

4.4 Absent/Missing Children

REGULATIONS AND STANDARDS

[The Protection of Children Standard](#)

Regulation 12

This chapter must be read in conjunction with LSCB Protocols for Runaway and Missing from Home and Care Procedures for the area where the home is located and the Protocol for Young People Absconding and Return to Home in section 4.5.

RELEVANT CHAPTERS

[Advocacy and Independent Visitors Procedure](#)

[Restrictive Physical Intervention Procedure](#)

[Delegated Authorities and Notifications Procedure](#)

[Protocol for Young People Absconding and Return to Home](#)

RELEVANT GUIDANCE

[Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care \(DfE, January 2014\)](#) where the child is, or has been, persistently absent from the placement;

[ACPO Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons \(2013\)](#)

AMENDMENT

This chapter has been updated November 2014 with links to the Protocol for Young People Absconding and Return to Home.

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1. Definitions

There are various different terms which are used in relation to missing children:

[Statutory Guidance On Children Who Run Away Or Go Missing From Home Or Care \(January 2014\)](#) uses the following definitions:

- **Missing Child:**

A child reported as missing to the police by their family or carers.

- **Missing from Care:**

A Looked After child who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be (eg school) and their whereabouts are not known.

- **Away from Placement Without Authorisation:**

A Looked After child whose whereabouts are known but who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police.

- **Young Runaway:**

A child who has run away from their home or care placement, or feels they have been forced or lured to leave.

[The Police \(ACPO Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons \(2013\)\)](#) categorise children as either Missing or Absent.

- **Missing:**

Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.

- **Absent:**

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

The police classification of a person as 'Missing' or 'Absent' will be based on on-going risk assessment. Note that **Absent** within the police definition would not include those defined as **Away from Placement Without Authorisation** above: a child whose whereabouts are known would not be treated as either 'Missing' or 'Absent' under the police definitions.

2. Culture

Children are less likely to abscond, become missing or absent themselves without consent where they feel secure and safe, able to express their feelings and wishes, make appropriate choices and develop positive relationships with the staff and their peers, which are free from bullying.

Children should feel that their plans are being progressed, that they have a positive future and that staff are working enthusiastically to support, advice and listen to them.

They should also have a clear understanding of expectations upon them, the routines of the home and house rules; to this end, they should know whether it's acceptable, or not, to leave the home without permission or consent and they should be counselled and informed of the risks that are posed to them if they become missing, abscond or absent themselves, of the agencies that may be able to help them, such as the **Children's Rights Director** or **Childline** - and of the consequences.

If homes are experiencing high levels of absence, absconsions or incidences of children being missing, managers should 'take stock' - they should undertake a formal review of the culture and strategies being used in the home and take steps to reduce the incidents.

3. Planning and Prevention

All children must have a **Placement Plan** which takes account of any likely risk of the child becoming Absconding, becoming Missing or Absent without Consent. If there are known/likely risks, the Placement Plan should incorporate measures to reduce or prevent the child becoming absent, and information that would help facilitate the location of the child should they go missing.

Where there are child protection concerns relating to a child and/or where the child has gone missing from the placement or from any previous placement, the Placement Plan must include information agreed between the local authority and the placement provider about the day-to-day arrangements put in place to keep the child safe.

The child's **Looked After Review** should be brought forward in the following circumstances:

- Where the child is, or has been, persistently absent from the placement;
- Where the Home, parents or area authority are concerned that the child is at risk of harm;
- Where the child so requests, unless the Independent Reviewing Officer considers that the review is not justified;

At the request of the child or where there are concerns about a child who frequently becomes absent or missing, the home's manager should consider raising concerns with the child's **Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)** or arranging a meeting between the child and the placing authority to consider the reasons for the child going missing and agree strategies to reduce the risk.

It is advisable that a Police 'Misper' form should be completed for all children, at the point of admission. The child's Placement Plan should be reviewed regularly and after any absence.

4. Leaving without Consent

If a child indicates that they propose to leave the home without consent, staff should remain aware that a child might want a staff member to stop them or at least give them a good excuse for not going.

