

Residents on 'jolly' Wardwell Avenue more cautious

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On an average summer day, Wardwell Avenue would be full of children playing games, riding their bikes and visiting elderly neighbors who could be counted on to give out cookies.

But ever since 12-year-old Jennifer Schweiger vanished a week ago, mothers have been keeping their children at home, and the dead-end Westerleigh street has been silent.

"This used to be a jolly block, with the kids going up and down," said Josephine Capeci, a middle-aged woman who lives on Wardwell. "You don't hear anybody now."

Mary Lastella, a mother of three who regularly baby-sits for other neighborhood children, has begun putting "the padlock on the gate all the time now. I lock the children inside the yard to play unless I'm right here on the street watching them. If one child wants to go a few houses down to play with another child, we phone back and forth to ask, 'Did they get there?'"

"They were all itching to go on their bikes today," she continued, looking around at the lively brood of children playing in her yard, "but I didn't want to take any chances trying to monitor them all unless one of the other mothers were here."

Alice Hartie said that when her 4-year-old daughter asked permission to walk down the block yesterday, "I stood on the porch and watched, because I'm not going to let her go by herself anymore. Not when there might be a man out there taking kids."

Mrs. Hartie said Jennifer's disappearance also prompted her to remind her own child to be wary of strangers. "I told her, scream if anyone comes over to you," she said.

Another Wardwell Avenue mom, Mary Higgins, said she used to let her 8-year-old daughter "go around the corner to neighbors, but now I'm thinking twice."

"All the neighbors here know everybody, they all look out for the children," she said. "To think that somebody has been around

that we didn't know is frightening,"

Kathy Esselborn, 14, who lives on a street nearby, held her 3-year-old sister's hand tightly as they walked down Wardwell yesterday. "My mother said to keep an eye on her all the time," she said.

"You read it in the newspaper about missing children all the time," said Dorothy McKee, who lives two doors down from the Schweigers. "But you wouldn't think it would be so close to home."

Although the missing 12-year-old girl has Down's syndrome, she functions at the level of a normal 7-year-old and has many playmates among the local children. Ranging in age from 4 to 14, they made it clear yesterday that no matter what they are doing, Jennifer is on their minds.

Amanda Harmon, 6, said the teddy bear her mother won in an

amusement park would go to Jennifer as soon as she comes back. Erin Hartie, 4, watched a helicopter beating its propellers overhead and said: "I know what that helicopter's doing. It's looking for Jennifer."

And Suzanne Lastella, who turned 7 on Wednesday, almost canceled her birthday party because she and her playmates were so sad about Jennifer's absence. In the end, they went ahead with the party in the hope that Jennifer would come home in time to join the festivities.

She didn't.