



If you can't find a lost child's parents, ring the police, says the NSPCC

# LOST AND FOUND BY A STRANGER

WHAT SHOULD A MAN DO IF HE FINDS A SMALL CHILD WANDERING THE STREETS ALONE, ASKS ANDREW DON

A FEW WEEKS ago while I was walking the dog I heard an angelic voice behind me call "doggie, doggie", followed by various incomprehensible baby gurglings of pure delight. My dog is rather large and playful and generally makes little distinction between cats and toddlers, so I thought it prudent to continue walking. But this did not deter my little friend, who soon caught us up.

I turned to face him: he could not have been older than two — and he was on his own. "Where is Mummy?" I beseeched in my best baby voice, so as not to startle the little cherub. "Doggie, doggie," he gurgled.

I continued walking, but my persistent pal would not be distracted. When he followed me into the road, I realised that I had to act.

"No," I pleaded. "Go home. Find Mummy."

Clearly the situation demanded action: my instinct was to pick the toddler up or take him by the hand — difficult, admittedly, when you have a greyhound-saluki cross at the end of a lead.

But I was also acutely aware that as a strange man — a mighty strange man — carrying or holding the hand of a child I didn't know, I put myself in a vulnerable position. I had visions of his parents running out of a nearby house screaming "pervert" at the tops of their voices. As a father-of-two, that would have been close to my reaction had it been my child with a strange man.

If that stranger had been a woman it would be entirely different. It seems so much "safer", says a friend who has always told her children, if lost, to look for another mummy or a lady.

I suddenly had an image of a house I had passed earlier — a house with its side gate open and a man working under his car. I left the child by the side of the road and ran to the house.

Dad was grateful, but rather than feeling like a hero, I felt a vague sense of disquiet. During the time I had left the child alone to find his

parent, he could have run into the road or a real paedophile could have nabbed him. And how did I know that the man who had retrieved him really was the father?

When I got home, I e-mailed my male friends and asked them what they would have

## THE MUM'S SHOUTING MADE HIM WONDER IF THE CHILD HAD BEEN TRYING TO ESCAPE

done. Most said they probably would have done the same. One, an accountant, said that with the benefit of hindsight he would have phoned 999 to tell the police what I was proposing to do so they had it on record.

Another, an IT consultant, said he would have taken the child's hand to ensure that he was safe and shouted at the top of his voice "Has anyone lost a child".

"My immediate reaction would have been to ensure his safety rather than mine regardless of the possible consequences," he said. Another friend reported that when he had found a child wandering alone in a supermarket car park and eventually found the mother (inside, and shouting at another of her offspring) she had shouted so horribly at the child that he wondered whether the boy had been trying to make his escape.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children says that a child's safety should come first, although it acknowledges why men might have reservations.

In such circumstances (ie, when you have a hunch where the child comes from) one should take the child by the hand to that place and find out if the parents are there, says an NSPCC spokesman. "If you have no joy there, ring the police. A child cannot be left alone."

Easy to say. Next time a similar situation happens, hand on heart, what would you do?

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