

# Beaches and Theme Parks and Fairs – Oh my!

*Keeping your kids safe in public places*

**By Alyssa Dver**

Family Safety Expert, Wander Wear Inc.

[www.wander-wear.com](http://www.wander-wear.com)

“We’re off to see the summer, the most wonderful season of all!” Follow the yellow brick road to water slides, picnics, and all kinds of outdoor amusements that we can enjoy with our families. We all know to put sunscreen, bug spray, and life preservers on our children to keep them safe. But what do you do to prevent them from getting lost? It may not be part of playing in public places that we like to think about – but it happens all the time.

## **They’re Off to See the Wizard or Something Else That Looks Interesting**

According to an October 2002 US Department of Justice report<sup>1</sup>, every year there are over **1.3 million** children missing or lost. That’s **2000 kids each day!** As an example, an Intimetrix<sup>2</sup> report noted that over a 12 month period, over 27% of all families that visited an amusement park lost one of their children while they were there – that’s one out of every three children! A Boston-area mall noted that they had 750 reports of lost children in one year alone!<sup>3</sup> A major ballpark records 2-3 children missing at every afternoon baseball game.

However, these statistics represent only the incidents that are reported to authorities. A study by Wander Wear Inc. found that only 11% of the accidental wandering incidents ever get reported at all and 97% of the time, children are lost for only a few (though still heart-stopping) minutes.<sup>4</sup> It turns out that 7 out of 10 children get lost at least once in their lifetime, 90% of families are affected, and it can happen in any public place such as a beach, amusement park, fair, or airport.

While we don’t readily share these seemingly embarrassing stories with our friends or spouses, virtually every parent has a story about one of their own children getting lost (or sometimes even a memory about himself/herself when he/she was a child!). Most parents will shudder to recall a time when their child decided to hide under a rack in a department store, wandered off at the beach, or “just took off” in an instant while the parent tended to something else - often, the child’s sibling. If you can relate to this, then you know how terrifying it can be to not know where your child is - even for a few seconds. The panic that you feel is indescribable. You immediately worry that your child has been abducted. Luckily most of the time, children are found and reunited with their caregiver quickly and physically unharmed. However, the trauma caused by a child getting lost can clearly leave lifelong traumatic memories for both child and parent.

## **Getting Hysterical Isn’t the Best Solution**

When a parent realizes that his/her child is unexpectedly not standing next to them, a typical reaction is to scream out the child’s name. If the child is not close by, screaming obviously won’t help locate them quickly (and could in fact alert a nearby child predator that your child is now by themselves). It is important to realize that non-family abduction is thankfully relatively rare (100 out of 1.3 million). Most of the time, chances are that children are lost because they simply wandered off accidentally. Therefore, try to remain clear-headed so you can productively find your child. While high tech products are slowly finding their way into the market that will help keep track and/or find children, the technology still remains expensive and is not always easy to use, nor is it completely reliable. There are, however, non-technical products and best practices

that parents and caregivers can use effectively to avoid the potential harm that can happen when a child is lost.

### **Put Safe, Easily Accessible Contact Information on Your Child**

The most common advice given to parents is to tell their children to meet at a designated place if they become separated from their families. Unfortunately, small children usually cannot remember or find an unfamiliar place - especially when they are scared. Even children up to the age of 10 will have difficulty remembering the meeting place or other basic information such as their home phone number.

While there is no substitute for parental/caregiver attention, the best thing you can do to prepare is to put your cell phone number on your child in an easily accessible place. This allows another adult to see and use it easily to quickly contact you or the caregiver that is out with your child (your mother-in-law, babysitter, etc.). A cell phone number does not provide any dangerous information that can lead a stranger to the child's home or school. Even if your child can recall your home phone number, the cell phone number is a much quicker way to reunite the caregiver and the child. When you are away from home, you don't want to have to call your home voicemail continuously hoping that you get a message about your lost child's whereabouts. When your child is missing, you want to know immediately if someone has found your child and where you can meet them to get your child back into your arms.

Young children or special needs children who cannot speak, should have the identification visible so that another person can access it easily without needing to undress or undo the child's clothing. If your child fidgets with the I.D., attach it to the back of the child's clothing between his/her shoulder blades. Older children can carry the cell phone information in their pocket if you are confident that they will be able to produce that information when they need it. You can use a laminated card, a sticker, or one of the various I.D. products on the market such as Wander Wear Parent Locator Tags. With any of these methods, consider whether you need the ID to be waterproof and if your child can and will be able to use it properly.

### **Dress children in bright, special "Away from Home" clothing**

To help spot children easily, dress them in very brightly colored external clothing such as a t-shirt, hat, or jacket. Very bright yellow or green works the best. Some parents routinely dress themselves and their children in the same color when they are going out to crowded places. Unless the color is bright, it won't really help you or your child to spot each other if your location is crowded with people or objects. You should especially avoid red or blue as they are the most common colors that people wear.

