

Abducted children: Conventional photos alone don't aid the search

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People's ability to recognise abducted children is impaired when they view a photo of a smiling, clean child, but come into contact with the same child whose appearance is very different because he or she is upset, crying, dishevelled or unkempt. This is the key finding of a study published today in *Applied Cognitive Psychology*.

When a child goes missing the police often rely on photographs provided by his or her parents, but the photos they usually provide, often school pictures, may not be as useful as they would like. The purpose of this new study was to identify what type of photo is most likely to help in the recognition of a missing child.

Two experiments were conducted to test the ability of adults to recognise children from photos. Over 150 adults were shown pictures of children that were either "cleaned up" as they would typically appear, in school photos, happy and clean, as well as a "dirtied up" picture, where the child looked dirty, tired, sad or angry.

Results from the study show that recognition is best when the original appearance of the child matched the appearance when memory is later tested.

"My question was, if you happened to see a missing child with their perpetrator and the child is dirty or has been physically abused, would you be able to recognise that child from a photo of him or her smiling, clean and happy?" said lead researcher, Dr. Vicki Gier, Assistant

Professor of Psychology, Mississippi State University. "If an adult is shown two pictures of a child with similar appearance, both 'clean' or both 'dirty', recognition is good. However, if an adult sees two pictures of the same child but with differing appearance, then recognition is poor."

These findings could prove beneficial in the search for children who are abducted or reported missing, as typically the picture given by parents and distributed by the police is a school photo, in which a child is smiling and clean.

To combat this, the researchers have strongly suggested that parents have both types of pictures available (clean and dirty) in case their child is abducted or missing. "If both types of facial appearance were shown to the public or possible eyewitnesses, the chances of recognising the child may increase," said Gier.

Source: Wiley

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