



Children Missing from Care

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 who are looked after are particularly vulnerable. They are at significant risk of being coerced into child sexual exploitation, offending, drug and alcohol misuse and gangs.

Research has identified a number of factors which contribute to Looked after Children 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 who are placed at a distance from family or friends
- Children not feeling listened to or taken seriously

In 2013 the Police revised the definitions of 'missing' and 'absent' in relation to both children and adults. Whilst children who were categorised as 'missing' received an active response, those who were defined as 'absent' were considered not at risk and no Police action was taken.

In January 2017, following a campaign by The Children's Society and other voluntary groups, the two-tiered recording system for categorising children missing from home or care as missing or absent was changed. Research highlighted that absent children were not only at serious risk of harm; they were far less likely to be offered a Return Home Interview. RHI's can help identify the reasons why a child is running away, and the actions needed to prevent them from running away again.

The revised definitions do not include those children who are 'away from placement without authorisation'. A child whose whereabouts are known will not be treated as 'missing'. This does not necessarily mean that a child, whose whereabouts are known, is not at risk, but they will not be considered 'missing'.

Placing a child in a placement that meets their needs is an important factor in reducing the risk of going missing, but even if there have been no previous concerns, a risk assessment must be included in the Care Plan and regularly reviewed. Foster Carers, and those within their support network, should be familiar with Agency procedures and ensure that they record any action taken or recommended. Carers should also be given information from the Local Authority who placed the child on the policies and procedures relating to any of their missing children.

A Return Home Interview should be carried out by an independent person as soon as possible after a child's return. Every Local Authority should have a policy which details the areas to be covered in the interview and who will undertake it. Even if a child frequently goes missing, a Return Home Interview should be carried out, as there is a strong link between frequent episodes of going missing and the risk of serious harm. If a decision is made not to carry out a Return Home Interview this must be recorded.

When a child goes missing

Carers should not attempt to restrain a child or young person who is saying they are leaving, or trying to leave a placement, unless they feel the child is at serious risk of harm; are a risk to others, or are likely to commit a serious crime. Carers should be aware, from the information provided prior to placement, of the inherent risks when a child goes missing. They should also be sensitive and alert to any changes in the child's behavior. It is also advisable to contact the Child's Social Worker, Counsellor or any other professional working with the child, such as an independent visitor or Advocate. Foster Carers should seek advice from the placing Agency and AFA, using the out of hours support service as and when necessary.

Action to be taken by the Foster Carer

In the event of a child going missing the carer should:

- Attempt to locate the child by phoning them if they have a mobile and/or contacting those who know or are known to the child e.g. school, friends, family.
- Visit areas the child is known to frequent e.g. playgrounds, areas where young people are known to congregate

Through providing day to day care to a child, carers will have a good understanding of any risks and vulnerabilities and this, along with information provided in the Placement Plan, will determine the level of concern and any subsequent action. Carers can always contact their Placement Manager or the Duty Officer out of hours. The response when a child goes missing will depend on their individual needs and vulnerabilities. The Foster Carer, using the support available from AFA and the Child's Social Worker, will respond according to each child's background and circumstances.

Contacting the police

Since January 2017 the Police will consider children whose whereabouts are unknown as missing. Following the guidelines, the Police will advise what action they are going to take, and a time will be set for the decision to be reviewed. If the young person has not returned home or been located, their assessed level of risk will be escalated, and the Police response determined. This process will be repeated until such time as the child or young person is located.

All information about children who are reported missing will now be recorded and stored on the Police missing person case management system. This is a significant step forward as it helps build up information on any patterns of behaviour and can be invaluable when a child returns home.

Some of the concerns relating to missing children are:

- That they are in danger due to their own vulnerability; or
- They may have been a victim of serious crime; or

- There are immediate and substantial grounds for believing that the public are in danger.

Following a referral to the Police

The carer will be asked to provide details about the child, including:

- A physical description including any distinguishing features
- The clothes and jewellery the child was wearing prior to going missing
- Additional needs, including any medical, physical, emotional or mental health issues
- Any identified concerns relating to sexual exploitation, offending behaviour, abduction, trafficking, self-harm or suicidal ideation

Carers should also:

- Complete an Incident Report detailing the date, time and circumstances of the child going missing
- Record any phone calls or contacts made prior to making a referral to the police e.g. calls to the school, child's friends
- Record who has been contacted and any action carried out or recommended

The Incident Report should be forwarded to the Designated Safeguarding Lead as a matter of urgency. Following a referral, the Police may request a photo of the child and search the carer's property to check if the young person is still missing or just hiding.

Carers must bring any additional information or change of circumstances to the attention of the Police and must not pass any information to the press. It is the responsibility of the child's Social Worker, or Local Authority, to inform the child's parents.

The Incident Report will be kept for information and monitoring purposes. A copy will be retained on the child's file and sent to their allocated Social Worker. The Regulatory Body (Ofsted) will, in accordance with Schedule 6 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2011, also be sent a copy. (See Notifications of Significant Events to other Agencies procedure).

When the child is found or returns

Depending on the circumstances of the child's return to the placement the Foster Carers should:

- Welcome the child back and allay any fears that they will be punished
- Respond to the child's immediate needs, e.g. providing food and drink.
- Following consultation with the Police, the carer may need to seek medical care as the child may have been subjected to physical or sexual assault
- Listen to what the child has to say and, on their immediate return, avoid asking direct questions
- Inform all professionals e.g. Police (unless they returned the child), AFA and the child's Local Authority that the child has returned
- Explain to the child what will happen next in terms of visits to complete a Return Home interview

Should there be any concern that the child has been subjected to an abusive situation, a decision may be made to instigate safeguarding procedures. Carers should follow the advice given by the Placement Manager and the child's Social Worker.

For further information see:

- Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018
- Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care (Department of Education)

Connected Policies or Guidance

Name of Policy / Guidance	Relevant for
Foster Carer Handbook	Foster Carers, Placement Managers
Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation	All staff and Foster Carers,
Safeguarding Children and Young People from Gang Activity	All staff and Foster Carers
Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers	All staff and Foster Carers
Notification of Significant Events to Other Agencies	Foster Carers, Placement Managers
Record Keeping and Confidentiality for Staff and Carers	All staff and Foster Carers
Placement Managers guidance relating to return interviews	Placement Manager, Managers

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