



Children Missing from Care

Foster Parents play a key role in safeguarding those in their care, and it is important that all those who are working with a 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 those looked after are particularly vulnerable as they are at significant risk of being coerced into child sexual or criminal exploitation (see the relevant policy on County Lines), which may include the misuse of drugs and alcohol, violence or offending.

Research has identified several factors which contribute to children looked after being at particular risk. These are:

- Action plans not being drawn up or acted upon
- Instability in a child's foster home
- Reports on missing children not always being shared with Senior Managers
- 'Return Home Interviews (RHI) not routinely being carried out
- Children living at a distance from their 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 those absent were not only at serious risk of harm; they were far less likely to be offered an RHI. 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 their foster home without authorisation'. If their whereabouts are known they will not be treated as 'missing' although this does not necessarily mean that a child, whose whereabouts are known, is not at risk.

Moving a child to a home that meets their needs is an important factor in reducing the risk of them going missing, but even if there have been no previous concerns, a Risk Assessment and Reduction Plan must be completed and regularly reviewed. Foster Parents, and those within their support network, should be familiar with AFA procedures and ensure that they record any action taken or recommended. They should be given information from the Local Authority who have responsibility for the child on their policies and procedures relating to missing children.

An RHI 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 within the interview and who will undertake it. Even if a child frequently goes missing, an RHI should be carried out, as there is a strong link between frequent missing episodes and the risk of serious harm. If a decision is made not to carry out a RHI, this must be recorded.

When a Child goes Missing

Foster Parents should not attempt to restrain a child who is saying they are leaving, or trying to leave the foster home, unless they feel the child to be at serious risk of harm; are a risk to others or are likely to commit a serious crime. Foster Parents should be aware, from the information provided prior to a child coming to live with them, of the inherent risks when a child goes missing. They should 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 them, such as an Independent Visitor or Advocate. Foster Parents should seek advice from the placing Local Authority and AFA, using the out of hours support service as and when necessary.

Action to be taken by Foster Parents

In the event of a child going missing the Foster Parent 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, Foster Parents will have a good understanding of any risks and vulnerabilities and this, along with information provided in the Care Arrangement Plan (aka Placement Plan), will determine the level of concern and any subsequent action. Foster Parents can always contact their Fostering Social Worker or the out of hours Duty Social Worker. The response when a child goes missing will depend on their individual needs and vulnerabilities. The Foster Parent, using the support available from AFA and the child's Social Worker, will respond according to each child's vulnerability, 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 has 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 which 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 a serious crime; or
- There are immediate and substantial grounds for believing that the public are in danger.

Following a Referral to the Police

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

- A physical description including any distinguishing features
- The clothes and jewellery that they were 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

Foster Parents should also:

- Complete an Incident Report on Charms 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 Foster Parents' property to check if the young person is still missing or hiding.

Foster Parents 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 birth 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), in accordance with Schedule 6 and Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2011, will also be notified. (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 foster home, the Foster Parents 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 Foster Parent 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 an RHI

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

For further information see:

- Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/942454/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_inter_agency_guidance.pdf
- Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-who-run-away-or-go-missing-from-home-or-care>
- For information relating to agencies who can provide additional guidance and/or support: <https://www.missingpersons.police.uk/en-gb/resources/links/children-and-young-adults>

Connected Policies or Guidance

| Name of Policy / Guidance | Relevant for |
|--|---|
| Foster Parents Handbook | Foster Parents and Fostering Social Workers |
| Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation | All staff and Foster Parents, |
| Safeguarding Children and Young People from Gang Activity | All staff and Foster Parents |
| Safeguarding Children from Trafficking | All staff and Foster Parents |
| Assessment and Approval of Foster Parents | All staff and Foster Parents |
| Notification of Significant Events to Other Agencies | Foster Parents and Fostering Social Workers |
| Record Keeping and Confidentiality for Staff and Foster Parents | All staff and Foster Parents |
| Fostering Social Workers' guidance relating to return interviews | Fostering Social Workers and Managers |

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