



Missing Children and Parental Struggle: From Chaos to Coping

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore parental experiences in handling missing/runaway children below the age of 12. Data was collected using in-depth interviews and later analyzed using thematic analysis. The parents were identified from the police data of reported missing/runaway children from years 2009 and 2010. Two main themes emerged from parents' reaction to missing children: negative psychological responses and disruption of daily activities. Fear for the child's safety, worry and anxiety were the most commonly reported feelings. Most parents reported that they felt "their world turned upside down" when their children went missing. Parents relied heavily on social support such as families, neighbors, friends of their children, and the police to locate missing/runaway children. Seeking information and visiting children's favorite places appeared as important strategies used by parents. Parents showed that they trusted close social networks more than the police in assisting them. This study emphasizes the importance of mutual understanding between parents and authorities with regards to managing a crisis situation such as this one. Psychoeducation programmes for both parents and authorities are needed to improve collaboration, to better understand and cope with challenging situations related to missing/runaway children.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of missing children under the age of 18 has been reported worldwide and is becoming a huge global concern. It has been estimated that at least eight (8) million children go missing each year (International Centre for Missing and

Exploited Children, 2013). For example, an estimated 800,000 children younger than 18 years old of age are reported missing each year in the United States; 230,000 in the United Kingdom from 2009-2010; 100,000 in Germany; 50,000 in Canada; 45,000 in Mexico; 40,000 in Brazil; 39,000 in France; and 20,000 in Spain (International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, 2013). In Malaysia, statistics indicated that a total number of 1,383 children below the age of 18 were reported missing from 2010-2011 (Utusan Malaysia, 2011). From the statistics, it can be estimated that about four (4) children under the age of 18 may have gone missing each year (Utusan Malaysia, 2011). The prevalence of missing children involving children under 12 years of age has increased from 50 cases in 2009 to 54 cases in 2010 (the Royal Police of Malaysia, 2011). The case is more serious among teenagers (13 to 18 years old) who marked up most of the total number of missing/runaway children in Malaysia. Although the number of children missing from home is still relatively small, what is worrying is that most cases are due to family problems (Mstar, 2011).

To the general public, the definition of missing children may seem relatively easy, which is children who run away from home (Wilson, 2000). However, for most of the researchers who are studying this issue, defining missing children can be complicated due to a multitude of factors surrounding the phenomenon. Children were reported to be missing for many reasons. Some children went missing from

their homes because they ran away from home, some have been thrown out by their caretakers; meanwhile some went missing due to abduction. The National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Throwaways Children (NISMAART) divided the data for missing children into eight categories: (1) Runaway/thrown-away; (2) non-family abduction; (3) family abduction; (4) custodial interference; (5) lost and voluntarily missing; (6) missing due to injury; (7) missing due to false alarm situations; and (8) sexual assaults (Hanson, 2000). The categories developed by NISMAART are based on a comprehensive data obtained from various sources including a large telephone survey of household, a survey of youth residential facilities, a study of returning runaways, a survey of the police records, a reanalysis of the Federal Bureau of Investigation data on child homicides, and a reanalysis of data from the Study of the National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect (Wilson, 2000). Conversely, Malaysia does not yet have a comprehensive study about the phenomenon. As a result, the data is incomplete and therefore may fail to accurately explain the causes and dimensions of missing children. To date, the data of missing children in Malaysia relies heavily on police reports.

Besides, there are two distinct types of running away behaviors which are (1) episodic running away; and (2) chronic running away. Episodic running away refers to running away behavior that is triggered by an event. There is no consistent pattern

of this type of behavior and children are not using it as a problem solving strategy at all times. It may be used to avoid some consequence, humiliation or embarrassment. Meanwhile, chronic running away refers to running away behavior that is used to gain power in the family. It is perceived as a form of power struggle, manipulation, or acting out. Thus, to understand these multilayered definitions and factors, a comprehensive study is warranted to better address the issue. This is an important issue and each individual has a role to play in tackling the problem.