It is crucial that staff always show care and concern, even if they are sure that a child is going to run away. It is important to make a point of showing care and concern both for the child's benefit and for other children in the group. However, staff are responsible for taking all reasonable steps to prevent children from leaving, especially if it will result in the child or others being placed at risk.

As a last resort, this can include the use of physical restrictions such as the locking or bolting of doors to restrict the child's movement* or Physical Intervention, if this is immediately necessary to prevent significant harm or serious damage to property. However, the use of such interventions may only be used as a last resort, if they are immediately necessary and the harm or damage to property is likely in the predictable future; in any case, the restrictions or interventions must be proportionate and must be compliant with **Restrictive Physical Intervention Procedure**. Staff must also consider the individual Placement or behaviour management plans for individual children, which may state that specific strategies must be used.

*doors may not be locked or bolted to restrict children's movement unless the home's Statement of Purpose contains a policy on when and how the strategy may be used and staff have received training on the use of it.

5. Immediate actions if a child is Absent or Missing

In the absence of any agreed strategy the following must apply if it is apparent or suspected that a child is absent, or missing. In such circumstances, staff should take what actions are immediately necessary to recover the child, in the context of risks posed to the child or others.

5.1 Immediate Actions

If it is safe to do so, staff should undertake enquiries locally and with the other children as to the whereabouts of the child to establish that sh/e is absent. This may include a thorough check of the local area and the home and may include contacting people who know the child or going out to look for them. If the child has become absent during an activity away from the Home, staff should conduct a search of the vicinity, if it is safe to do so.

Searches beyond the local vicinity may only be undertaken with the approval of the manager.

If staff are satisfied that the child is absent, absconded or missing but they are aware or suspect the whereabouts of a child, they should consult a Manager with a view to recovering the child. This may include attempting to communicate with the child on his or her mobile phone, searching for the child and/or obtaining information from others about the possible whereabouts of the child.

5.2 Recovering the Child

Any actions taken to recover the child and return them to the home must focus on promoting the child's welfare and must take account of their care or legal status, age, understanding and level of risk posed to the child or others. If children are found but refuse to return to the home, staff must consult the manager (who should consult the child's social worker) or, in an emergency/where the child or others are seriously at risk, call the Police. The use of physical interventions, such as Restraint should not be used unless there is an immediate risk of Significant Harm, serious damage to property, as a last resort and if staff are confident that such interventions will work/de escalate the situation and make the child safe; if this outcome is not likely, they should withdraw and immediately consult their manager or the Police.

6. Risk Assessments, Monitoring and Notifications

Having established that the child is absent, missing or absconded, an assessment should be carried out to determine the level of risk that is posed to the child i.e. if the risk is 'Low', 'Medium' or 'High' Risk.

Note: Missing children/young people will be classified by the police as either '**Missing**' or '**Absent**' after a risk assessment has been carried out by police call handlers-please be aware that this does not mean that local procedures on notifications are in anyway altered. Please remember, in order to promote the safety of the absent/missing person, you are required to support the police call handlers by offering them all the information that you have available; for more detail see: [ACPO Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons \(2013\)](#)

This assessment and any re-assessment must be recorded.

The first assessment must be conducted once it is established the child is absent or missing, then as per tables below.

6.1 Assessing Risks/Who to Notify

Low Level Concern

For Guidance on Assessing Risks see [Appendix 1: Assessing Levels of Concern Guidance](#), if the Child is assessed as Low Risk:

Notifications: There is no requirement to notify the Police, social worker or parents.

Review of Risks: every 2 hours or as circumstances changes; if the child is Absent/Missing, in this category, for a total of 6 hours s/he automatically becomes Medium Risk

Medium Level Concern

For Guidance on Assessing Risks see [Appendix 1: Assessing Levels of Concern Guidance](#), if the Child is assessed as Medium Risk:

Notifications: The Police, social worker and parents **may** be consulted or verbally notified, for information, but there is no requirement to notify them formally.

Review of Risks: Every 2 hours or as circumstances change. If a Missing child remains in the Medium Category for a total of 6 hours s/he automatically falls into High Level Category.

High Level Concern

For Guidance on assessing Risks see [Appendix 1: Assessing Levels of Concern Guidance](#).

