

Fostering

# Missing Children

The Trust Board has granted the Chief Executive of the Sandwell Children's Trust the authority to approve this document.

# Missing Children

## Regulations and Standards

The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011:

[Regulation 11 - Independent fostering agencies—duty to secure welfare](#)

[Regulation 13 - Behaviour management and children missing from foster parent's home](#)

Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards

[STANDARD 5 - Children Missing From Care.](#)

## Related Guidance

[Statutory Guidance on Children who Run Away or Go Missing from Home or Care \(DfE\)](#)

## Related Chapters

Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation Procedure

Identifying and Supporting Children and Young People Vulnerable to Violent Extremism including Radicalisation Procedure

## Scope of this Chapter

This chapter explains how foster carers and staff should deal with children when they go missing. This chapter should be read in conjunction with the Local Safeguarding Children Board Safeguarding Procedures and Protocols.

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# 1. Introduction

All children must have a Placement Plan which takes account of any likely risk of the child going missing. The Placement Plan should incorporate measures to reduce or prevent the child becoming absent, and information that would help facilitate the location of the child should they go missing.

Where there are Child Protection concerns relating to a child and/or where the child has gone missing from the placement or from any previous placement, the Placement Plan must include information agreed between the placing authority and the fostering agency about the day-to-day arrangements put in place to keep the child safe.

Foster carers will be proactive with regards to providing a foster home which promotes a feeling of security that aims to minimise the likelihood of the child going missing. Foster carers will work with children to educate them about the risks of going missing, help them where possible to identify trigger points and give them other alternatives in these particular circumstances.

The fostering agency will always follow the guidance in the Local Safeguarding Children Board Procedures and Protocols for Children Missing From Home And Care.

On their return the child must be seen alone by an independent person usually independent of the child's placement and the placing authority.

# 2. Definitions

There are various different terms which are used in relation to missing children:

[Statutory Guidance on Children Who Run Away or Go Missing From Home or Care \(January 2014\)](#) uses the following definitions:

## **Missing Child:**

A child will be defined as 'Missing' if their whereabouts are unknown and:

- The circumstances are out of character; or
- The context suggests the child may be;
  - The subject of a crime; or
  - At risk of harm themselves.

## **Absent Child:**

A child will be defined as 'Absent' if the following criteria are met:

- (a) The child has deliberately or carelessly absented themselves; and
- (b) This is not out of character or there is an apparent explanation for them going absent on this occasion; AND
- (c) The child is expected to return; AND
- (d) The child is not expected to suffer or cause harm whilst absent; AND

(e) The level of risk does not justify police intervention at this time.

[Click here for the College of Policing definition of missing and absent.](#)

The Police classification of a person as 'missing' or 'absent' will be based on on-going risk assessment.

Police will not be sent to cases where children/young people are defined as being 'absent'. Instead the onus will be on care providers to take steps to locate the child/young person, with monitoring by the Police and escalation to 'missing' if there is a change to the circumstances that has increased the level of risk. It is expected that all reasonable steps should be taken by care providers to locate the child/young person prior to making a report to the Police. Where they remain absent, and the care provider feels that they may be at risk of harm, then a report should be made to the Police.

Police will attend reports of 'missing children/young people'.

Some other terms of relevance should also be noted by foster carers and those working with them in this context:

- **Child Abduction:**

This term is used when a child has been forcibly removed from their placement. It should be reported to the Police immediately;

- **Grooming:**

Young people in care are particularly vulnerable to grooming by adults who wish to sexually exploit them. Up to 90% of children subjected to sexual grooming, research has shown, go missing at some point. Sometimes drugs, alcohol or money are used to entice young people, so it's essential that foster carers remain alert to any unexplained gifts or unusual patterns of behaviour.

A range of 'push' and 'pull' factors may be reasons for being absent:

- Push factors - conflict with carers/others, feeling powerless, bullying, being unhappy with regards to their situation, physical or sexual abuse;
- Pull factors - wanting to be with family or friends, peer pressure regarding established attractions of 'street life', attractions of people who may present a risk and exploit the child.

### 3. Planning and Prevention

As part of the referral, placement and ongoing planning process, consideration must be given to the risk of the child becoming missing. If there is a risk, a plan must be drawn up to reduce or prevent it.

Foster carers should know when to try to prevent a child or young person leaving the home and should do so through dialogue, but they should not try to restrain the child should they be intent on leaving, or in any other circumstances, unless it is necessary to prevent injury to the child or others, or serious damage to property.

On a day to day basis, foster carers should be alert to signs or indications that a child may be likely to 'runaway' or become missing. If foster carers suspect that this may happen, they should take any actions already agreed with the Supervising Social Worker and the child's social worker, or do what they reasonably and safely can to reduce or prevent the child from leaving - this includes circumstances where a child is refusing to return to the home.

If the risk increases, they should contact the Supervising Social Worker or, if out of hours, the on-call social worker for advice.

