

# Lost

Schools don't lose kids, right?

Of course not! Not even little kindergartners. They have everything organized and send kids exactly where they need to go to arrive home safely.

Or so I thought.

Fear. Confusion. Sheer terror.

The morning was quite an exciting one. It was Chase's first day of kindergarten. He was so excited to go to school and "ride the big yellow bus." He had been intrigued by buses from the day he could speak.

I must admit, I was a bit apprehensive. He was MY baby—how was he big enough to go to school? My mind trailed back to the first time I held my sweet, chubby-faced baby in my arms. His hair was so black. Stick-straight—chicken hair. He had a smooshy, pug-like nose and beautiful, full lips. As the nurse carefully placed him in my arms, I vowed to never let anything happen to him.

Instantly brought back to reality by Chase's squeal of excitement as we were getting out of the car he said, "Mommy, kindergarten is going to be awesome!" He continued as he jumped over the lines on the sidewalk, "and I get to ride the bus home today!"

I smiled gloomily at him and thought, *How in the world would he know what stop to get off at?* I had to keep telling myself that it would all work out. He would be fine and he would make it home. Schools don't lose kids, right?

We walked into his kindergarten class, hand-in-hand. He was bursting with excitement. Mrs. Allen, his teacher, walked up to us and introduced herself. She was a friendly lady and seemed like she would suit Chase just fine as he began his school career at just five years old. There were already many students in the classroom. Many parents hung behind waiting to make sure that their child was going to be okay. Chase hung his book bag onto the hook in his cubby. I double-checked the frog tag to ensure that it had all the information it needed to get him home. Address—check. Phone number—check. Mode of transportation—check. All was in order and I knew that information would help get him home.

I told Chase good-bye. He was ready, big-eyed and eager to get going and to explore the classroom. He wanted to play and make new friends. I choked back tears as he walked off without a care in the world. The lump that had risen in my throat felt like it was expanding and going to choke me. I wanted to let him be big, but I also still wanted my baby. My baby with chicken-hair.

As I walked out of the classroom I blew him a kiss. *He'll be fine* was on repeat in my head, like a broken record player. *It's going to be okay. He'll be safe. You'll see him this afternoon*—these thoughts made their debuts in my head, as well.

As I turned my body and headed for the door, tears spilled over my eyes like a bathtub overflowing. I slowly walked out of the school building and to my car with all the concerns and worries a mom could possibly have for her first time school experience.

My mind kept reeling back to the bus ride home. I wondered if he would make it home. I kept telling myself, *STOP. BEING. RIDICULOUS! Schools know how to get*

*kindergartners home in one piece.* Then the little worry-wart voice would pop in right after I would calm my worries and say, *or do they?*

I went about my day at work. I was a teacher's assistant at the school next door to Chase's. My day was full of popping in and out of classrooms to offer assistance to students and teachers who were in need. As I was working with students, I would find my mind wandering to my curly-headed five year old making friends with everyone around him, all the while with a big, goofy grin on his face. I knew he would love school because he was such a social butterfly.

3:30. I glanced at the clock. Chase would be boarding the bus to go home any time now. I was stuck at work and knew I would not make it home in time to see my big kindergartner step off the bus. I felt a bit emotional at this thought. I knew I was lucky to be able to slip away from school this morning to see him off to school, but I was worried that asking to leave early would be pushing it. My heart broke a little inside at this reality, but I was grateful to my mother for agreeing to pick Chase up for me.

I was working away at my desk, entering in data for students and teachers, when my phone vibrated on my desk.

I saw "Madre" on my caller ID. Excited and giddy, I picked up the phone and answered it. I was eager to hear all about Chase's first day of kindergarten.

Tell me all about your day! How was..." I was cut off by my mom's frantic voice.

"LACEY! He's not on the bus!"

"Wait! What? He should be! His frog tag specifically said that he was a bus rider today."

"Well, he isn't! The bus driver said he didn't see a little boy in a red shirt with curly, curly hair even get on the bus. He's a hard one to miss!"

My mind was reeling with a hundred questions, thoughts and ideas. *He has to be on the bus. Where else would he go? His tag said he was a bus rider! Schools know how to get kindergartners home safely—they do it all the time! If he isn't on the bus, then WHERE IS HE?!*

"Well, are you sure he isn't asleep somewhere on the bus? Remember when Sam did this on his first day of kindergarten? He fell asleep slumped over in the chair and missed his stop. I'm sure that's what happened. Have the bus driver check!" the words fell out of my mouth faster than I realized. I was frazzled, but I felt like I had easily and immediately solved the problem as to where Chase was. *Surely this is the solution*, I thought to myself. After all, my younger brother, Sam, had done that exact thing. Luckily, the bus driver found him while sweeping the bus before taking the bus to the bus barn. Mom had been worried and frantic, but it was only a matter of minutes before he was found and brought home. Surely, it would be the same case for Chase.

