

<b>Chapter 3.4.1</b>	<b><i>Absent Children</i></b>	<b>Southwark Social Services</b> <b>Children's Division</b>
<b>Type</b>	<b><i>Procedure</i></b>	
<b>Issue Date</b>	<b><i>October 2004</i></b>	

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### **SCOPE**

These procedures state how staff/carers in residential and foster care should act to prevent children from being absent and placing themselves at risk; or on the measures that must be taken if a child is absent.

The procedures are based on the Joint Protocol for Children Missing from Care in Southwark first agreed between the Metropolitan Police and Southwark Social Services in September 2000.

They should be read in conjunction with the London Child Protection Procedures, paragraph 9.7 on page 163.

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### 1. DEFINITIONS

Absent Child is the generic term for **Looked After** Children who are **Missing**, whose absence is **Unauthorised** or who have **Absconded**.

For the purposes of this procedure a **child** is to be considered “missing” if he/she is absent from his/her place of residence without authority to a degree or in circumstances where the absence causes concern for the safety of the child or where there is a potential danger to the public. “Missing” children under this definition include children who may have “absconded” i.e. gone missing and are looked after as a result of a “criminal” court order.

#### 1.1 Missing

Absences which cause concern are those where staff or carers have no indication that a child is likely to return in a short space of time or where the child’s location is unknown or where the reason for absence is unknown, and there is cause for concern for the child because of his or her vulnerability.

#### 1.2 Unauthorised Absence

Clearly some children absent themselves for a short period and then return: often their whereabouts are unknown. They are not considered at risk and usually they are testing boundaries. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed either on purpose or unwittingly. This kind of boundary testing activity is well within the range of normal teenage behaviour and does not come within the definition of “missing” for the purposes of this procedure. These children should be regarded as children “whose absence is unauthorised”.

When abduction is suspected this procedure will not apply and the situation should be dealt with and referred to the Police as a criminal matter.

#### 1.3 Absconded

This category would apply to a child for whom the Police have the power to arrest e.g. where bail conditions have been breached. It should be recognised that children who fit this criteria may also be vulnerable and at risk.

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### 1.4 Deciding which category

If a child informs the carer where s/he is going before leaving the unit/home and if his/her whereabouts are known and if the child doesn't return home at the stated time, a telephone call should be made by the carer to ascertain whether the young person is at the given address. If the child is there and s/he states that s/he is not returning to the unit/foster home, this may not be desirable but it is not a matter for the Police Service unless the carer has reasonable cause to believe a child would otherwise be likely to suffer **significant harm**. If the carer is in doubt they should contact the on-call duty manager or the emergency duty social work team for guidance.

In assessing the significance of a child's absence, all staff/carers will apply the above definitions and, in addition, take the following into consideration:

- ◆ Guidance already incorporated in the child's **Care Plan** and/or **Placement Plan**
- ◆ The age of the child
- ◆ Physical/learning difficulties
- ◆ Time of day/night
- ◆ History of self-harm
- ◆ History of absence
- ◆ The legal status of the child
- ◆ Previous behaviour patterns
- ◆ State of mind at time of absence
- ◆ Group behaviour
- ◆ Whether the child is perceived as running to someone or running from a situation
- ◆ Any information available on the likely whereabouts of the child
- ◆ Any other particular circumstances at time of incident

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- ◆ History of inappropriate sexual exploitation

In responding to and managing an individual child's absence from care, both Social Services and Police staff should beware of dismissing the potential significance of multiple abscondings by a young offender. Often such young people are immediately labelled as "the problem" and insufficient consideration is given to considering why they are persistently absenting themselves.

## 2. PREVENTATIVE STEPS

During the planning of an admission of a child to be looked after or a change of a child's placement, or should circumstances require it, consideration should be given to the probability of the child absenting him/herself, and the risk involved for the child.

The discussion should include the following and be recorded in the **Care Plan** and/or the **Placement Plan**.

- a) The degree of risk for the child who has gone missing
- b) The level of supervision/support offered to the child
- c) The parents' advice on what action they feel should be taken if the child goes missing.
- d) The level of risk presented if the child goes missing
- e) Frequented addresses
- f) Adults Involved where child may be at risk

The child's social worker should complete a "Young Person Missing from Care" Personal Details Form for a child at/prior to placement admission. The details on this Form contain key information that will help the Police Service to undertake an assessment of risk when a child goes missing from care. The child's social worker in conjunction with the carer should update the Form after each missing episode.

If there is a significant risk of the child going missing, the child's social worker will discuss with the carer this possibility and the possible responses outlined in this procedure.