If there is a serious risk e.g. the child is behaving in a violent manner or threatening to damage property, the carer should contact the Police, then contact the Supervising Social Worker at the first opportunity.

## 4. If the Child is Missing

In the absence of any agreed strategy the following must apply if it is suspected that a child is absent, absconded or missing. In such circumstances, foster carers should take what actions are immediately necessary to find the child, in the context of risks posed to the child or others.

The following checklist should be considered by foster carers to start to think about the level of risk to the child and what action should be taken:

1. Is this event significantly out of character?
2. Have they done this before?
3. Is there a time you expect them to return?
4. Who are they with?
5. Have you been in contact with the child?
6. Is the child likely to be subjected to harm or a crime?
7. Is the child a danger to themselves or others?
8. Is the child likely to attempt suicide?
9. Does the child have any specific medical needs?
10. Is there a specific concern?
11. Do you know the child's whereabouts?
12. Do you believe them to be involved in crime?
13. What were their intended actions when last seen?
14. What have you done to locate the child?
15. Is there any other significant information you are aware of?

If a child has left or is missing, the carer must contact the Police and then inform the Child's Social Worker (or their manager / duty service if unavailable), their Supervising Social Worker or the fostering manager. If the incident occurs out of normal office hours the On-Call / Out of Hours Duty Social Worker / Manager must be contacted.

The police will require information as follows:

- Name and gender of the child (including all names and aliases);
- Date of birth and age;
- Description of the child and their clothing;
- The child's home address and if relevant the child's family home address;
- The location the child is absent from;
- Circumstances of the absence, including any signs of pre-planning (have they taken any money/clothing etc.);
- Whether the child told anyone they intended to leave, including if they have left a letter or note;
- The child's mobile phone number and if they have taken their mobile;
- If any contact has been made with the child, including if a message has been left on the child's mobile phone and/or if a text message has been sent;
- Locations where the child may have gone, including places where they were found previously;
- Details of any friends and associates they may be with;
- Name, address and telephone number of the reporting person and their relationship to the child;
- Addresses that the reporting person has already checked (including time/date and details of who lives at the addresses visited).
- Any regular medication taken by the child.

Please note that we do not expect carers to check possible addresses prior to the police being informed.

## **Photographs**

Two recent photographs of the child (face and full body length) should be retained by the carer for missing from care purposes. Copies of these photographs should also be held on the child's electronic file. Digital photographs are preferable and they should be regularly updated.

Immediately after contacting the police, the carer needs to inform Children's Services. During working hours, the child's social worker and the carers' supervising social worker must be informed. Outside working hours the Emergency Duty Service needs to be informed.

For further information please see Sandwell Children's Trust Missing from Home or Care Policy.

When a child does go missing this is described in the Fostering Regulations as a 'Notifiable Event' and by law this requires the fostering agency to monitor and review all incidents of this nature. It is therefore a requirement that foster carers inform the Supervising Social Worker in the event that the child in their care leaves without permission.

Where a child goes missing for long periods of time or very regularly, the child, their social worker, the foster carers and other relevant staff / Managers will meet to decide what action should be taken to help and protect the child.

## **Once the Child Returns Home**

When a looked after child returns from a missing episode, a protocol needs to be followed by the child's social worker (see foster carers' handbook for details). The carer needs to inform the police and the social workers if a child returns voluntarily.

Good practice would indicate that the carer makes the child welcome, tells them they are glad the child is safe and does not interrogate them about their whereabouts. No sanctions should be applied

The foster carer should take the following steps when a child returns after such an event:

Assess the child's immediate needs i.e. offer something to eat, does the child need a shower/bath and a clean change of clothes? Is there any need for medical treatment?

Explain to the child that they do not want them to go missing but they will be welcomed back to the household;

Try to gain an insight into the young person's absence and what can be done to minimise its recurrence, although it is acknowledged that the point at which the child returns may or may not be the best time to try to discuss the reasons why the child has gone missing;

Inform all relevant professionals i.e. Police (unless they returned the child), fostering manager and the child's social worker that the child has returned.

Should there be any suspicion that the absent without consent episode is linked to an abusive incident, the Safeguarding Children and Young Peoples Procedure should be invoked.

## **5. Recording**

The fostering manager will arrange to log this information for monitoring purposes. A copy of the report will be retained on the child's file and a copy forwarded to the child's social worker. A copy of the report will also be sent to Regulatory Authority in accordance with Schedule 7 of the Fostering Service Regulations (see Notifications of Significant Events to Other Agencies Procedure).

Carers will keep records of absence and the fostering manager will notify the placing authority. The record will include:

- Action by the foster carers. Recordings need to reflect who was informed and the time they were spoken to;
- Circumstances of the child's return;
- Any reasons given by the child for the absence;
- Any action taken in light of those reasons.

These records will be shared with the child's social worker and where it is appropriate, the parents.