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of missing children cases (below the age of 12) reported for the year 2009 and 2010. The main reason for missing children in the majority of the cases failed to be determined or was somewhat left unknown. However, frequently cited reasons for missing children

included parental conflict, family violence, peer influence, demand for more freedom, loss of interest in studies, and taken away by family members. Similarly, Siti Nor *et. al.*'s (2009) study indicated that the common causes of runaway children include peer influence, demands for more freedom and escape from strict parental control.

Research from other countries also showed consistent findings in which family crisis or conflict was the leading cause for missing children/run away children. The most frequently cited reason contributing to missing/runaway children was a lack of supportive and functional families, followed by peer influence. Studies indicated that family crisis such as divorce, separation, abuse and neglect are all factors which increase the risk of children running away from home (Rotheram-Borus, 1996; Milburn *et.al.*, 2006). Meanwhile, Springer's (2001)

Table 1
Missing Children Reported in 2009 and 2010

Reasons	2009		2010		TOTAL	
	1-6 year old	7-12 year old	1-6 year old	7-12 year old	2009	2010
Unknown	9	25	4	30	34	34
Taken by the father	0	2	1	0	2	1
Follow friends	0	7	0	5	7	5
Wants more freedom	0	5	0	5	5	5
Neglect by family	0	1	0	3	1	3
Follow boyfriend	0	0	0	1	0	1
Parental conflict	0	0	1	2	0	2
Family violence	0	0	0	0	0	1
Taken by family members	0	0	0	1	0	0
Taken by acquaintance	0	0	1	0	0	1
Lost interest in studies	0	1	0	0	1	0
Total	9	41	7	47	50	54

Source: Royal Police of Malaysia, 2011

findings support the notion that children missing/run away from home was related to negative environments such as to escape from physical abuse or negative family situations. Negative family environments such as alcohol and/or drug abuse were identified as contributing factors as to why children run away from home (Teare *et. al.*, 1994). Few studies associated missing/running away children with the motivation to more desirable or adventuresome social situations (Lindsey *et. al.*, 2000; Zide & Cherry, 1992). However, it is notable to mention that missing/running away behavior may also indicate poor problem solving skills among these children. They may run out of problem solving skills and perceive running away from home as an immediate solution. For example, research by Lightfoot *et. al.* (2011) showed that higher levels of problem solving and planning skills were strongly related to lower levels of multiple problem behaviors in homeless youth. The finding is consistent with the study done by Dumain (2010) who researched optimism, hope, problem solving, and runaway behavior in adolescents in the dependency system in Canada. The study found that runaway adolescents had dysfunctional problem-solving skills, including negative problem orientation, impulsivity/carelessness styles, and displayed avoidant problem-solving styles.

Runaway is associated with many social, economic and psychological consequences. For example, runaway children are at risk for being sexually abused, exploited and exposed to hunger, diseases and criminal

activities. This problem also causes an economic burden to the government directly or indirectly. When children go missing, hundreds, if not thousands of relatives and families are affected. Parents are left with unimaginable nightmares, wondering what has happened to their loved ones who, in some cases may never return. Most parents find themselves in “a world turned upside down”. These parents, who face a sudden crisis situation such as this one, encounter an immediate demand to respond to missing issues and coping strategies. There is a general expectation that parents should protect their children from harm. When something as bad as this happens, most of the parents are unprepared psychologically to cope with it. As Maxwell (1994) put it, a sudden loss of a child may be more difficult to grieve than anticipated death. The effect of a loved one going missing cannot be underestimated as the real damage to emotional, physical and financial can be huge.

The purpose of this article was to examine two aspects of the study: the experience of missing/runaway children from parents' perspectives and coping strategies used by parents to deal directly with the loss. As for the research questions, the following questions were to be examined: (1) What are the psychological responses parents experienced following their missing/runaway child? and (2) What are the coping strategies that parents of missing/runaway children used to deal with the sudden loss?

