

The Kidnapper's Trick

By Nathan Thornburgh

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Around the globe, millions have followed the story of Natascha Kampusch, the girl who was kidnapped at age 10 and held prisoner for eight years in a windowless basement near Vienna, Austria. They have clicked through snapshots of her dungeon posted on the Internet, speculated in chat rooms about why she had never been discovered, and marveled at her eloquence in her first television interview last week.

But in the U.S., one group is intently focused not on the physical layout of Kampusch's captivity but on the mental landscape of a girl who grew up thinking her parents had abandoned her--counselors who work with children of divorced couples. Long-term abductions by strangers are thankfully rare, but psychologists say the trauma of Kampusch, 18, who was told for years that her parents had simply forgotten about her, echoes the fallout from the more common nightmare of a custody dispute in which a child is irrevocably poisoned against one parent. However composed she appears now, they warn, Kampusch has a long, treacherous road to recovering her relationship with her parents.

Convincing children that their parents don't love them is a brutally effective way to secure children's allegiance. Steven Stayner was kidnapped in Merced, Calif., in 1972, at age 7. For seven years, he lived with his abductor as a son, going to a public high school, often left alone but never escaping. According to Sharon Carr Griffin, a friend of Stayner's who is writing a book about his life, Stayner's kidnapper told him that his dad had died and his mother had signed custody of Stayner over to the kidnapper. "If you can convince a child that their parents don't care, then you own them," says J. Michael Bone, a mental health counselor in Winter Park, Fla.

Bone has counseled scores of victims of a phenomenon known as "parental alienation syndrome," in which one parent accuses the other of brainwashing their child and turning him or her against the parent. Parental alienation is a controversial legal theory. Some say it's just a smoke screen for abusive or negligent parents who deserve to be hated by their children. But practitioners say that in extreme cases, parents can implant false memories of abuse or otherwise stir a child into a permanent and completely irrational rage against the targeted parent.

Increasingly, family courts are ordering a treatment called reconciliation therapy. One technique is to have the child look through an album of photos of the alienated parent to humanize that person again. Another is to show studies about how easily the mind is tricked, to let children know it's not their fault that they have come to believe falsehoods about their parent. But those first steps toward rebuilding the parent-child relationship can be wobbly.

That is why counselors are saluting the caution being shown in Natascha Kampusch's case. At first blush, it seems counterintuitive: after eight years of wrenching separation, she hasn't returned home to either of her parents (who divorced before the abduction). Instead, she has been living at Vienna General Hospital, where she is likely to stay for at least another month in the care of a cadre of social workers and psychologists. She has arranged brief, if frequent, visits with her mother but in the first week saw her father only once.

In fact, an odd custody battle for Kampusch's allegiance appears to be playing out publicly between her father and the memory of her captor, who threw himself under a train hours after Kampusch escaped. Christoph Feurstein, the journalist who conducted her television interview, says Kampusch is angry at her father for speaking on her behalf to the media; he told an interviewer that she would celebrate her captor's death. Kampusch, in fact, visited the morgue and saw her abductor before he was buried, and told the world she mourned his death.

When Stayner escaped 26 years ago, there was little idea that such ambivalent feelings could exist in a child. He was immediately returned to his childhood home, but by many accounts struggled to fit back in. Nine years later, he died in a motor-cycle crash.

Kampusch says she was fighting with her mother on the day she was abducted. "My mother always used to say that we should never part ways angry," she said during her television interview, "because something could happen to her or me and we'd never see each other again." But in the aftermath of such cruel captivity, seeing each other again comes with its own challenges.