

Appendix 2—Carer Guidance:

Reporting a child in your care missing

A child going missing can be a warning sign of a range of serious risks. Some children who go missing may be harmed while away and patterns of missing episodes can help to identify ongoing risks they may be facing. It is therefore important that professionals and carers prioritise the response to missing and know how and when to report an incident to the police.

However, there are also risks with inappropriately reporting a child missing. Over-involving the police in a child's life by reporting them missing can unnecessarily damage the child's relationships with professionals and their carers and can bring them into unnecessary contact with the police.

Looked After Children are more likely than other children to be reported missing. Careful thought should always be given to how to prevent a child in your care from going missing, and, if they are not where they are supposed to be, whether and when they need to be reported as missing to the police. Decisions and actions taken should always be focussed on the child's best interests and what will best help to keep them safe.

Planning and prevention

Every effort should be made to prevent children from going missing in the first place. Good communication; trusting relationships; and effective planning are all vital to prevention.

You should always feel supported in how you look after a child in your care, including when they are reported missing. A child's home plan should clearly set out what needs to happen if their whereabouts are unknown: what actions should be taken, and when they should be reported to the police as missing. This should be reviewed regularly to take account of any changes in the child's circumstances, their vulnerability and any identified risks. You should be encouraged to inform these plans and to feel confident in what is expected of you.

When the child moves in you should have a conversation with them to explain any expectations about times to return home and what may happen if they don't return as expected. Potential triggers should be openly discussed with them (for example wanting to see family or friends, or unhappiness with a curfew) and genuine efforts should be made to avoid these triggers causing the child to go missing. Conversations with children should be warm and supportive to enable them to share their views. They should be made aware that if they are reported as missing it would be because of concerns for their safety, not because they are in trouble.

When a child in your care is not where they are supposed to be

When a child is late returning home, or goes out without permission, any known risks to the child and the urgency of the situation should be fully considered, together with the information in the child's home plan and your agency or home's guidance, policies, and procedures.

You should think about each individual missing incident separately, taking account of circumstances, trigger events and if child's recent behaviour indicates an increased cause for concern.

If you are concerned that the child will come to serious harm, you may need to report them as missing to the police immediately. If not, it is likely that in the first instance there will be an expectation that you take steps to try and contact the child and check that they are okay yourself.

You should keep a record of the actions that you take both before contacting the police (if required) and afterwards; so that everyone involved in locating the child and ensuring their safe return is aware of what has been done by whom.

Keeping records of actions, you have taken is important because if you do contact the police to report a child as missing it is likely that they will ask what steps have already been taken to try and contact or locate the child. They may also suggest other actions that you could take. It is important that children feel cared for and know that carers are concerned about them and making all reasonable efforts to find them.

If a carer doesn't think a child is safe and feels that the police are not taking their concerns seriously and are not accepting that the child is missing, a carer can and should challenge this. It might be appropriate to ask to speak to a senior officer as well as contacting the child's social worker to let them know your concerns. No child should fall through the gaps and all professionals involved should take concerns seriously.

The Levels of Intervention model below provides guidance for carers when responding to a child whose whereabouts are unknown.

The levels of concern about a child and the action that needs to be taken may change quickly considering emerging information. The three categories outlined in this model are fluid and progression through them may not be linear, for example if a very serious risk is identified carers should jump to police intervention immediately.

No intervention

You are not concerned about the child's safety based on the information you know about them and the circumstances of this incident.

The carer decides to wait for the child to return of their own accord.

Carer intervention

You have some concerns and want to ensure that they are okay but at this time you do not have any reason to believe they are going to come to harm. You have considered information contained in the child's plan.

You take steps yourself to locate them and check they are safe.

The child is not where they are expected to be. The carer accepts responsibility for contacting and/or searching for the child to ensure their safety and return. The circumstances, and level of concern do not justify police intervention at the time.

Police intervention

You are worried about the child and have been unable to contact them or, if you have contacted them, don't think they are safe.

There are serious concerns about the child's safety. The police have a duty to assist.

