

PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

Helping Children In Crisis

by Ernie Allen

(NAPSA)—Millions have already seen Ben Affleck's powerful film "Gone Baby Gone," based on the novel by Dennis Lehane (<http://www.gonebabygone.themovie.com/>). Many of them left the theater discussing and debating what they had just witnessed. It is a riveting police thriller but it is more than that. It portrays the moral and ethical dilemmas often faced by those trying to help children in crisis.

Do we do the "right thing" for a child? Or do we do what is required by law?



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It is a heart-wrenching decision. Some reviewers called the film's ending "unbelievable." Yet this is a dilemma faced every day by child welfare workers, law enforcement, judges and others across the country.

Is it in the best interests of a child to be taken out of an abusive, neglectful home and placed in one that is more caring and nurturing? Obviously. Yet what about taking a child from a poor family and placing him or her in a home that offers greater economic advantages and opportunities?

We are a nation of law, not emotions.

These dilemmas are faced by America's Child Protective Service (CPS) workers every day. Often, our child welfare systems appear to be overwhelmed with the sheer magnitude of the challenge. Yet without the rule of law, often, these decisions would be made on the basis of personal biases or emotions.

Judges and CPS workers must make decisions based on the risk of

immediate harm to the child. A child cannot be taken away from his parent and awarded to someone else simply because of higher socioeconomic status or the fact that they live in a nicer neighborhood. All parents have rights, including those whom we view as not as fit. Without CPS standards, we run the risk that children will be placed arbitrarily into situations with others whom society views as better able to provide for the child.

A fictional account of child abduction raises important ethical questions about child protection.

Ben Affleck and I spoke early in the process. I visited with him on the movie set. He wanted to be sure that the underlying elements in the film were fair and realistic. He wanted to understand child abduction and the types of victimization experienced by so many children. He worked tirelessly to make this fictional account of a child abduction and its aftermath as rooted in reality as possible. And he did a magnificent job.

Yes, it is a work of fiction, but it raises moral and ethical questions regarding the care and protection of America's children that we must talk about as a nation. Fundamentally, it reminds us that there is no right way to do the wrong thing.

• *Ernie Allen is the president and CEO of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) in Alexandria, Virginia. NCMEC's mission is to help prevent child abduction and sexual exploitation; help find missing children; and assist victims of child abduction and sexual exploitation, their families, and the professionals who serve them. For more information, call 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) or visit www.missingkids.com.*