

I had just turned 12 when I was abducted to Australia with my 8 year-old sister. My father had lead us to believe that we were simply going on holiday, but within a very short space of time, it was clear that this had never been the intention at all when we were told by him that we were “never going home”.

Having grown up in Surrey, surrounded by school friends and supportive family, my new life, forced upon me, was about as much as a child of 12 could ever possibly cope with. I experienced months of abuse from my father, his family and friends. I was often separated from my sister at meal and bed times, with our only time together being during recess at school. I was locked in the garage by my grand mother, and family members came to tell me in turn how I was “sick”, “unloved”, how “no-one cared” where I was and how I “wouldn’t be wanted” back in England. My school was instructed to never ask my sister or I about my mother because she was dead! We were moved around from house to house and left alone for more than twelve hours a day, miles from anywhere during the peak of summer, without food, air-conditioning, anything to do. Letters from our mum were stolen from us or never delivered at all and I remember the painfully devastating times when someone got to the phone before me and said “No I don’t know where they are” and hung the phone up. The level of deception, betrayal and isolation knew no bounds and it was clear that I was going to have to fight to survive by myself, that no-one would help me.

I rapidly developed childhood depression. I stopped eating; I couldn’t sleep, became withdrawn and had constant suicidal feelings and plans. The only thing at that time that kept me going, was helping my little sister maintain some level of normality on a daily basis, feeding her, playing, phoning home reverse charge so that no-one would find out and holding onto the smallest of victories and humorous events. I had made good friends at school but was promptly removed from this peer support. I became incredibly resourceful, using every opportunity to make contact with the outside world, to cause disruption to my fathers plans and ultimately to keep my sister and I as safe as possible. I look back now and have so much admiration for the gutsy girl who was half dead physically, almost totally emotionally and wonder how I ever made it to 32 years of age.

After 8 months of separation, we were reunited with our mum thanks to the newly adopted Hague Convention. We returned to England among much celebration, and were immediately thrown back into school and “normality”. Twenty years on, reflecting on my experience, I have one thing that I would ask all parents to please consider, whatever the length of time their children have been away...

For the child, the impact and fall-out of removal from all that is known, requires the hugest amount of energy to just survive, to process new surroundings, dialects, foods, environments, people. Combine this with traumatic experiences, things that have been heard, felt, seen and then a brisk re-introduction to “home” including school, exposure to family, friends, and a regular life, and it almost guarantees ongoing problems for the child. Failing to address, discuss or work-through what has gone before with your children either by yourself or through help offered by trained counsellors, mediators and pastoral support at school, can potentially be as isolating as the abduction itself. It can create further problems with regards to reintegration, recovery and development of the child. Please enjoy each others’ company, trust and love again, but please also ensure that your children are well supported on their return and that you also get a chance to access support and time to recover.

It's now twenty years since I was abducted and I have slowly rebuilt my life with the support and trust of those around me. I realise that I was sadly caught up in something that ultimately wasn't about me at all, yet caused my life maximum devastation, without consideration for my welfare. I sought out support and ways of dealing with what I experienced, so that I could at last move-on.

I'm now proud of what I have become, can reflect positively on the challenges I faced and how I coped and am now incredibly happy, but it has been the most painful, long and heart-breaking quest getting here.

I wish all families currently experiencing separation from one another or those that have been reunited, happy and safe futures together.

Nicky