



Children Missing from Care

Foster carer's guide on
what to do when a child
goes missing from care.



A hands-on approach to help children in Slough be
..... Safe, Secure and Successful

Statutory Framework

Under the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, regulation 13 (as amended) all fostering services must have a policy, agreed with the local police, which aim to prevent children from going missing and sets out what must be done when they are absent from the foster home without permission. Under regulation 35 and 36 fostering agencies must monitor and record where a child placed with foster carers is missing from the placement, and notifying the responsible authority, the area authority and the police.

Under National Minimum Standards 5 and also the Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 4: fostering service foster carers should know the policy and procedures of the fostering service and the responsible authority in relation to a foster child going missing. Fostering services should make sure that staff and foster carers comply with the 'truancy, and missing from home and care' protocol of the local authority, where the foster carer lives. The care provided should minimise the risk that children will go missing, foster carers should know when and how to try to prevent a child or young person leaving the home and children who return from missing should be responded to positively.

Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care:

- Standards 2 – [Understanding your role as a foster carer](#)
- Standards 4 – [Know how to communicate effectively](#)

See also:

- [Slough Safeguarding Partnership - Children Missing from Care, Home and Education](#)
- [Slough Children First– Independent Fostering Agency Statement of Purpose](#)

Introduction

When a child is placed with you, the child's social worker should make you aware of any previous occasions when the child has gone missing or if this is something they think they might do in the future. As a foster carer you should provide a home which promotes a feeling of security which helps to minimise the likelihood of the child going missing.

The child's Placement Plan should take account of the likely risks of the child going missing, and incorporate measures to reduce or prevent this. It should also contain information that will help find a child should they go missing. The degree of risk that a young person might be exposed to if they go missing will vary depending on things like their age, understanding and awareness.

One of the responsibilities of the foster carer would be to talk to the child/young person about the risks of running away and let them know where they can get help, or advise them of people to speak to if they feel like running away (for example, the Advocacy, Rights and Participation Service / Childline).

There can be many reasons why children in care go missing but it should always be taken as a sign that something is not right. It is through communication that you are most likely to understand and be able to deal with the issues which make them feel like running away.

Common reasons for going missing include peer group issues, grooming from people willing to exploit or issues relating to their birth family and family time. It is possible that the young person might not be used to people being concerned about their whereabouts and they might not understand that you are trying to keep them safe and look after them.

Foster carers can look out for individual signs or patterns of behaviour that usually happen before a child goes missing. This may help you talk to them to prevent them from going. You should be aware of what measures you can take to prevent a child from leaving without permission. The use of persuasion and your relationship is the most powerful tool that you have to prevent them going and you will find that the best thing that you can achieve is for them to want to come back.

When a Child is Missing

When the child is missing without your permission but you know where they are you will need to treat the situation differently to when you don't know where they have gone. The following checklist should be considered to start to think about the level of risk to the child and what action should be taken:

1. Is this event significantly out of character?
2. Have they done this before?
3. Is there a time you expect them to return?
4. Who are they with?
5. Have you been in contact with the child?
6. Is the child likely to be subjected to harm or a crime?
7. Is the child a danger to themselves or others?
8. Is the child likely to attempt suicide?
9. Does the child have any specific medical needs?
10. Is there a specific concern?
11. Do you know the child's whereabouts?
12. Do you believe them to be involved in crime?
13. What were their intended actions when last seen?
14. What have you done to locate the child?
15. Is there any other significant information you are aware of?

If a child is missing and you do not know where the child is and they are not found within a reasonable time frame: 30 minutes for under 12s, and 1 hour for over 12s (unless stated otherwise in their Placement Plan), you must contact the child's social worker or team manager. Should this prove difficult, they should contact their supervising social worker and ensure messages are left with the various teams. Outside normal office hours, the emergency duty team [EDT] should be notified as well as the police. When a child is unaccounted for, unless there is a risk that s/he could be in imminent danger, it is sensible first to act as a responsible parent would and:

- Search the child's bedroom, the rest of the accommodation and the immediate neighbourhood.
- Contact known friends and relatives with whom the child might be.
- Visit locations that the child is known to frequent (if this is possible, also taking into consideration personal safety, e.g. the time of night).

The foster carer must report the child missing to the police using the 101 number and support police enquiries as necessary. This could include providing a description of the child including what they were wearing and sharing information such as an up to date photo, details of their legal status, family addresses, known acquaintances, circumstances which increase the risk to the child, any health concerns and any other information you think will help. On receiving the missing person report, the police will assess the risks to the missing person using a continuum of risk which ranges from 'no apparent risk (absent)' through to high-risk cases that require immediate, intensive action. For more information please see the College of Policing - <https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/#definition-of-missing>

The particular course of action a foster takes when a child goes missing will vary from case to case. It will depend on a number of factors, such as the vulnerability of the child, their history, the timing of their disappearance and the foster carer's relationship with the child.

Keeping a log

A log will need to be kept which records all times when a child or young person goes missing. You should also record the circumstances in which they return, why they say they ran away if they do and what actions you will put in place to try and prevent a further occurrence. This information should be shared with the responsible authority and where appropriate the child's parents. When the child has been found or returned to their place of residency there will be a 'Safe and Welfare check' undertaken by the police. The child will also be offered a Return Home Interview with an independent person to talk through the issues which made them go missing once they have been found. It is good practice for this interview to take place within 72 hours of the child being located or returning from absence. It is especially important that a return interview takes place when a child:

- Has been missing for over 24 hours.
- Has been missing on two or more occasions.
- Has engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities during his/her absence.
- Has been hurt or harmed while missing (or this is believed to have been the case).
- Has known mental health issues.
- Is known to be vulnerable to being, or is being, exploited for sexual or criminal activities.
- Has contact with persons posing risk to children.

It is, however, acknowledged that where children go missing, it may not be necessary to see them every time they return. In these cases, the child's social worker will decide the frequency of such checks.

The child's social worker will visit the child within five days of them returning and discuss and agree ways of preventing repeat episodes. The child's risk assessment may need reviewing; your supervising social worker and the child's social worker will do this with you and the child, wherever possible. This will make sure that everyone knows what actions will be taken and by who and will help to look at what can be done to prevent the child from running away again.

Whenever a child runs away from a foster home, the supervising social worker will complete a critical incident report, and these will be regularly reviewed with the missing persons coordinator to see if there are any lessons that we can learn as an organisation.

Dealing with repeat missing episodes

If the child has three missing episodes within a 90-day rolling period then a strategy meeting is held with professionals to discuss the risk and address to the plan to reduce missing episodes. Foster carers can be asked to participate in this meeting.

Useful links:

- [Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care](#)
- [Joint protocol between Thames Valley Police and Slough Children First](#)