

## MISSING CHILDREN POLICY SOUNDLY FOSTERING

At Soundly Fostering it is our aim to assist foster carers in creating an environment whereby children and young people make positive choices and that includes choosing not to go 'missing' or run away from placement. We want to ensure that children and Young People are safe from harm, however, should they 'go missing' Soundly Fostering will do all we can to locate children and ensure that foster carers are fully conversant with the procedure should this occur.

Foster Carers play a key role in safeguarding the children in their care, and it is important that all those who are working with, or are known to the child, are aware of the procedures they should follow if a child goes missing or runs away. Any child who runs away is at risk, but children 'in care' are particularly vulnerable as they are at significant risk of grooming and being coerced into child exploitation, which may include the misuse of drugs and alcohol, violence or offending.

We know from research there are a number of factors which contribute to children looked after being at particular risk, these are:

- Action plans not drawn up or acted upon
- Placement instability
- Reports on missing children not always shared with senior managers
- 'Return Home Interviews (RHI) not routinely carried out
- Children placed at a distance from family or friends
- Children not feeling listened to or taken seriously

We will attempt to mitigate the above risk factors as much as possible, working with children and local authorities to ensure that we are doing all we can reduce the likelihood of a child going missing or running away.

## Regulations and Standards:

### **The Fostering Services (England) Regulation 2011**

Regulation 11 – Independent fostering agencies – duty to secure welfare

Regulation 13 – Behaviour management and children missing from foster carers home

### **Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards**

Standard 5 – children missing from care.

#### RELEVANT GUIDANCE:

Statutory Guidance on children who Run Away or Go Missing from home or care (DfE)

#### RELATED CHAPTERS:

Safeguarding children and Young People from CSE

Identifying and Supporting Children and Young People from violent Extremism including Radicalisation Procedure

#### **SCOPE OF THIS CHAPTER:**

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This chapter explains how foster carers and staff should deal with children when they go missing. This chapter should be used in conjunction with the Local Runaway and missing from home and care protocol.

## 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 local guidance and the Runaway and Missing from Home or Care Protocol.

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

An exception may be where a child has a strong relationship with a foster carer or their social worker and has expressed a preference to talk to them, rather than an independent person, about the reasons they went missing and the foster carer must work with the placing authority (child's social worker) to create a strategy to keep the child safe in future. Where appropriate someone from Soundly Fostering will visit the child.

## 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 reported as missing to the Police by their family or carers.

- **Missing from Care:**  
A looked after child who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be (e.g., school) and their whereabouts are not known.
- **Away from Placement Without Authorisation:**  
A looked after child whose whereabouts are known but who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the Police.
- **Young Runaway:**  
A child who has run away from their home or care placement or feels they have been forced or lured to leave.

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 foster carers or those caring for the child 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 and risk assessment, 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 supervising social worker or the fostering manager, unless there is an immediate serious risk to the child or others, or there is an agreed strategy in place, in which case, they should contact the police first. If the incident occurs out of normal office hours the On-Call / Out of Hours duty social worker / manager must be contacted.

The supervising social worker / duty social worker or fostering manager will come to a decision about the actions that should be taken, depending on the level of risk to the child.

The level of concern should then be reviewed every two hours by the supervising social worker or in their absence the fostering manager, or as circumstances change. It is likely that foster carers will be asked to inform the police immediately depending on the risks identified.

If a missing child remains missing for a total of 6 hours, the police and social worker must be formally notified.

Where a child remains missing, the police and the child's social worker must be consulted every six hours to determine whether to up or down grade the level of concern. This notification/consultation must be recorded. Such a child should only be notified formally to the police/social worker if it is determined that the level of concern is high; though this does not prevent strategies from being adopted, with the police and social worker, to return the child to his/her placement if possible.

**High-Level Concern:** If there is a high level of concern, the police in the area where the child became absent must be formally notified immediately.

The social worker must be notified as soon as practicable. The social worker should decide whether to notify the parent(s) and, if so, who should do so.

When notifying or consulting the police and social worker, an explanation should be provided of the circumstances leading to the absence and that there is a high level of concern about the child - as well as an explanation of those concerns. All notifications and consultations must be recorded.

Children who go missing will be helped to have a meeting, in private, with their social worker.

Where a child goes missing for long periods of time or very regularly, the child, their social worker, the supervising social worker and the family will meet to decide what action should be taken to help and protect the child.

Foster carers should be familiar with the local Runaway and missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) Protocol for the area in which they live. The fostering agency is committed to working within the parameters of the relevant protocol.

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.

At no time should the foster carer pass any information to the press. All information should only be shared between the local authority, police and the fostering manager.

### **Once the Child Returns Home**

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. Foster carers should immediately inform the Agency and who will assist them in reporting the necessary information in order to safeguard the child.

## 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.

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

- Action by the foster carers.
- 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.