Notifications: If there is a High Level of Concern:

- The Police in the area where the child became absent must be formally notified;
- The social worker must be notified as soon as practicable. The social worker should decide whether to notify the parent(s) and, if so, who should do so;
- If the child has absconded from lawful detention, the Youth Offending Team (YOT) must be notified.

6.2 Information Sharing and Recording

When notifying/informing the Police (in the area where they have become absent e.g. if on an activity away from the Home), Social Worker or others e.g. Youth Offending Worker/Team, it is vital to provide information about the circumstances and risk factors that led to the notification; but it is also important to discuss possible strategies for finding and recovering the Child safely. Agreement should also be reached about others who may need to know the Child is Absent or Missing e.g. the Child's Parents.

It is advisable that a Police 'Misper' form should be completed for all children, at the point of admission. The child's Placement Plan should be reviewed regularly and after any absence, but they will require the following information:

- a. A description of the child, possibly a photograph;
- b. When the child was last seen and with whom;
- c. A recent photograph of the child;
- d. Family addresses;
- e. Other addresses of people the child may make contact with;
- f. Any previous history of the child going missing;
- g. The name and address of the child's GP and Dentist.

The Police, social worker and others notified must then be updated as circumstances change and when the child returns.

Staff must record the incident on the following and update these records as circumstances change or decisions/actions taken:

- Daily Log;
- Child's Daily Record/File;
- Absence Log.

7. Prolonged periods of absence or being missing

24 hours or on the first working day after the child has been reported missing/absent, the Line Manager for the home must be notified.

Also, the home should consult/update the Police and social worker/YOT Worker every day for the first 7 days, or as new information is available, to review the Strategies that can be adopted to find/return the child.

After 72 hours, the Police will notify the **UK Missing Persons Bureau**.

If the child is still absent after 7 days, the **Designated Manager (Absence)** and child's Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) must be notified/consulted to decide what actions to take e.g.

- a. The convening of a Strategy Discussion;
- b. Use by the Police of their powers to recover the child, for example, placing a child in Police Protection;
- c. An application for a Recovery Order;
- d. An application for a Secure Accommodation Order;
- e. The use of publicity.

8. Returning Children

If a child's whereabouts become known, staff should decide to consult the Social Worker/YOT Worker and Police about the most appropriate way to return the Child to the home or care.

Any actions taken should preferably be with the co-operation or by negotiation with the child.

Also see **Section 5.2, Recovering the Child**.

9. Upon Return of the Child

The Police, Social Worker/YOT Worker and others notified of the absence must be informed when the child returns.

The child must be welcomed back and must have the opportunity to talk about the reasons for leaving.

At the request of the child or where there are concerns about a child who frequently becomes absent or missing, the home's manager should consider arranging a meeting between the child and the placing authority to consider the reasons for the child going missing.

If the social worker is unable to see the child, an independent professional or the manager/supervisor of the home may meet the child on the social worker's behalf.

The Police may wish to carry out a 'Safe and Well' check, to check for any indications that the Child has suffered harm; where and with whom they have been; and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against, them. However, where the child goes missing frequently, the Police are unlikely to see them every time they return. However, a reasonable decision will be taken with regard to the frequency of such checks.

An **Independent Return Interview** should be carried out by an independent professional (e.g. a social worker, teacher, health professional or police officer, who does not usually work with the child and is trained to carry out these interviews). Children sometimes need to build up trust with a person before they will discuss in depth the reasons why they ran away.

The person conducting the interview should usually be independent of the child's placement and of the responsible local authority. An exception maybe where a child has a strong relationship with a carer or social worker and has expressed a preference to talk to them, rather than an independent person, about the reasons they went missing.

The responsible local authority should ensure the Return Interview takes place, working closely with the host authority where appropriate. Contact should be made with the child within 72 hours of them being located or returning from absence, to arrange an Independent Return Interview in a neutral place where they feel safe.

Where a looked after child has run away they should have the opportunity to talk, before they return to their placement, to a person who is independent of their placement about the reasons they went missing. The child should be offered the option of speaking to an independent representative or advocate.