"LACEY!" Mom brought me back to reality. "The bus driver already walked the bus. He got up to look when he was at the stop and Chase didn't get off."

"Uhh..." I was at a loss for words and what to do. My mind went back to the hundreds of questions and thoughts I had earlier—*He has to be on the bus. Where else would he go? His tag said he was a bus rider! Schools know how to get kindergartners home safely. If he isn't on the bus, then WHERE IS HE?!*

Amidst the chaos in my brain, I still felt pretty calm. Surely there was an easy answer to my many questions. Fear hadn't quite sunk in. I was still processing the situation.

"I'm going to get off the phone. I'm going to walk the neighborhood and see if he got off at an earlier stop, by chance," Mom told me.

"That sounds like a good idea. Just please let me know if you find him. I am going to call the school," I replied.

Mom and I both hung up the phone. I sat and stared at my computer screen for a brief second with terror-filled eyes. I was at a loss for words and the worry began to sink in. My mind was reeling with what could have happened. Surely he just got on the wrong bus and will be brought back to school, right? Seemed like a reasonable explanation for why he was not on his bus.

I picked up my cell phone and dialed the phone number for the school's office. My hands shook a little bit more as I pushed each number. I realized my fears from this morning were really coming true. *How is this possible?* I thought.

*He didn't make it home.*

The phone began to ring.

My mind wandered. *Maybe he was on the wrong bus. Maybe he had gotten off at the wrong stop. Maybe my precious, people-loving five-year-old was out wandering the streets of Tulsa without a clue in the world as to where he was.*

Ring...ring...ring...

*It was scorching hot outside. He was going to die from heat exhaustion or from getting overheated on the back of the bus. My mind was thinking the worst—the fear was growing. Building up in my chest and getting ready to explode. It wouldn't stop. He was out wandering the streets and some sicko was going to come and pick him up. I would never see him again. How had this happened?*

Ring...ring..."Hello, this is building A office. Rose speaking. How can I help you?"

I couldn't speak. My throat was swollen shut trying to prevent the tears from flowing out. It was a futile attempt because the tears forced their way out, regardless of my attempts to keep the dam closed. There was no stopping them.

"Um, hello? Ma'am?"

*Get it together, Haynie! They have to know where Chase is. It was a simple fact. They wouldn't lose him. Schools don't lose kids! Ever!*

"Um..." I choked. "My son...Benjamin..." my voice cracked. I made a feeble attempt at taking a deep breath in.

"Benjamin Chase Haynie is in kindergarten..." my voice was shaking.

"Uh-huh," the lady replied.

"...and he didn't get off the bus today." Huge sob.

"Ma'am, are you sure? Who is his teacher?"

*AM I SURE?! No, I am just making this all up for fun,* I thought to myself. I wish I could have said, "Joke's on you!" but, unfortunately this wasn't the case.

"YES! YES, I AM SURE!" I nearly screamed in to the phone. "He is in Mrs. Allen's class. The bus driver walked the bus and didn't see..." I took another deep breath in..."him anywhere." My last syllable came out as a mouse-like squeak. I was trying to control my tears, but the flood gates had already opened and there was no stopping them.

"Well, maybe he got on the wrong bus. What bus was he supposed to take home?" Rose asked me.

“Twenty-five.” Tears rolled down my cheeks like boulders. They crashed onto my lap and splattered just like a raindrop.

“Okay, well, would you mind coming up to the school? We will call the bus barn and see if he is on any of the busses there or en route to there.”

“I am on my way!” I blurted without a single hesitation. I hung up before she could even respond. I didn’t even bother shutting down my computer. I grabbed my purse and bolted out the door without even a second glance back. I was at Chase’s school in a matter of seconds.

The walk from my car to the front door of the school building was one that lasted for a lifetime—an eternity. I was unaware of all that was around me. My sight was focused on the front door of the school—the office was just beyond the threshold. There was an eerie, deafening silence. My feet clopped along the ground with each step I took. My stride covered twice the distance it usually did.

As I walked in to the office, I could tell no one had a definite answer. By this point, I thought I had regained my ever-so-fragile composure. Other than feeling like my eyes were a bit puffed-up and swollen, I had the tears and emotions under control. Or at least I felt like I was in control. I walked up to the front desk and learned that I was ever so wrong.

“Ms. Allen remembers sending him to the busses this afternoon. We have confirmed with some of the busses that he is not on them.” My world began to spin. I felt like I was walking through the spinning tunnels at a fair. I had to grip on to the front desk and brace myself. She didn’t seem panicked at all. She was cool, calm and collected. *HOW COULD SHE BE THIS WAY WHEN MY BABY WAS MISSING AND NO ONE HAD ANSWERS?!* I thought to myself. I instantly felt sick and frustrated that they didn’t seem concerned.

The phone rang and Rose answered it. She gave me the “hold on a minute” finger.

