

Surviving on a whistle and a prayer

A mother weighs the fear of giving a child independence against the dangers of the street

By Lynne Melcombe

PORT MOODY, B.C.

It's the same routine every weekday morning. As the 8:55 buzzer sounds, I pull up across from my son's school and watch him saunter, with the un-studied nonchalance of a six-year-old, along the east wall of the building to the rear entrance.

As he ambles the last few paces, I flush with pride to see the big boy he's becoming. It's only when he waves goodbye and rounds the corner to walk the last 50 feet out of my sight that my heart quickens and my breathing stops.

What if someone is waiting for him there? What if our routines have been carefully observed and clocked by some twisted mind? What if some murderous pedophile is ready, out of my sight, to grab my first-born as I struggle daily to let him grow beyond the safety of my grasp?

I was feeling confident about my son trekking the last 50 feet alone until I read a recent issue of his school's biweekly newsletter. It warned that a man had been spotted at a neighboring school trying to lure children into a van, and recommended "increased precautions."

I don't recall my mother having these worries. She walked me to and from my first day of kindergarten. Every day thereafter, I walked with my older siblings or friends.

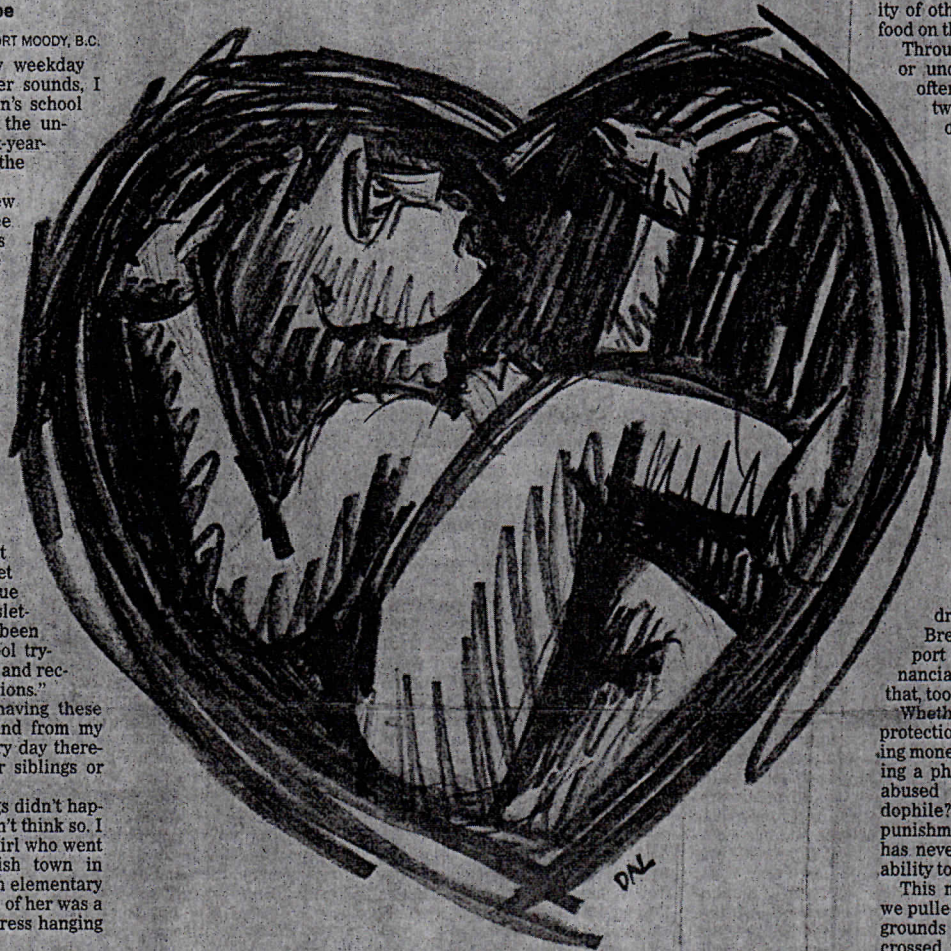
Was this because such things didn't happen in the good old days? I don't think so. I remember the case of a little girl who went missing from another smallish town in southern Ontario when I was in elementary school. All that was ever found of her was a running shoe and a scrap of dress hanging from a wild raspberry bush.

Are these heinous incidents happening more frequently than they did 30 years ago? Or does it just seem so because they receive such extensive coverage? Almost monthly, I hear of another disappeared child. There are so many, I can't keep track of their names.

But I remember the grizzly details of all their disappearances. Their smiling poster faces, transformed into visages of terror and pain, haunt me on sleepless nights, in the shopping mall when I lose sight of my daughter for half a breath, on weekday mornings as I watch my son disappear.

It's becoming increasingly difficult for me to win the daily, internal conflict over which damage will be more profound: the slow destruction of my child's confidence at not being allowed enough room to grow, or the chance that in a single moment of letting down my guard, he will fall prey to a rare but final act.

As a survivor of childhood molestation and a former child-care counsellor, I know danger lurks as menacingly behind trusted



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faces as in the bushes surrounding the schoolyard. I have a shelf full of books on street proofing, raising safe children and teaching kids to say "no."

My children are as aware of danger and how to cope with it as I know how to make them.

The tradeoff has been that they are afraid to be alone upstairs at bedtime —

they won't allow me to put the garbage out without them — in case a stranger sneaks into the house and abducts them. They are growing up with an understanding of their own vulnerability which is at once pragmatic, and disheartening.

A friend commented recently on the indifference of our society to the needs of the many single-parent families and the major-

ity of others requiring two incomes to put food on the table.

Through no fault of overworked parents or under-paid care givers, young ones often are inadequately supervised between school and day care, while older ones are supervising themselves until mom and/or dad get home.

Surely, we can find a way to supervise our children better while their parents are trying to provide for them. Of course we can, but it will cost.

While provision of better supervision would be helpful, isn't prevention preferable to protection? A variety of studies have shown that although only a third of abused children grow up to become abusers, virtually all adult offenders were abused as children.

What differentiates those who abuse from those who don't? It's often situational, a reaction to extreme stress that shows up in the form of imitating the behavior of one's own parents.

Efforts at prevention must address this cyclical nature of abuse. Breaking the cycle will require support for parents shouldering heavy financial and emotional burdens. And that, too, will cost.

Whether we're talking about increased protection or better prevention, we're talking money. But what about the cost of allowing a physically, emotionally and sexually abused child to become an adult pedophile? Even if we reconsider capital punishment, its efficiency as a deterrent has never been established, much less its ability to bring a child back to life.

This morning, I over-slept. By the time we pulled up in front of my son's school, the grounds were eerily empty. My little boy crossed the street, hurried along the east wall of the school and disappeared from sight.

I swallowed hard and started to walk away. But something stopped me.

I sprinted 200 yards to the back of the school. There was no sign of him. I raced to the entrance, took the steps two at a time and flung open the door to his classroom. Wet haired and breathing hard, I met the gaze of 20 startled school children, my blue-eyed boy safely among them.

Today, I bought my son a whistle. Tomorrow, I'll hang it around his neck. It will allow him to keep his hard-won independence, and empower him to call loudly for help should he need it.

In the morning as I watch him go, I hope this stop-gap measure will give me some peace. I hope I'll be able to drive away calmly knowing that in the first moments after he's waved goodbye, I haven't heard a sound.

(Lynne Melcombe is a Port Moody, B.C. freelance writer. This article first appeared in the Montreal Gazette.)

use of condoms.