

Guiding Hands Adolescent Services, Inc.

Wake Up, Your Coming With Me

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Most parents say they would go to any lengths to help a troubled kid, but is paying someone to "kidnap" your own child going to far? Absolutely not, says Joey Dusina of Guiding Hands, a child-escort company based in Salt Lake City. He has wrested nice, middle-class girls out of the clutches of pimps and nabbed teens who are suicidal, shooting up drugs or living on the streets. "If this is what it takes to save a child's life, then so be it," he says.

But critics say that escorts who typically charge about \$1,500 to transport a child take advantage of desperate parents and traumatize kids. "If you're trying to teach [children] about self-respect and respect for others, taking them by force is a hell of a way to start," says Martha Matthews, an attorney at the National Center for Youth Law in San Francisco.

Officials at Aspen Achievement Academy say they urge parents to enroll their child voluntarily. They have found that kids who have been delivered by escorts typically feel angry and betrayed and then have trouble trusting the counselors. But they acknowledge that voluntary enlistment is not always possible. Parents maybe physically intimidated by their teen or afraid their child will run away. Some parents are unable to confront their child; others are just unwilling. "Sometimes I want to shake [parents] and say, 'Take a little responsibility!'" admits one staffer.

Dusina, who has been transporting children for 16 years, has the job down to a science. Typically, he and the parents enter a child's room in the morning when the youth is still asleep. The parents have been instructed to wake their child, introduce Dusina, and then withdraw. "If the parents stick around the kids start performing" he says. Dusina tells children that like it or not, they are leaving with him and it's their choice as to whether they'll be treated as children or young adults. He says the vast majority go without a fight.

Hogtied. Many of Dusina's colleagues are less tender, however. Some children are grabbed on the street and pushed into waiting cars. Others have been blasted with pepper spray, put in choke holds and hog-tied. As the ranks of child escort companies have swelled to well over 20 in recent years, so has the number of "bungled escorts," Dusina says. Some of his new colleagues are trying to do good, he says, but are inexperienced. Others see parents as "easy targets in their time of need and capitalize on the opportunity to make a fast dollar." Dusina wants to see his field regulated, and in the meantime urges parents to investigate prospective escorts by asking educational consultants. Find out about their background, what kinds of restraints they use and how often.

Anita Targan, an educational consultant in Morristown, N.J., argues that the often arduous process of enlisting children in their own treatment is an even better way for parents to spend their time. She estimates that fewer than 1 percent of her clients end up hiring escorts.

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