

# Investigation

Peyton, and Nathaniel, six, left for a trip to Disneyland with their Taiwanese-Australian father, Darwin Lee, in January 2014. She hoped the holiday would help keep the peace with Lee during their custody battle. When they didn't come home, she called the police and, later, hired a private investigator. More than a year passed before her ex-husband and children were tracked down in Taiwan.

Nunez, 46, has been trying to regain custody of her sons through Taiwanese courts ever since. In December 2015, a judge made a temporary order granting her regular two-hourly visits with her children in a counsellor's office in Taiwan, pending a full custody ruling.

Nunez now travels from Sydney to Taiwan each month to see them. During the visits, her boys, now aged 11 and eight, mostly just do their homework. "They don't talk to me. They see me as the one who couldn't get along with their dad and that this is all my fault," she says. Having your children taken away is a form of domestic abuse, she says. "It is like you are being punched in the face every day. It strips you down and is designed to break you."

But she has never considered hiring recovery agents because of the risks involved. "If something goes wrong, you have a high chance of never seeing your children again," she says. She maintains hope that the judge will award her custody in Australia. "I stay strong and positive because I need to be there for my children, but I can see how some give up," she says. "If I was to win, I still have years ahead of me where I have to fix something that is broken because their trust is gone."

**U**nder the rules of The Hague Convention, Australian parents can seek recovery of children who are wrongfully removed to or retained in another convention country. Courts in the other convention country are supposed to

**114**  
Australian children were abducted by their parents in 2014–2015

**94**  
countries have signed a convention to return kids to their homeland



While child recovery websites (left) are just a quick Google search away, Patricia Nunez (above) is choosing to fight for custody through the Taiwanese courts.

criminal charges. "Heavy penalties might make people feel better. But, say, in the recent Lebanon case, the father would think twice before bringing the children back to Australia if

he knew he might spend time in jail." Instead, she supports other methods to prevent abduction, such as putting a child's name on the Family Law Watchlist to stop them from leaving the country. She suggests the introduction of travel consent documents where the written consent of both parents is required before a child might leave the country.

Dr Wollner advises left-behind parents to pursue legal channels rather than engage a child recovery agency. "Parental abduction in the long term can cause alienation from both parents and create issues associated with loss of trust, ability to form relationships, depression and anxiety," she says. "You can understand parents taking such measures because they're desperate, but they have to remain child-focused. Recovery agencies take the high moral ground, but unless the claims of both parents are tested before a court of law, it is difficult to say who is right and who is at fault."

But Dempster has no regrets about hiring Adam Whittington. "A lot of people who are pontificating on this situation in Lebanon need to ask themselves a simple question: what would you do if one day you come home and your son or your daughter is not there?" Dempster's ex-wife didn't pursue him as he fled the country with his daughter. He says he has emailed since returning to Australia, but received no reply. Today, Natasha suffers from feelings of parental alienation, he says. "To an extent she is bottling things up, and I am getting advice on how to deal with it."

"She is too young to understand," he explains. "But at some point, I will tell my daughter everything." □