10. Recording, Notifications and Review

10.1 Recording

For details about recording the initial incident (when the child is reported as absent/missing) see **Section 6.2, Information Sharing/Recording**

Throughout, staff must update the following records:

- Daily Log;
- Child's Daily Record/File;
- Absence Log.

10.2 Notifications

When the child returns, all those notified of the absence must be informed.

If the child was involved in sexual exploitation, the Regulatory Authority must be notified.

If there is a pattern of persistent incidents or the circumstances gave rise for serious concern, the Home's Manager must notify the Child's Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO).

10.3 Review

If a child is, or has been, persistently absent without permission from the Home and/or the Manager considers that the child is at risk of harm, the Manager will ask the placing authority to review the child's Care Plan. The Manager will consult the Child's Social Worker/YOT Worker and Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) with a view to reviewing the Care Plan.

If it is decided not to review the Care Plan, the Home's Manager should still review the Placement Plan.

Appendix 1: Assessing Levels of Concern Guidance

Section 1: Indicators/Categories of Risk

There is additional guidance in [Section 2: Other factors that should be considered](#)

HIGH RISK A Child is automatically High Risk in the following circumstances	OTHER RISK FACTORS These are risks/indicators that should be considered when assessing other Children, who do not automatically fall into the High Risk Category
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If the Child is Remanded or otherwise Lawfully Detained, s/he is absconded;• The child's death may occur;• The child may be at risk of serious injury or harm, e.g. from adverse weather conditions or the child's inability to stay safe;• The child requires essential medication/medical attention;	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Any guidance agreed within the child's Care Plan or Placement Plan;• Vulnerability due to age;• Particularly vulnerable (e.g. Learning/Physical disability, on child subject to a Child Protection Plan);• In need of regular medication (e.g. diabetic);• Previous history of being missing;• History of self harming;

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child is likely to suffer Significant Harm; • The child may come into contact with a person who may pose them a risk. The child may be injured, including self injury, and require medical attention; • There is a warrant for the child's arrest; • The child may commit a violent or criminal offence; • The child may be abducted; • If the child's name is on the list for a child subject to a Child Protection Plan; • The child is subject to Police Protection; • The child is subject to an Emergency Protection Order or Recovery Order. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible involvement in crime; • Health, including mental health; • Weather (e.g. severe cold or heat), or geography (e.g. remote area); • Dependency on drugs and/or alcohol; • Known vulnerability of the child, raising concern that they may have been led into danger, including sexual exploitation; • Known associates that give rise to heightened concerns over the missing child's safety (e.g. associates known to be involved in criminal activities); • Degree of risk to the public; • Recent significant events, contributory factors and the child's state of mind at the time of the absence; • Time of day/night; • Legal status.
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Section 2: Other factors that should be considered

The following should be considered alongside [Section 1: Indicators/Categories of Risk](#)

Age and level of understanding	Age and level of understanding Age is a factor, but not alone. Also consider level of understanding, ability to make informed decisions, the child's ability to operate in urban or rural environments, social and life skills, disability etc. The more able the child is, the less concern staff should have.
Number of Absences	Consider the number of times the child has absented him/herself and from what situations. For example, children who have absented themselves from similar accommodations and returned safely may be of less concern than those who are not known to staff or who do not normally absent themselves.
Behaviour whilst absent	Consider what the child does or is suspected to get involved in whilst absent on previous occasions. Also consider how recent such problems have been. Higher levels of concern should be attributed to those who are known, recently, to have placed themselves or others at risk of significant harm. The factors that may result in higher levels of concern are that the child has previously:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Made contact with people who pose a risk to the child; • Been abducted; • Self injured or attempted suicide; • Committed or been associated with a serious or criminal offence; • Been subject to sexual exploitation; • Or other serious risks/concerns.
<p>Circumstances on the day</p>	<p>The following are examples of circumstances, which may be considered in deciding the level of concern on the day. The fact that they apply to a child does not automatically mean there is a high level of concern; the decision rests with the manager having considered all the circumstances.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Out of character/unusual behaviour prior to disappearance; • Absence with no prior indication; • Possibility of sexual exploitation or being drawn into offending behaviour.