Where considered appropriate, the child should be given a copy of this procedure and have explained to him/her what actions will be taken if he/she absents him/herself without permission.

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### 3. NOTIFICATION OF ABSENCE

When a child absents him/herself without permission it is necessary to initiate procedures, which encourage him or her to return as quickly and safely as possible and ensuring he/she is treated positively on return.

When a child's absence from a residential home is a cause for concern the on call residential manager should be informed, or if a child absents him/herself from foster care, the out-of-hours emergency duty team should be contacted by the foster carer.

The senior manager on duty or the emergency duty team will consider whether the absence causes such concern as to fall within the definition of a missing child under this procedure.

If the child is deemed to be 'missing', the senior manager or the duty officer should, without delay, inform:

- The Police: who will treat the matter as involving a "vulnerable missing person"
- The parents (and those who have parental responsibility)
- The child's social worker

In addition, for **any** child missing from residential care, the senior residential manager or his/her nominee or the duty social worker will **at midnight** inform the Police Service that the child is missing.

In addition, for **any** child missing from foster care, the foster carer **at midnight** will inform both the emergency duty team and the Police Service that the child is missing.

The Police will treat the matter as involving a "vulnerable missing person" and will complete a Missing Persons Enquiry Form, which includes assessing the level of risk to the missing child. The Police will also complete the 'Notification of Children or Young Persons Coming to Notice of Police' Form (Form 78) and immediately pass a copy of this Form to the local Police Child Protection Team (CPT).

Any unauthorised absence lasting for 24 hours should be reported to the external line manager by the senior manager of the home or the child's social worker.

Any unauthorised absence lasting 48 hours should be reported to the Service Manager by the home's external line manager or the social worker.

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Any unauthorised absence lasting for five days should be reported to the **Designated Manager (Absent Children)** by the Service Manager and to the **Commission for Social Care Inspection**.

If a child, who has been reported missing, returns to his/her carer in the meantime, the child's social worker will inform the Police Service.

When reporting the matter to Police, the residential staff member or the duty officer is responsible for passing the completed Young Person Missing from Care" Personal Details Form to the Police Service. (This Form will be completed by the child's social worker on the child's Looked After placement – see paragraph 2 above, Preventative Steps).

The child's social worker will update the Form as necessary in conjunction with carer after each missing episode. The information contained in this Form will enable the Police Service to fully undertake an assessment of risk on the missing child and will inform their appropriate line of enquiry. Issues to address in the Form include:

- a) A description of the child
- b) When the child was last seen and with whom
- c) A recent photograph (if available)
- d) Distinguishing jewellery or body piercing
- e) Clothing
- f) Family addresses
- g) Other addresses of known contacts
- h) Any previous history of going missing
- i) The name and address of the child's GP and Dentist
- j) Any circumstances, which may increase the risk to a child, should be drawn to the attention of the Police.

On receiving a report of a missing child, the Police will record and make enquiries in accordance with their policy and procedures.

#### 4. UNAUTHORISED ABSENCE OF A CHILD

If Social Services assessment results in the view that the child's absence is unauthorised, no report is made to the Police. Social Services staff should take all reasonable and practicable steps to establish the whereabouts of the child, and only when the risk assessment process identifies the child as 'missing' or 'absconded' should notification be made to the Police.

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In all other cases, the situation should be referred to as 'unauthorised absence'. This category should be the subject of continued risk assessment.

If the location of the child is known, and there are thought to be specific issues of safety or public order difficulties, then action to deal with those difficulties should be agreed in consultation with the Police.

### **5. INFORMING THE MEDIA**

The police have responsibility for any missing person enquiry and will decide whether media involvement will assist or hamper the enquiry.

A decision to use the media will only be made after consultation between the Police and the Local Authority. The parents should also be involved.

Where media publicity is required, any statement made between agencies will normally be agreed between press officers. Where a child is to be publicised through the media every effort will be made to inform the parents beforehand.

### **6. RECORDING**

Throughout the process identified within this procedure, a full record must be kept of all actions taken and messages received/given. This recording should be made within the log-book of a residential home, with a duplicate entry on the child's file (this latter recording could merely be a photocopy of the log book entries if this is deemed appropriate), or directly on the child's file in the case of an absence from a foster home). For foster care placements, recording events should take place in the foster carer's Daily Record and on the child's file.

In addition the 'Young Person Missing from Care Information Form' must be updated as necessary.

### **7. PLANNING FOR THE CHILD'S RETURN**

If a child's absence continues beyond a few hours and falls within this procedure, the Social Services senior manager on duty or the emergency duty officer, if possible in consultation with the child's social worker, the Police and the parents, where appropriate, should commence contingency planning for when the child is located. Such plans should include:

- a) Will the child return to the previous placement?