Additionally, when your child is lost, he/she isn't going to be the only one scared and potentially unable to remember details - you may have a hard time remembering what you dressed them in that morning. To assist your own memory, only let your kids wear their special bright colored clothes when they go out to a crowded place or event. It will be one less thing you need to remember in case your child does get lost and you need others to assist you in the search. The bright colored clothing becomes a very descriptive identifier in addition to being easy to spot and it will help you and the others find your child quickly.

### **Carry a recent photo and description of each child**

Carrying a recent photo of your child is one of the most important things you can do for his/her safety. On the back of the photo, note the child's eye color, hair color, height, weight, and any birthmarks or other distinguishing marks. If your child is one of multiples, note that as well. Finally, be sure to put your cell number on the back too. If your child is missing, you will have the photo and information available to assist others who are trying to help you find your child. A photo can really help other people who don't know your child more easily identify them, especially if an Amber Alert is needed. When every minute matters, having that photo of your child with you can make a real difference in the successful recovery of the child.

### **Teach your child to ask another mommy for help**

A scared child may not be able to find a trusted authority quickly. It is difficult to even describe a typical guard or officer. However, children as young as 1 ½ can be taught to enlist help from another mother. Children know that a mommy is a woman with other kids. Practice with your child pointing out other mommies. Also, right before you arrive at a public place, remind your child about what to do if he or she gets lost.

### **Reinforce good behavior**

When you go out to a public place – the supermarket, gym, or mall - and you come back without your child getting lost, tell him/her that he/she was good for staying with you the entire time while you were out. Positive reinforcement is the best way to elicit the behavior you want from your child.

### **What to Do Immediately When Your Child Is Lost**

Many public places such as retail stores, amusement parks, and beaches now have specific lost child procedures such as lock downs. If your child does get lost, try to remain calm and quickly find an onsite employee to trigger the venue's lost child process. Don't wander too far yourself while you look for your child. Often the child is still near by.

### **When to Call the Police**

The National Center of Missing and Exploited Children and some state police departments advocate calling the police immediately upon realizing that your child is missing<sup>5</sup> and you have any sense that the child may be in danger. It is much better to call the police back a moment later to report that you have found your child than it is to later regret waiting those few valuable minutes that could have made a dramatic difference in the safe return of your child.

### **Celebrate, don't berate when you are reunited**

Once you are reunited with your child, be sure to congratulate him/her for following the instructions you taught to do in case he/she gets lost. Celebrate that you are back together because of his/her smart and brave actions. Don't yell at your child for getting lost. If he/she ever gets lost again, he/she will prefer to remain lost rather than be yelled at again. If the child did not follow the proper instructions when they got lost, discuss the incident seriously but calmly and recall precisely how you both felt while you were separated. Often times, the child doesn't

even think they were missing at all – they may think that you were the one lost! Reiterate how important it is that they don't wander off next time and remind them about finding another mommy to ask for help.

### **There is unfortunately “no place like home”**

We do live in some scary times and the media does its best to make us paranoid about child abduction and sexual predators. We are all well aware of recovery solutions such as fingerprinting, DNA sampling and picture ID cards that parents carry in their wallets. Yet most parents don't think about the everyday occurrence and the simple **preventative** things we can do to avoid a child getting lost. While summer is a great time to be outdoors enjoying public venues like beaches, theme parks and fairs, they are unfortunately common and potentially dangerous places for kids to get lost. The most important thing is to realize that children do get lost often and it is not a result of bad parenting or bad children. As “good” parents, we can be proactive and avoid the profound trauma and possible physical harm that occurs when a child is lost, even momentarily. Whether you are at a familiar local park or on vacation somewhere foreign, every child can use some help when they get lost – and unfortunately the “Wanderful Wizard” isn't always easy to find. So use these “lost saving” tips – it's as easy as clicking your heels.

1: Source = NISMART2: National Incident Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children. U.S. Department of Justice. October 2002.

2: Source = IntiMetrix study, 2002.

3: Source = interview with head of security at a Boston-area mall that requested to remain anonymous; December 2002.

4: Source = Wander Wear Inc. parent survey, November 2003.

5: Source = Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Programs, “PERSONAL SAFETY FOR CHILDREN—A GUIDE FOR PARENTS”

***Refer to Wander Wear's Website [www.wander-wear.com](http://www.wander-wear.com) for more free resources on how to keep children safe in public places including our 'Away From Home' Checklist and online seminar!***

About the Author:

*Alyssa Dver is a Family Safety Expert and the CEO of Wander Wear® Inc., (www.wanderwear.com), a parent-run company that offers practical information and affordable products that help prevent kids from getting lost. She is a frequently requested speaker and consultant for parenting groups, corporations, and the media. Based outside of Boston, MA, she is the mother of two "wonderful" boys ages 2 and 6.*