

Return Interviews

Introduction

Children and young people who go missing or runaway can be at risk, and return interviews are a way in which this or any actual harm can be uncovered and dealt with. Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing states that when a child is found they should be offered an independent return interview (DfE, 2014:14). The key benefits of return interviews are to identify people at risk; understand the risks and issues faced whilst missing; reduce the risks of future episodes of missing or running away; and equip people with the resources and knowledge of how to stay safe if they do choose to run away again (DfE, 2014: 15-16).

What is a return interview?

The Department for Education (DfE) describes return interviews as in-depth discussions and their purpose is to 'identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered... understand and try to address the reasons why the child or young person ran away, help the child feel safe and understand that they have options to prevent repeat instances of them running away [and] provide them with information on how to stay safe if they run away again, including helpline numbers' (DfE, 2014:15). Local authorities are responsible for ensuring protocols are in place to enable return interviews to be undertaken, and the guidance states that it is advantageous for these to be conducted by an 'independent person'; that is, someone not directly involved in the care of the child or young person.

When should a return interview take place?

Return interviews should take place within 72 hours of a child or young person being found or returning from running away or going missing, according to statutory guidance (DfE, 2014:14).

Who conducts return interviews?

The guidance states that an offer of an independent provision must be made (i.e. independent to the child's care). The child's best interests are to be paramount. The child should be asked who they would like to speak to about their missing episode. The child may prefer to speak to someone they know such as their allocated social worker but the independent offer should always be made to ensure options are made available to the child.

For those missing from home who are not open to children's social care any professional suitably trained to work with children/young people can undertake the interview such as social workers, teachers, police officers, youth workers, voluntary sector etc. Each borough has their own bespoke provisions.

The difference between the police 'safe and well checks' and return interviews

The London Procedure for Safeguarding Children Missing from Care and Home (p12-13) outlines the 2 types of interviews undertaken by the police and then an independent one (the Return Interview). The Police will interview all children when they return. The interview consists of a simple series of questions. If the child makes an allegation of crime that occurred whilst they were missing or that contributed to him/her running away, the Police will record this allegation and take appropriate action. This is known as a 'safe and well check' or a 'debrief'. The police debrief does not constitute a return interview and thus should never negate the need to conduct one.

Return interview: children should be informed that they would be expected to talk about their absence to someone independent of their parents/carers on their return. Providing children with an opportunity to talk is key to safeguarding them. The interview and the actions that follow from it must: identify and deal with any harm the child has incurred; understand and address the reasons the child ran away'; implement safeguards to avoid it happening again. For children living in the community, the Police and Children's Social Services have responsibility for ensuring that an opportunity for a return interview is provided.

Frequent missing episodes

It is recognised that in some high risk cases a child may go missing numerous times in a short period. In these cases it is advisable to cluster missing episodes in one return interview.

Newham's local policy dictates that this can be done for a maximum fortnight period where there are 3 or more missing episodes.

Newham's local policy

All children who have had a missing episode must have a return interview completed within 72 hours of their return. This includes those children that are not open to CSC and have already returned and those that are missing from education and/or truanting. The return interview acts as an assessment for children missing from home that aren't open to social care to identify opportunities for early help to safeguard that child and prevent further missing episodes. For those children open to social care the return interview informs risk assessments and safety planning.

The weekly missing report is a means of informing the partnership on those children who are missing and those that have returned. It includes an outline of the safety plan, risks/concerns for the child and involvement with other agencies. As part of that report a summary of the information gleaned from the return interview is also required.

What is the purpose of the return interview?

- ❖ Identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered – including harm that might not have already been disclosed as part of the 'Safe and Well check' – either before they ran away or whilst missing;
- ❖ Understand and try to address the reasons why the child ran away;
- ❖ Help the child feel 'safe' and understand that they have options, to prevent repeat instances;
- ❖ Understand what the child would like to see happen next whether short and/or long term;
- ❖ Gather the parents' or carers' views of the circumstances, if appropriate;
- ❖ Provide the child with information on how to stay safe if they choose to run away again, including helpline numbers.

How is the return interview shared?

Any intelligence gleaned from the return interview must be shared with the Newham's borough police misper unit KF-Mis-pers@met.pnn.police.uk

The return interview must be shared in multi-agency strategy meetings to ensure it informs risk assessments and safety planning. Its purpose is to better assist the safeguarding of the child in question therefore its findings must be shared with the partnership.

References

[DfE. \(2014\) *Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care* \(London: The Department for Education\)](#)

[London Child Protection Committee – London Procedure for Safeguarding Children Missing from Care and Home](#)