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- b) How will he/she be conveyed there?
- c) Do the Police wish to interview the child before he/she is returned to his/her placement?
- d) Who will be an appropriate “independent person” to talk to the child after his/her return?

Normally, Social Services will make arrangements for the transportation of a child to his/her residence. The Police will assist in appropriate cases.

Occasionally, however, especially if the child is over 16 years, the Police may have limited power to enforce a return if the child resists this and is not apparently at any risk.

Where a missing child is over 16 years, prior discussions should take place between Social Services and the Police regarding Police/Social Services powers to enforce a return.

Should a child's absence from a residential home continue, and after Police, social worker and parents have been informed, the senior manager of the home should make arrangements to inform all children and staff within the home. In this way, distressing rumours may be avoided and additional information regarding the missing child's whereabouts might be obtained. The child's school should also be informed in case they, too, have any information regarding his/her whereabouts. Any such information should be passed to the Police.

## 8. THE CHILD'S RETURN

When a child returns home the carer should immediately inform both the Police Service and Social Services (i.e. emergency duty team and/or the child's social worker).

The child should be told that we would expect him/her to talk to his/her social worker who is independent of the home or the foster home about the absence. The child's social worker should ascertain the reasons/motives for the absence. Thereafter, the social worker in consultation with his/her manager will decide whether and by what means this information is to be appropriately shared with the carers, the Police Service and other agencies.

On the child's return, his/her medical condition should be discussed immediately and an offer made to arrange medical attention.

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Parents, Police, social worker and all others informed of the absence should be advised of the child's return without delay.

The child's social worker and/or link worker should discuss with the child why and where he or she went missing; these details should then be recorded in the child's file and, where appropriate, the home's unauthorised absence record.

In consultation with the home's staff/carer, the social worker and his/her manager should decide whether a special strategy meeting is required.

It is the responsibility of the senior manager of the home to ensure the child receives an interview with his/her social worker within 72 hours of his/her return from absence. In the case of a child missing from foster care, the social worker should visit and see the child within 72 hours of his/her return.

If the child has four episodes of being missing with each episode lasting longer than six hours, his/her social worker will be required as a matter of course to call a **Placement Plan Review** to address the absence. The Police Service (Child Protection Team), the carers, parent(s), the child and link workers will be invited to attend.

The purpose of the Review will be to address the issue of the child's absence by

- Assessing the reasons why the child has been missing
- Re-assessing the risk to the child by his/her absence
- Identifying strategies to manage the child's absconding behaviour

Representatives from the following agencies may call a Placement Plan Review at any time to address a child's absences. These are:

- Police Service (Inspector level upwards)
- Social Services (Team Manager Adoption & Fostering Team; Head of Residential Home; child's social worker).

Consideration should also be given to the need to convene a **Looked After Review** to consider the child's **Care Plan**.

### 9. MISSING DURING EXTERNAL ACTIVITY OF A RESIDENTIAL HOME

The person in charge of the external activity should:

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- a) Notify the local Police in that area.
- b) Notify the home's manager, the emergency duty social worker or the child's social worker.
- c) Institute a local search if staffing levels permit.

The Manager of the home will be responsible for ensuring the general procedures in relation to missing children are followed.

The Manager of the home and the person in charge of the activity will decide within 24 hours of the absence whether the others taking part in the activity should return to the home.

Ongoing communication regarding the missing child will be maintained between the carers and the Police local to where the absence occurred.

### 10. LONGER TERM MISSING PERSONS

Where a looked after child is missing for 8 days a strategy meeting should be held, attended by the relevant Social Services manager and the divisional commander, or his nominee, together with appropriate staff from both agencies.

The meeting can be arranged sooner if required.

The meeting should produce a clear statement of the actions being taken in respect of the absence, and all participants should satisfy themselves that all possible action has been taken to date. This meeting should be formally documented.

The Police will notify the National Missing Person Bureau 28 days after a child goes missing.

The Head of Children's Services should formally review all cases where children have been absent for six months or more and should satisfy him/herself on the actions taken to recover the child.

Whilst the child remains absent, his/her case should be identified as "open" on the Social Services Client Information System and should be reviewed at six monthly intervals by an officer at Assistant Director level.

All Police missing persons' files will remain "live" until the person is traced or until the divisional commander is satisfied all lines of enquiry have been exhausted. He will then forward the file to the Assistant Chief Constable who will take the decision to file or otherwise.

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Where the Assistant Chief Constable has made the decision to file, the Force Intelligence Bureau will be responsible for bringing forward the file on persons who remain missing for review by the Detective Superintendent 12 months after the file date

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