METHODOLOGY

Respondents

Respondents were parents of children who had been reported missing/runaway between the year 2009 and 2010. The list of these missing children and their detailed information (e.g. home address and parents contact numbers) were obtained from the Crime Division, the Royal Police of Malaysia Bukit Aman. This information was the main source used by the researchers to locate all respondents in the study which summed up to 104.

Location

This research was conducted in all states in Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah with the exception of Sarawak, where no missing children cases were reported in those years. For research convenience, these locations were clustered into four (4) major regions, namely Northern Zone (Perlis, Kedah, Pulau Pinang, Perak); Eastern Zone (Pahang, Terengganu, Kelantan), Southern Zone (Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor), and Middle Zone (Selangor, Kuala Lumpur) and East Malaysia Zone (Sabah). Please refer to Table 2 for details.

TABLE 2
Number of Missing Children by States 2009 – 2010

State	2009	2010
Perlis	2	3
Kedah	1	0
Pulau Pinang	0	1
Perak	0	1
Selangor	6	18
Kuala Lumpur	35	13

TABLE 2 (continue)

Negeri Sembilan	0	0
Melaka	3	7
Johor	0	4
Pahang	0	3
Terengganu	1	1
Kelantan	0	0
Sarawak	0	0
Sabah	2	3
Total	50	54

Source: The Royal Police of Malaysia, 2011

Procedures

This research used semi structured interviews for collecting data. Parents were separately interviewed. Semi structured interviews were selected to elicit discussion of specific topics that were identified beforehand. This approach enabled researchers to elicit in-depth information concerning participants' perceptions and their willingness to discuss topics beyond the core semi-structured questions, if any. Questions were divided into two main sections. The first section focused on questions relating to respondents psychological response following missing/runaway children incident. Meanwhile, the second section focusing on coping strategies which were applied by parents to deal with the sudden loss.

Data analysis

Data from the interview was analysed using thematic analysis procedures. This process included examining the transcripts to identify major themes arising from the core questions. Major categories were identified and then followed by developing subcategories to specifically

illustrate component of the broad categories. Coders worked independently and then came together to resolve discrepancies. Established main and subcategories then were compared among the coders to reach a consensus concerning specific categories and their definitions. This process was done repeatedly until the research team reached a general consensus concerning main categories and subcategories established from the data.

RESULTS

Psychological Effects

The first few days were reported to be incredibly confusing for most parents. Parents were shocked, in panic, anxiety and fear. Parents at the early stage reported feelings of fear and anxiety about their children's fortune, their situation and whereabouts. Safety was the priority concern for most parents. The agony of not knowing and uncertainty were unbearable and stressful. During the crisis, parents lived in a constant state of high alert, waiting for their children to return home or for any news. Parents were alternately anxious, angry, in denial and guilt; mixed feelings to be experienced at the same time. These responses triggered other psychosomatic symptoms associated with the trauma experience such as sleep difficulties, loss of appetite, frequent urination and agitation. These were worsened by parents thinking that their children might be at risk of being a victim of crime.

"As a father of course I felt worry, anxious because, I never experienced this (missing/runaway children), I read paper, I watched movie about this kind of thing, I know how terrible this could be. But when this hit you, I felt like I wanted to go to toilet all the time."

(Ibrahim)

"Afraid others would try to kidnap my child...afraid that they would ask for ransom...and demand for money. It was hard when our children gone missing... I couldn't sleep... how could I? I didn't know where he spent the night. You're simply lost."

(Ding)

"Not just panicked. I couldn't think straight, and then news about children got kidnapped and murdered. That made me crazy. I couldn't think about anything else."

(Jihat)

"I had no idea where she went... if she was okay, then thank god. But what if someone did something bad to her?"

(Chandra)

"I felt worry. Worry because you heard so many bad things about children who went missing. Angry, couldn't sleep, frantically searching everywhere. You terribly worried because she disappeared just like that. She went out without telling me."

(Farah)

"My feelings... this shouldn't have happened... first time happened to me. I was in chaos."

