

Children Missing from Home or Care

Why is this protocol needed?

There is an established link between children missing and the risk of sexual and/or criminal exploitation.

Missing children may also be vulnerable to other forms of exploitation, to violent crime, gang exploitation, or to drug and alcohol misuse.

Factors/risks associated with going missing include:

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), abuse by adults or other children, abduction by family or others, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, trafficking and fabricated or induced illness and risks of radicalisation.

Our guidance covers all children (up to 18 years old) who go missing from their home, who live in Slough and all children who are Children Looked After (CLA), this includes care leavers up to the age of 25.

Principles

The principles that underpin our response to missing children are:

- They are children first
- The child's safety and welfare are paramount whatever the circumstances
- Locating and returning the child to a safe environment is the main objective
- They are all our children until they are safe. If the child is deemed medium or high risk in multi-agency procedures child protection procedures will be initiated
- The analysis of data relating to missing children should inform strategy
- Understanding the reasons that a child goes missing is key to prevention

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Definitions

It is important that we all understand what we mean when we refer to children who are 'missing'. The following are agreed definitions in line with Slough's missing children guidance;

Missing or absent:

The Department of Education's Statutory Guidance on Children who Runaway or Go Missing from Home, Association of Chief of Police (ACPO), 2013 is used by Slough Children First (SCF) and police employees:

Missing:

"Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed". Therefore, a child (i.e., under the age of 18 years) is to be considered 'missing' if their whereabouts are unknown, whatever the circumstances of their disappearance. They will be considered missing until they are located and their wellbeing or otherwise is established.

Absent:

"A person is not at a place where they are expected or required to be"*

If a child's whereabouts are known, then they cannot be 'missing'. However, if they are known to be staying somewhere where they are in danger and it is not possible for the carer/ person with parental responsibility to remove the child, then it may still be necessary to involve police and partners in safeguarding them.

Absences that cause concern are those where:

- There is no indication that the child is likely to return within a reasonable period; and
- Frequent / persistent absences that form a pattern

**Police definitions differs for absent where there is 'no risk apparent (absent)' meaning there is no apparent risk of harm to wither the subject or the public*

Unauthorised Absence:

This category is critical to the clarification of roles of the police and SCF.

Some children absent themselves from home or school for a short period and then return. Often the children are not considered at risk, for example when staying out longer than agreed as a boundary testing activity which is considered normal adolescent behaviour. These children have taken 'unauthorised absence' and would not usually come within the definition of 'missing'.

In the case of Children who are Looked After, Social Workers and partner agencies should always consider whether an unauthorised return to family or staying with a friend places a child at risk.

Unauthorised absences must be carefully monitored and the reasons that led to the child's "flight" response, addressed. This is an early indicator that a child may begin to go missing.

Reporting and following up

Anyone who believes a child has gone missing, once completing initial checks or gathering information, should report this to the police immediately.

A strategy meeting should be held within 24 hours of the child being reported missing if they have not been located.

Representatives from both the Police Missing Persons Unit and Child Abuse Investigation Unit, Children's Social Care and Health should attend the strategy meeting, as well as other practitioners involved with the child e.g. school.

Intervention after the child is found

Children should be informed by the police that they will be offered the opportunity to speak to someone independent of their parents/carers and social worker on their return. This is called a Return Home Interview (RHI).

RHIs should be offered within 72 hours of a child's return (more urgent for children already deemed as medium or high risk). It is recognised that providing children with an opportunity to talk as soon as possible after the missing incident is key to meeting any current need and safeguarding them from future harm. The interview and the actions following from it must:

- Identify and deal with any harm the child has experienced (his/her medical condition should be discussed immediately and any need for medical attention assessed)
- Understand the reasons the child went missing (push and pull factors)
- Take steps to avoid it happening again
- Ensure that any intelligence gathered is referred to the police.
- · The RHI Worker will conduct these interviews
- For some children bespoke arrangements are made which may include using a member of YJS, Residential unit's volunteers or commissioned services such as the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS).

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