone or in another location such as the home of a friend or family member, a local hotel or café. The offices of the Missing Children's Network are also always available to families.



## After the Interview

### What will happen afterwards?

In times of great duress, it is normal to feel emotionally drained following an interview. Talking to a stranger about your feelings and concerns for the safety of your missing child may leave you feeling exhausted and upset.

- If possible, try to pace yourself so you can gather your strength and have some private recovery time in between interviews. Your physical and mental resources are going to be limited right now and the fresher you feel during any dealings with the media, the more effective you will be;
- Do not hesitate to call the journalist if questions or concerns arise following the interview;
- Prepare yourself for mixed and heightened emotions when the copy is read back to you or you see the article in print. Some people find this distressing as it confirms the reality of the situation.

## Maintaining Media Interest

### How can I keep the media interested in the medium / longer term?

In the first few days after your child has disappeared, your contact with the media may be frequent. However if your missing child has not been found within a few weeks, it's important to be aware that the media attention may wane and you will have to work to keep the appeal active and the public's interest. Here are some things you can do to help:

- Think of ways to motivate the public to continue their support. These might include significant birthdays (especially if your missing child is young), monthly or annual anniversaries of the disappearance);
- Give the story of your missing child a new "angle". Consider asking a high profile individual such as a politician, media / music / sports personality or celebrity to help by making a further appeal for information and continuing to raise awareness;
- In collaboration with the police, announce any developments, recent sightings or new information separately to help spread coverage over a longer period of time;
- If you have developed a good relationship with a particular journalist, ask him to help devise ways to get your appeal back in the spotlight;
- Keep a list of the names and cellphone numbers of journalists you felt comfortable with so you can stay in contact with them should they move from one publication to another;
- If your child has been missing for some time, you may wish to consider circulating an age-enhanced photo to raise awareness of what they might look now. The Missing Children's Network can advise you on how to go about this.

## SUMMARY

The Missing Children's Network will maintain its appeal for information about your missing child for as long as you wish, on its website, through its Facebook followers and through poster campaigns. However if your missing child has not been found within a few weeks, media interest may decline. There are a number of strategies you can employ to ensure that the media continues to publicize your missing child's case.

## The Media: Your Rights

### Dealing with journalists: what are my rights during an interview?

- Simply put – you don't have to say, provide, do or agree to anything you don't want to;
- You should expect to be treated with dignity and respect at all times;
- You have the right to grant the interview in the language of your choice;
- Ask that the website address and telephone number of the Missing Children's Network be published as well as police or other contact details so readers or viewers can report sightings or any other information;
- It's not advisable in the early days to sign any "exclusivity" contract which restricts you from talking to any other publications or appearing on any other television or radio programs. You may want as much publicity as possible to try and reach your missing child;
- If you feel that your wishes and dignity are not being respected, you have the right to terminate an interview, to ask a journalist to leave your home, or to complain to his Editor;
- You have the right to end any interview that is making you feel distressed, pressured or otherwise uncomfortable;
- You can refuse to allow other family members or friends to be photographed;
- You can refuse to allow certain areas or rooms in your home to be photographed;
- You can refuse to allow photographs to be taken of your missing child's room or possessions.

**Whenever you have the occasion to grant an interview, always insist that the media publish a photo of your missing child.**