(Steven)

"I couldn't sleep... I couldn't eat... everything. I felt so stressful. I couldn't do anything. I just cried. I prayed to God... I read Quran... that's all I can do. I felt like my world just ended. I know how it feels like missing your children. Although he's not my real son, but I still felt miserable... I couldn't accept it."

(Daniel)

"He always returned to home... I think it's every parent's nightmare when their children failed to return home. Of course you are worry."

(Ismail)

Parents recalled that emotional and physical responses were highest immediately following the missing. According to Rinear (1984), this is a normal response to crisis

and gradually will return to normalcy with the passage of time.

Disruption to Daily Activities

Disruption to daily activities for parents was unavoidable as parents tried to gather information, asked for social support and planned strategies in managing the crisis situation. At this stage of mind, it was very difficult for parents to focus on anything mentally. Parents' thoughts were with their children.

"I was at my office and I had an important meeting. Then I went out searching for my son. I felt I was not there in the meeting."

(Ding)

A father confessed that he was almost involved in an accident due to failure to stop at a red traffic light. It is understandable that when parents were caught in their reeling emotions, it disabled them to respond to intellectual challenges surrounding them and this sometimes can be very dangerous.

"You couldn't concentrate; everything else seemed blurry, like when you're driving a car or something. That's really bad. One time, I almost hit another car because I failed to stop at a red traffic light, very dangerous to myself. Luckily I was with my neighbour and my older son. You couldn't go out alone in such situation."

(Ibrahim)

Efforts by Parents to Locate their Missing/Runaway Children

A social support system has been described as “a set of personal contacts through which the individual maintains his social identity and receives emotional supports, material aid and services, information and new social contacts” (Walker *et al.*, 1977; in Malson, 1983). Parents in this study worked very hard to locate their missing child and they used every available support they could possibly get which consisted of police, family members, office colleagues and even neighbors. In this context, social support acts through providing necessary resources through mutual act, social network, sharing problems, problem solving and helping people to cope with crisis. Through this social support, parents did not only receive energy and resource but most importantly emotional support.

“After I returned from work, me and my older son, we went out late that night to search for him. I tried looking for him in places he usually went to play. After a few hours, I asked the police what should I do next, should I just report straight away or should I wait. The police told me, don’t wait and just do it (report).”

(Ibrahim)

“All my family members, they all helped us. We divided into several groups and each group looked for different places... all men. One

group went to Batu Caves, one group searched at Taman Koperasi, one group was here, and another group went to Datuk Senu, Jalan Ipoh. After we failed to locate him, we went to the police to report he was missing.”

(Chandra)

Besides using social support such as neighbors, colleagues and family members, another important source parents usually used in helping them to locate their children was through friends and/or classmates of their children. This is understandable due to the close relationship teenagers usually have with their peers. The knowledge that their peers have about missing/runaway children might help parents to locate their children faster. There are ample cases where parents managed to locate their child’s whereabouts with the help or information provided by their child’s friends. However, this also caused more trouble especially when information provided was misleading or inaccurate.

“We were searching for him until early in the morning. We’re getting anxious... then we tried his friends. Then the father of his friend said “my son also did not return home.” Okay fine, then I called my husband.”

(Syafik)

“I asked his friends. They said they don’t know. Some said they saw

him watched soccer, some said he followed other friends.. and some even said they saw him in a car with someone.”

(Ismail)

my work. I tried cyber café, I went to Puduraya but I couldn't find him.”

(Syafik)

Location

The most frequent location sought by parents was a place where their child always spent their time. Among places frequently reported by parents were shopping malls and public spheres. Parents sometimes had to travel long distances, spend a lot of time and energy with the hope they would successfully locate their child. Most parents did not mind missing their work for a few days to search for their children.

“I just circled around the place for so many time. Then a boy told me “aunty, I just saw him near here.”

(Jihat)

“We tried all Sentul area...”

