

KIDS CAN BE **BADLY AFFECTED** IF SEPARATED FROM THEIR FAMILIES

By Pieter van Zyl

HIS tiny hand is clasped tightly in his mother's and the joy on the little boy's beaming face is nearly tangible. He was missing for nearly a month and he's delighted to be back with his mom.

He was abducted from his home in Alexandra, Johannesburg, but was found and safely reunited with his mother. Fortunately the story of his ordeal has a happy ending and you'd think all's well that ends well. But that's wishful thinking.

The picture on the right is the same little boy taken the day after his return. Three-year-old Lesley Mhlanga, who only 24 hours earlier couldn't stop smiling (in the picture on the left), is now standing with his head bowed with a faraway look in his eyes. He has been crying all night and there will be many tears to come.

Lesley was abducted from his mom's home at the end of June. A week later he was found more than 100 km away in Mmotong Ga Mabotja, a town near Polokwane, in the company of an 18-year-old.

A villager smelt a rat and called the police. Lesley was found safe and sound, fast asleep in a sparsely furnished house.

Initially there were joyful celebrations at house No 58 in Alexandra. Doctors confirmed Lesley had suffered no visible injuries apart from a few

small scratches on his head.

But the first evening after his return his mom, Neriah, realised something was seriously wrong with her son. He wept inconsolably. The following day he was subdued.

Days after his return he still shied away from people. He'd play for a while then suddenly burst into tears. Neriah can no longer leave him on his own with his playgroup where he'd fitted in so easily before. She now takes him with her to her housekeeping job.

Lesley is showing classic trauma symptoms, experts say.

He has separation anxiety, Johannesburg family therapist Liz Dooley says. "It's hard for him to grasp it wasn't his mom who deserted him."

The family will have to

undergo at least six months' counselling, therapists say. And the sooner the family resume their routine the better for the little boy.

Abductions are traumatic events that we hope won't affect anyone reading this story. But there are many other circumstances where children experience separation anxiety, such as when a parent has to go on a business trip or is admitted to hospital for surgery. If you know you're going to be separated from your child and understand how to handle it the experience needn't be traumatic for your child.

SEPARATION ANXIETY IS SOMETIMES NORMAL
Many children suffer from

separation anxiety at some stage in their lives but there are ways of alleviating the consequences. They cope better with being separated from their primary carer if they feel safe and secure at home, says Professor Awie Greeff, a family psychologist at Stellenbosch University. They know you'll be back, that you love them and won't leave them on their own.

Infants start developing separation anxiety between the age of eight months and a year, child development experts say. They often cry when you leave the room, which is normal behaviour and a sign of normal development and that there's a healthy bond between parent and child.

Children this age often



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