

Viewing a Crime in Progress: How to Help Safely!

by Susan Bartelstone, Crime Prevention Specialist

BE AN UPSTANDER ... NOT A BYSTANDER!

If you hear someone yelling for help, please heed it. Evaluate the situation as best you can. Don't walk away until you're satisfied.

If you have the occasion to use your cell phone to photograph a criminal in action, try to do it on the down-low, so he/she doesn't come after you and attempt to destroy the evidence.

If you find yourself in trouble, the best thing to yell is something like "Call the Police, I'm being attacked" or something empowering like "Get your hands off me" or "Back Up!"

Pre-set your phone to dial 911!



Some years ago, I was sent a video clip of a segment from **The Today Show** called "**Protecting Your Kids.**" The clip showed several simulated abduction scenarios in which a security specialist played the role of a child abductor and a seven-year-old girl posed as the potential abductee. The purpose of the staged scenarios, which took place in broad daylight on a heavily-trafficked New York City street, was to see if people passing by would take action, and if so, what action.

The little girl was screaming and yelling for help and carrying on very convincingly as the "abductor" attempted to drag her off; but time after time, no one stopped or intervened in any way. It was frightening how many people wouldn't get involved. According to the show's host, it took hours before anyone actually confronted the "abductor" and tried to help the little girl.



The "Bystander Effect." This is a perfect example of what researchers call the "**Bystander Effect.**" Experts have found that most people in a crowd become frozen with fear and denial if they happen to view (or hear) a crime in progress and are unlikely to take any action to help the person in trouble. If just one person responds, however, that seems to unfreeze everyone and others will usually join in. This is exactly what happened in the video clip.

To be fair to the onlookers, in several of the scenes shown on the clip it did look simply like a father was disciplining his unruly daughter. While many just walked right by, some people did stop or turn around but were clearly confused as to the severity of what was happening. In other scenes, however, the child clearly yelled "You're not my father" and/or "Please help me." Here there was no doubt as to what was happening, yet no one responded. If you hear someone yelling for help, whatever the circumstances may be, please take heed!

How to help. Here are four tips for providing assistance to someone in trouble without jeopardizing your own safety (now often referred to as the **Upstander Effect**):

■ **Stay on the Scene.** You may not feel capable of getting into a physical confrontation with a person you observe committing a crime, so

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Teach your children, if they find themselves in an abduction scenario, to yell clearly what the problem is so people observing the scene will know without doubt that intervention is needed: "This isn't my Dad/Mom etc., "I'm being kidnapped" or" Call the police."

The term "he/him" when describing an attacker is used solely for expediency. Attackers/abductors can be women as well as men, and teens or tweens as well as adults.

No absolutes exist in crime scenarios and no advice can address every variable. Evaluate each situation individually and only respond in the way you judge will ensure your safety or survival. Sometimes nothing can be done to prevent an undesirable outcome.

More Resources:

Kidpower: <https://www.kidpower.org/>

The Upstander Project:
<https://upstanderproject.org/>

Turning Bystanders into Upstanders:
<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/film-festival-bullying-prevention-upstanders>

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just stay on the scene and try to evaluate exactly what's going on. An audience can be a preventive.

■ **Call 911.** From a discrete distance, look directly at the "perpetrator" so he knows he's being observed. Either call 911 discretely on your cell or you can yell something like "I don't know what's going on here, but I've called the police." In a heavily trafficked area, you are safer to alert the abductor. This will also alert any passersby that something is wrong and may enlist their support. If you don't have a cell phone (tsk, tsk but YES, some folks don't), yell to a passerby to call 911 and give a brief description ("Call the police, I think someone is being attacked, kidnapped, robbed, etc.").

■ **Take a Picture.** If you have a smartphone, stay a safe distance from the action and take a picture of the scene so you can save it for the police. Letting the perpetrator know he's being photographed may be enough to deter the crime (safe distance is the keyword here). In any event, try to make a mental note of what the people involved look like and, if a car is involved, try to remember or photograph the car's license plate. Even 3 digits can be enough to put a make on the owner.

■ **Involve Others.** Try to involve others on the scene ("I think that child is being kidnapped") to take action with you. A group has far more stopping power than an individual.



**Upstander Training, Sexual Assault Prevention
Upstander Training, and Anti-Bullying Training are
especially important in schools and colleges.**

VAWnet National Resource Library. Bystander/Upstander content:
<https://vawnet.org/material/sexual-assault-prevention-and-response-office-sapro-program-overview>

See the Signs, Speak Out, Become an Upstander:
<https://speakout.worldsecuresystems.com/>

Upstander Training Programs: <https://www.upstanderprogram.com/>