(Chandra)

“I asked his friend. Is he returned home? They said no, he went straight to KLCC. He spent the night at KLCC. I didn't know, maybe he couldn't catch up the last train and was left behind. We waited for him the next day. We went to his friend's house; we asked whether he went there, but none. I frantically searched for him and I even missed

DISCUSSION

This study indicated that, except for the police, most parents did not access any support service which was available to them. The only authority figure they found useful was the police for law enforcement action on missing children. There were two possible explanations relating to parents' action: (1) parents were not aware of any available support services that specifically handles missing/runaway child within their community and, (2) no such services which exists in the community. In 2007, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development s introduced a telephone service – NUR Alert (15999). NUR Alert was modeled after the United States' Amber alert; an emergency response system that galvanized the authorities and the community via a comprehensive network to locate missing (Khairudin Murad, 2013). NUR Alert also provides services for others including child abuse, single mother cases, juvenile problems and many more cases.

NUR Alert is responsible to spread information quickly and as fast as possible to help trace missing children (below 12 years of age) who could be victims of crime or abuse (Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission, 2011). Despite being a great initiative, NUR Alert has drawn criticism from people in the society.

For example, many parents and/or adults still do not know about NUR Alert or have heard about it. Some may know about NUR Alert but they do not know the functions and responsibilities of the service. Khairudin Murad (2013) in his study on the effectiveness of the NUR Alert information campaign found that only 31.7 percent of respondents were aware of the NUR Alert campaign. Traditional media for campaigning (billboard advertisement, television and radios) rather than new media (Facebook, Twitter) contributed to the lack of awareness of the NUR Alert campaign in the society (Khairudin Murad, 2013). Hence, the government is urged to fully utilize new media as a fast and cheap social media campaign against missing/running away children from home.

Parents relied heavily on available social support which came mostly from family members, neighbors, colleagues and friends. This indicated that parents who do not have good social support were at a higher risk of bearing the emotional impact and worry of their missing child alone. Empirical studies have shown a strong relationship between social support and well being (Harknett, 2006; Henley *et al.*, 2005; Ryan *et al.*, 2009; Thoits, 1985). A comprehensive study by Lin (1986) on social support and well being argued that real and perceived support, both instrumental and expressive, whether from the community, social networks, and intimate friends generate the feeling of bonding, contributes to the sense of belonging and social identity. Undoubtedly, the emotional issues parents and families went through

were also huge. These emotional impacts clearly resulted in physical symptoms such as sleeplessness, stress and deteriorating health. Symptoms reported by respondents in the study indicated common reactions to crisis. According to Wainrib and Bloch (1998), disbelief, emotional numbness, nightmares or sleep disturbances, anger, moodiness, irritability, forgetfulness, flashbacks, survivor guilt, hypervigilance, loss of hope, social withdrawal, increased use of alcohol and drugs and isolation from others are signs, symptoms, and reactions are common psychological responses to a crisis or traumatic event. Hence, crisis counseling can be very beneficial to help parents who dealing with crisis such as this. Psychological support must be available for parents to access as untreated distress and discomfort can lead to more serious psychological conditions including Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD). In addition to these emotional issues, parents found themselves carrying the financial burden of undertaking research activities and this led to losing the person's income. Parents were putting themselves at risk of losing a job.

This study highlighted some of the difficulties families faced in handling missing/runaway children and the needs of families to be helped by specialist groups. Most parents do not have knowledge about the proper ways and actions that can be taken when facing this kind of crisis situation. Thus, it is suggested that: (1) partnership between the police, other agencies, local authorities and the voluntary sector should

be established to enhance the effectiveness of support in their area; (2) enhance public awareness through education on missing children in community settings; and (3) establish a standard protocol as guidelines to help parents better cope with crisis situations and to better inform procedures, roles and responsibilities that involve multi-disciplinary agencies. Another issue worth noting here is addressing issues of missing/runaway children who return home. In cases that involved children who ran away from home, any family conflict contributing to the problem should be addressed immediately. Parents' failure to identify the core problem contributing to their children going missing from home may result in repeat runaway behavior.

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