

Just like fingerprints, toothprints can identify your child

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If Muncie mom Emma Rodenberger grays prematurely, 8-year-old Steve Rodenberger will have to be blamed.

The youngster has wandered off twice in his short life, once sending his poor mother into a panic at Wal-Mart (the store was locked down until he was restored 5 minutes later) and once disappearing during a family visit to a friend's house (he was gone nearly an hour and the police were called).

Scares like this convinced Emma that getting her son's Toothprints taken was a good idea.

That's right - Toothprints. Just as fingerprints are unique to every person, and parents are often encouraged to keep their child's fingerprints on hand for emergency identification, dental imprints are utterly individual. The characteristics of the teeth, their position in the arch and the relation of the upper jaw to the lower can be used to identify a person if - worst-case scenario - their fingerprints are not available, their appearance has been altered, or they have no identifying fillings or dental work, which is not uncommon for children today.

"They can change a lot of things about kids but not their dental records," said Emma Rodenberger. "It kind of puts my mind at ease."

Rodenberger got her son's Toothprints taken at Muncie Plaza Dental Center.

There, Samuel Bacon warmed a thin, horseshoe-shaped piece of plastic in a cup of hot water, put it in the child's mouth and instructed him to grip it tightly between his teeth. It would be a familiar feeling to anyone who has worn a retainer.

Thirty seconds or so later, he removed the wafer now bearing the impression of the child's teeth on both sides and sealed it, saliva and all, in a plastic bag. The saliva could come in handy for DNA testing and even scent-dog tracking.

The whole procedure took 5 minutes and cost \$18 (\$15 under a current special), and Rodenberger took the Toothprints wafer home with her.

"That way, they'll always have it," said Bacon, who started offering the service, usually in conjunction with regular office visits, just a month ago. "I thought parents would like to have the extra security in case their kid comes up missing."

Kerr Corp., the maker of Toothprints, recommends children get their first dental impressions around age 3, after they get their primary teeth, again around age 7, after their permanent front teeth and back molars have come in, and again around age 12, after the child has all their permanent teeth but their third molars.

Muncie Plaza Dental Center office manager Barb Lamb plans to put her grandchildren's Toothprints in a safe-deposit box alongside their fingerprints and negatives of their photographs. Though she jokes that any kidnappers would quickly return her rowdy grandsons, ages 4 and 7, she thinks Toothprints are a precaution you take against an unthinkable circumstance - so hopefully, you never have to think about it again.

"It's scary nowadays," she said. "That way I don't have to worry."

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Steps to take if your child goes missing

1. Call the police. Make a thorough search of your home, checking tight places a child could become trapped or fall asleep, and contact friends and neighbors, then do not delay calling authorities. If away from home, also request the help of the facility's management or security.
2. Tell the police your child's name, birth date, weight, height, eye color, hair color, what the child was wearing, and if the child wears eyeglasses, earrings, braces, etc. Answer all their questions, and follow their instructions.
3. Ask that your child's information be entered immediately in the FBI's National Crime Information Center Missing Persons File, a computerized system that would help law enforcement in other communities identify your child. It is within your rights to make the request directly to the FBI if you doubt that the police have done so.
4. Call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, (800) THE LOST.

Source: Kerr Corp.