I began to cry again. It was a silent yet powerful cry that took over my body. The tears followed the tracks of the previous tears that had fallen. I decided to step aside and call my mom to see if she had seen or heard anything and to fill her in on what I was doing and what I knew.

“I am walking the neighborhood and I don’t see him anywhere. I have almost covered the whole area. I am going to head back to the house and wait there, just in case he makes his way there.”

“Mom, they don’t seem very concerned. Should we call the police and put an alert out for him?” I asked.

“We might. First, see what the school has to say.” She seemed calm. This didn’t concern me. Mom was always able to keep her cool in stressful situations. She knew if she got too worked up, I would only become more of a disaster. Someone had to hold it together for both of us. I had the tears under control for her and me.

“K,” was all I could manage to choke out. The tears flowed. It was only seconds later that the snot followed in suit of the tears.

“I am going to head back home. Let me know what you find out ASAP,” mom told me.

I took in a deep breath. “I will.”

We hung up the phone. I sat on the bench and just blubbered. I felt alone, worried and so scared. Ultimately, I felt so helpless. No one knew where my baby was and the situation was currently out of my control.

Fear. Confusion. Sheer terror. These feelings were sinking in. Apparently, schools DO lose children.

The snot bubbles started. They poured and formed out of my nose just as quickly as my tears welled and spilled over my eyes. I could not control them no matter how I tried.

The office staff must think I'm ridiculous. As I blubbered I imagined them thinking, "Sheesh! Can't this lady get a grip? We never lose kids!" This thought didn't help the tears.

Rose slowly approached me. She was so thoughtful to bring me some tissues. Finally.

"Well, we are not able to locate him on any of the buses."

My eyes grew with terror as big as saucers.

"Could he have ridden home with a friend?" she asked me.

"No..." I whispered. "No...It would have only been me or my mom. No one else would have picked him up." By this point I knew I sounded like a nasally clown. My nose was filled with so much snot as it bubbled out of my nose and down my lips. "We should call the cops, right? I feel like we have no other options."

"Well, let's not do that just yet," Rose suggested.

"Where else could he be?!" I cried.

"Let me go check one more thing..." her voice trailed off as she walked away. I sat there. Alone. Fear. Confusion. Sheer terror.

I said a little prayer in my head. *Heavenly Father, please help me find my baby. Please let me know where he is. Please. Amen.*

Just as I opened my eyes and went to wipe the snot dangling precariously from my nose, Mrs. Allen came walking around the corner.

"Ms. Haynie! I am so sorry about all of this! I know I walked him to the bus."

I didn't know what to say. I slowly nodded my pounding head and haphazardly wiped the tears from eyes. She sat down next to me and half-heartedly patted my shoulder.

"Oh my goodness!" Mrs. Allen's eyes widened. "We NEVER checked after-care! I don't know why no one, me included, thought of this!" She jumped up from sitting next to me. She got up so fast, it startled me. She rushed out the door as she yelled, "I'll be right back!"

*After-care.* I thought. *Why DIDN'T we think of that?!* I took a deep, much-needed breath in hopes my simple prayer had been answered. I didn't want to be the mother whose worst fears would come true.

I was still sitting on the bench in the office. A small weight seemed to be lifted off my shoulders. This seemed like it could be the answer. Time seemed to be moving like mud through a tiny straw. Slooooooow. I was anxiously waiting to hear what news Mrs. Allen would bring back to me. Actually, I was only hoping she would bring my Chase back to me.

I leaned forward to rest my head in my hands. I was emotionally drained. My eyes burned. My head pounded. My heart ached. I needed this to be the solution. I

couldn't handle not knowing anymore. I turned my head to the right, towards the front windows. At that moment, I saw my curly-headed little boy in red walking hand-in-hand with Mrs. Allen. It seemed as if he didn't have a care in the world. In fact, I knew he didn't have a care in the world. I could tell, as he skipped and hopped alongside Mrs. Allen. Happy and carefree as ever. Relief flooded over me. I felt light again.

So light that I sprung from my chair and dashed out the door to grab and hug my little guy. I couldn't get to him fast enough.

"Oh! Honey! Where were you?!"

Mrs. Allen interjected, "he saw some friends go to aftercare and decided to follow along instead of get on the bus!"

Before I could speak again, Chase exclaimed, "Mommy! It was really awesome! I'm going to go every day!" I looked at his sweet five-year-old baby face. He was so carefree and innocent. He had a red Kool-Aid mustache and cookie crumbs smeared across his lips and cheeks.

He continued to ramble on. I listened intently to hear about his little adventure that had me tied-up in knots and tangles and crumpled on the ground. "I got free snacks—cookies and juice!—and I even got to play on the Wii! It was all for free and very fun. I want to go all the time!" So innocent.

All I could do in that moment was giggle and hold him tight as relief washed over me. I squeezed his little five-year-old bones and kissed his chubby cheeks. I loved his carefree, social butterfly spirit all the more for this, despite the terror and fear he had put me through.

Relief. All was right in the world.