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WHAT TO DO WHEN A CHILD GOES MISSING POLICY



Introduction

When children run away it must be recognised as an early indication that a child is at risk. Running away should be seen explicitly as a child protection issue with protocols and procedures in place backed up by clear systems of accountability and performance management.

Running away is a cry for help and a sign that something is wrong in a young person's life.

Young people can run away for a number of reasons:

- **Problems at home** – these can range from arguments with parents, to conflict between parents, to long-term abuse or neglect. Some young people in care run away to be closer to friends or family.
- **Problems at school** – children who are being severely bullied are more likely to run away as are those who feel negatively about school in general.
- **Problems elsewhere** – young people may run away after being groomed by adults who want to exploit them for criminal or sexual activity or simply encouraged to run by older friends.

In many cases running away will be a combination of these factors.

Which children are more likely to run away?

Children who run away come from all sections of society.

We know that girls (10%) are more likely to run away than boys (8%) and that almost a third of those who run will go missing before they are 13. Some specific groups are also more likely to run away than others:

- **Children not living with their families** are three times more likely to run away than those who do
- **Children who are absent from education** – a third of young people who said they had problems with school attendance had run away
- **Children who have problems with drugs or alcohol or have been in trouble with the police** – more than a third of children with issues in one of these areas had run away
- **Children who consider themselves as disabled or having difficulties with learning** – are twice as likely to run away as other children
- **Children whose parents' relationships have broken down** – young people living in step-families are almost three times as likely to have run away at those living with both parents.

What happens when a child runs away, and why you must act immediately?

When a child runs away they are at risk of serious harm.

Running away or going missing is also a key early indicator of child exploitation. Recent research has found that many as 70% of children who are sexually exploited go missing from home, while our research shows that:

- One in five children had at least one harmful or risky experience such as begging, stealing or sexual exploitation while away from home
- One in six children said that they had slept rough, or stayed with someone they just met, for at least some of the time they were away
- One in nine had been hurt or harmed while away from home
- Eight out of 10 do not seek help from anybody because they do not know where to turn, they do not feel there is anyone they can trust or fear the consequences.

What are some of the warning signs?

There are a range of factors associated with running away which include a child:

- Skipping school regularly for either part of the day or more

- Being unhappy about recent changes in the adults who live in their home, in particular if a parent or parent's partner moves in or out
- Beginning to behave in a more challenging way
- Suddenly spending time with older friends or receiving a lot of text messages
- With any other unusual attributes such as tiredness, lateness, dirty clothes or being hungry

All of these factors, including running away, indicate that there are more serious underlying issues that need to be addressed.

What to do if you suspect a child is running away

The normal child protection processes always apply.

Discuss your concern with your manager or safeguarding lead. Together you may decide on a range of actions including:

- You or a member of support staff speaking to the child or young person involved, always making sure that you inform them that you will have to share your concerns
- Sharing your concerns with their parents – unless they are running away because of uses such as forced marriage or sexual abuse
- Informing the police if the child is missing from education and hasn't been reported by their parents. Do check if they intend to inform social care.
- Making a referral to children's services – your designated safeguarding officer will do this.

The Children's Society's work with missing children

The Children's Society has been a leading provider of specialist services working with children who run away in England for over 25 years and we currently run nine dedicated projects supporting hundreds of children in England.