

# School patrols stepped up after abduction attempt

By Heath Urie (Contact)  
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Photo by Marty Caivano

Boulder County sheriff's deputy J.D. Caton chats with kindergarteners Nick Mitchell and Amie Weber, both 5, who stopped to talk to him after leaving school at Heatherwood Elementary on Tuesday. Caton kept watch over the school as students let out for the day after an attempted abduction Monday.



## Tips

Anyone with information about the Monday incident is asked to call Detective Ali Thompson at 303-441-3643.

The suspect is described as a white man with a darker, tan complexion who's in his late teens or early 20s with short, light brown hair that's longer and curly in the back. He was driving a silver two-door hatchback, possibly a Toyota.

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**Correction: This is a corrected version of the story that clarifies Heatherwood Elementary School is located in Gunbarrel.**

An 8-year-old girl who fended off a would-be kidnapper Monday is a "very brave child who knew what to do in a scary situation," thanks in part to a school program aimed at teaching self defense, said Heatherwood Elementary School Principal Larry Orobona.

Sheriff's deputies increased patrols at the Gunbarrel school Tuesday, and made a public plea for help identifying the man who approached the third-grader as she was walking home from school.

The man grabbed the girl by the wrist and tried to drag her into his silver-colored car around 3:15 p.m., officials said, but she was able to kick him and run home to her mother.

The attack was not connected to reports of a suspicious vehicle last month outside Boulder's Flatirons Elementary, police said.

The girl, who returned to school Tuesday, has since been able to help detectives create a composite sketch of the man.

"She feels safe here," Orobona said. "She has a good support system. We feel the students have a good background in personal safety."

## 'Kick, scrape and stomp'

Orobona praised the girl for following the training all Heatherwood students receive as part of a child-assault prevention program.

The national, nonprofit program has been offered to students, parents and teachers at the school for the past nine years, Orobona said, and is offered at many other Boulder Valley schools.

"That was one of the things that she credits her quick thinking to, was using that knowledge," Orobona said.

The girl was introduced to the program in kindergarten and first grade, Orobona said, and is due to take the training with the rest of the students again this school year.

Victoria Strong, executive director of the Front Range Center for Assault Prevention, which runs the program, said the classes teach students from preschool to high school the skills to avoid sexual assault, stranger abduction and bullying.

Students across the Front Range learn how to recognize danger, yell for help and escape potential abductors, Strong said.

"We teach them if a stranger has a hold of them to kick, scrape and stomp," Strong said. "We need to give them a way they can use the adults' strengths against them."

The Heatherwood student, Strong said, followed the program's moves and escaped.

"When we hear stories like this, we look at them as a success story, although we can't imagine why people do these kinds of things to children."

## 'On heightened alert'

Sheriff's Cmdr. Phil West said deputies on Tuesday had a "heightened presence" at Heatherwood as students arrived and departed. The attack on the student, West said, is enough to make parents and police equally concerned.

"It's a pretty unique situation for us," West said. "The description provided by the victim would lead us to believe this individual intended her harm. We're responding to that pretty aggressively."

Authorities continued to search for the man, described as white with a darker, tan complexion who's in his late teens or early 20s with short, light brown hair that's longer and curly in the back. He was wearing a blue T-shirt, baggy jeans and black-and-yellow boxer shorts. He also was wearing a beaded necklace with a shark pendant.

The car was a two-door hatchback, possibly a Toyota.

School resource and patrol officers in Boulder were also placed on "heightened alert" Tuesday, and were told to watch for any suspicious vehicles or activity near schools.

At the same time, Boulder police determined that a suspicious vehicle spotted last month in the area near Flatirons Elementary is not connected to the attempted abduction.

Officers received a report from a parent Sept. 30 that a silver car was cruising near the University Hill school, police spokeswoman Sarah Huntley said. They could not locate the car, but police have since said the vehicle descriptions from the two incidents did not match.

The parent reported the Flatirons Elementary case, Huntley said, because parents at two other Boulder schools — Casey Middle School and Sacred Heart of Jesus — received a letter from school officials just days earlier warning of a suspicious car driving in those areas.

In those incidents, men in a white car had waved students over, asking them to take paperwork home to their parents. Police later found that car and could not determine that a crime had occurred.