



## **Balloon Boy Falcon Heene Hides 5 Hours, Like Tom Sawyer Child Development Experts Say Children Hide Out of Fear, Stress or Need for Power and Attention**

By SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES

For five hours, Falcon Heene -- part Tom Sawyer, part Huck Finn -- tucked himself away in the rafters of his Colorado garage, in some ways watching his own funeral.

Today, no one knows why the rambunctious boy hid as police, firefighters and the National Guard chased after an experimental balloon gone wild, or even if Thursday's incident was a hoax.

But hiding is not an unusual behavior for a 6-year-old, especially one who's been alternately described as "well-adjusted and fun-loving" and a "nationally known troublemaker." Falcon's answer to authorities was that his father, Richard Heene, amateur scientist and storm-chaser, "scared me because he yelled at me."

But glimpses of the boy on a family YouTube video and on the reality TV series "Wife Swap" show a much more rebellious personality. In the first season of the show, Falcon told his "new mom" and home-safety expert Karen Martel, "F\*\*k this rule!" when she tried to rein the boy in. "Hiding around doesn't always happen as a result of feeling guilty," said George Scarlett, a child development expert at Tufts University.

"I've known children around this age to hide as a way to exert control and feel powerful," said Scarlett. "Think of how powerful a small child momentarily feels knowing that others, mostly large adults who normally have control over him or her, are now searching for him or her. That's power."

Child specialists say most children hide because they are afraid of punishment. Before Falcon went missing, Heene told police he had yelled at his son for trying to get in to the experimental balloon.

### **Child Specialists Say Hiding Not Unusual**

Heene's former business partner Barbara Slusser told ABCNews.com that the father was known to have a temper.

"One of the main reasons is fear of getting in to trouble," said Danielle Kassow, a child development specialist from the Seattle nonprofit group Thrive by Five Washington. "But there can be other reasons. It could be a coping mechanism. Adults run away from their problems and this is like a young child version of this.

"It's not unusual behavior," she told ABCNews.com. "I remember one time I was babysitting, and the girl did something wrong and went hiding in her closet. When I was 5, I hid."

Falcon also had the competition of two equally daredevil older brothers, Bradford, 10, and Ryo, 7, and a father who admitted he had difficulty punishing the 6-year-old.

"If I scold him with a loud voice, he pouts and walks away on his own," Henne, 44, told Larimer County Sheriff Jim Alderden. "We don't ground our children."

Sometimes children will use misbehavior to get attention from their parents, according to Dr. Gene Beresin, director of child and adolescent psychiatry residency training at Massachusetts General Hospital and McLean Hospital in Boston.

"If the parent is disconnected or is felt to be uninvolved for any number of reasons -- unemployment, family stress, a death or loss, an illness -- the child will find a way to get the parent reconnected," Beresin added. "Often, this will be accomplished by misbehavior. Sometimes kids will hide after doing something wrong as a way of 'being found.'"

Beresin said children need care, guidance, attention and involvement of their parents.

"While they may dislike punishment or reprimand, doing something wrong, making up, making reparations requires love and caring on the part of parents," he told ABCNews.com.

"Remember [that] one of the most important words kids first learn as a sign of love is 'no,'" he said. "This applies to putting a fork in the light socket, pulling the cat's tail, stealing or lying. Parental limit setting is intrinsically stabilizing for the child. The hiding is way for the child to say, 'Come find me! I need you in my life!'"

Stress can also play a role in hiding, according to experts. On a national TV interview this morning, Falcon threw up while being interviewed -- perhaps a sign of stress.

"Children have a limited set of skills for coping with stressful events, especially events that are quite unique, as this one would appear to be," said Paul Miller, professor of social and behavioral sciences at Arizona State University, an expert on how children cope with stress.

"He is also old enough to know that his action of releasing the balloon, however inadvertent or accidental, was not something his parents would be happy about," Miller added.

Faced with not knowing what to do, children this age often use avoidance strategies that either get them out of the situation physically or mentally, according to Miller.

Falcon told authorities that while in hiding he played with toys then napped for several hours.

"His hiding ... was an avoidant action. However ineffective in the longer term, it addressed his stress in the short term," said Miller. "A key, but often not well-articulated role in a great deal of parenting is helping children learn strategies for coping with stressful events."

Miller said that Falcon likely had no idea he had sent his family into a panic.

"So, we can't presume that the child acted the way he did knowing how it would affect his parents," he said.

Parents need to have open lines of communication with their children so the kids feel "safe" when parents are delivering "bad news," according to Miller. Without learning coping strategies, children can continue avoidance behaviors well into adulthood, he said.

But **Dr. Steven C. Scholzman**, associate director of child and adolescent psychiatry residency at **McLean Hospital** in Boston, said there were "no simple answers."

Developmentally, 6-year-olds have concrete thinking and "struggle with their desire to initiate their own projects at the expense of potentially feeling inferior," according to Scholzman.

"In stressful situations, kids move backward -- they regress -- so that emotionally they start struggling with feelings of guilt and shame," he told ABCNews.com. "Kids get stressed, lose even their ability to think concretely and, instead, think dichotomously, 'I will be punished; but if I am not found, then I won't be punished.'"

Even adults can regress when they are under stress.

"Think of adults who steal trust funds and then disappear," he said. "Sometimes, they're trying to get away with things, but they might also have genuinely needed the money, saw the money when stressed, and took the money the way a kid takes a cookie. This doesn't make it OK, but it allows us to understand how childish thinking can influence behavior."

Though Scholzman did not want to comment specifically on the details of Falcon's case, he said hiding can bring some "secondary gain."

"Think of Tom Sawyer," he said, referring to scene in the Mark Twain novel and the scene where Becky Thatcher and an entire town weep for the presumed drowning death of three boys.

"He was hiding initially on the island with Huck," Scholzman said, "but he badly wanted to, and enjoyed, listening to his own funeral. There is some satisfaction -- not malicious -- involved in knowing folks love you and are worried, just relief from the worries we all have about whether we are truly loved."

And hiding, he said, gives children, "the opportunity to hear how others feel about your being missing even when the presumed reason you're missing is that you've done something wrong."

"Tom got more cuffs and kisses that day-- according to Aunt Polly's varying moods -- than he had earned before in a year," writes Twain, in his account of Tom Sawyer hiding. "And he hardly knew which expressed the most gratefulness to God and affection for himself."