

Guideline for Carers and Placement Providers: Managing children absent or missing from placement

This Guideline provides information on what you need to do when a child isn't where they are supposed to be, doesn't return to placement or leaves placement without permission. Following the steps outlined in this Guideline will help Territory Families and the Northern Territory Police to work collaboratively with you to ensure the safety of the child or young person who is missing or absent from placement.

Background

Territory Families and Northern Territory Police use the same definitions to categorise children who are not in their placement.

An absent from care child is

- a child who is absent for a short period of time without permission; and
- where the child's whereabouts are known or can be quickly established.

Such examples may include: a child who is due to return at 7pm, however the Carer has spoken to them on their mobile and confirmed they will be home at 10pm with the Youth Bus; a child who has left placement and family members confirm they are at their house; a child who is not in placement but has been located at their friend's house.

A missing from care child is

- a child whose whereabouts are unknown; and
- where there are fears for the safety or serious concern for the welfare of that child.

Such examples may include: a child who has not returned to placement at the designated time, is non-contactable, attempts have been made to locate the child but they cannot be located at known addresses or places they usually visit and there are concerns for the child's safety;

Children who are absent from their placement are a concern; there is a need to locate them and ensure they are safe as quickly as possible. Each child's circumstance and response to their absence is decided on an individual basis and a formal missing person's report to the Police may be actioned earlier in some circumstances than in others. For some children it may be appropriate to immediately report them as a missing person. The fact that a child may have gone missing on a number of previous occasions does not reduce the risk.

When should I call Police straight away?

Abduction of a Child in Care

If you believe that a child in care has been abducted you should call Police immediately on 000. After calling NT Police, you will need to tell Territory Families immediately. Territory Families and NT Police will work with you to ensure the safe return of the child.

Children in imminent danger

Imminence is the key; not all circumstances warrant a call to police. Where you believe an absent or missing child is in imminent danger or at imminent risk of significant harm you should report this to the NT Police. Reasons that may contribute to you making an immediate report to Police is where the child:

- is aged 10 years or under;
- is vulnerable e.g. has a disability, intellectual disability, illness or mental health issues;
- may be suicidal;
- was highly distressed at the time they left placement;

- has stated their intention to harm others;
- has stated their intention to commit a crime;
- is believed likely to place others at risk;
- is at risk from the actions of another person e.g. parent of the child or someone who has made plausible threats to harm the child previously; or
- is at risk of sexual exploitation.

What Should I do as a Carer?

When a child is not where they are expected to be, you must make all reasonable attempts to take action quickly to locate the child including:

- Searching the house and the premises including the garage, grounds and surrounding area;
- Attempting to contact the child directly via phone, text message, email, social media, where relevant;
- Attempting to contact the child indirectly via phone, text message, email or social media via their friends and family;
- Asking friends or neighbours if they have seen the child;
- Alerting the child's friends and networks that you are looking for the child and seeking their assistance to find the child, where this is appropriate to do so;
- Contacting the child's school or workplace to determine if they have information about the child's whereabouts; and
- Checking places where the child frequently attends, such as shops, parks, friends' or families' homes or other 'special places' they may go to.

If there is doubt about how to respond you can seek advice from Territory Families by either contacting the child's Case Manager, the local Territory Families Office or Central Intake on 1800 700 250 if the matter is after hours.

I've found the child but they're not in placement, what do I do?

Once you are aware of the child's location you should make a plan for the safe return of the child to your care. You should then tell Territory Families about this. You can call or email the child's Case Manager or your local Territory Families Office. If the matter is after hours, **and** you have concerns for their safety, you should notify Central Intake by calling 1800 700 250. You will need to tell Territory Families:

- The time the child was last seen;
- The time and nature of the last contact with the child i.e. via phone, visited house where child is;
- The current location/whereabouts of the child; and
- The anticipated plan for the child to return to placement.

You should tell Territory Families if you have any worries or concerns relating to the safety of the child in the place they are in.

I know where the child is and I have concerns for their safety

If you know where a child in care is **and** have immediate concerns for the safety of the child, you can seek support from NT Police by reporting a concern for welfare for the child. When you make this report to NT Police you should

- Tell Police the location of the child;
- The worries you have for the child at the place they are at; and
- What help you would like from Police.

Police will assess the risk and need to undertake a safety and wellbeing check. NT Police will tell Territory Families Central Intake the outcome of any checks. Depending on the time of the day that NT Police tell Territory Families, either Central Intake will tell you or the Case Manager will tell you during office hours.

If you make a concern for welfare report you should tell Territory Families that you have made the report. You can tell the Case Manager or the local office during office hours or Central Intake after hours. After reporting verbally to Territory Families you should also complete a [Reportable Incident form](#) and email a copy to the TF Practice Integrity Unit (TF.PracticeIntegrity@nt.gov.au) and your Case Manager.

I can't find the child, what do I do?

If you attempt to find the child and cannot confirm where they are **and** you have concerns for the safety and well-being of the child, you must report the matter to the Northern Territory Police as soon as possible. You must report a child as "missing" to Northern Territory Police when:

- the child is absent from their placement;
- their whereabouts cannot be confirmed; **and**
- there are serious concerns for their safety or wellbeing.

How to report:

You should report the missing child to Police by

1. Emailing a completed [Territory Families Report to NT Police – Missing and Welfare Concern Report](#) form to Police.Assistance@pfes.nt.gov.au.
 - a. The Case Manager, Team Leader and Manager must be copied into the email;
 - b. The report must clearly state what actions have been taken to locate the child; and
 - c. what action is required from Police.
2. Then call the Police Assistance Line on 131 444 to ensure the report was received.
 - a. Request an NT Police ICAD Number; and
 - b. Keep a record of the number provided.

In urgent situations, or where you are continuing to make active attempts to look for the child, you can call Police in the first instance. After you have reported the missing child to Police, you need to email the completed form to Police as soon as reasonably practicable.

Alternatively you can report the child missing at your local NT Police Station.

You must tell Territory Families if you report a child in care as missing. You can tell the Case Manager or Territory Families Office during business hours or call Central Intake if you report the child missing after hours. You should tell Territory Families the ICAD reference report number given by Police. After reporting verbally to Territory Families you should also complete a [Reportable Incident form](#) and email a copy to the TF Practice Integrity Unit (TF.PracticeIntegrity@nt.gov.au) and your Case Manager

What to report

You should tell Police what actions that you have taken to locate the child. Police will ask for as much information as possible to help you and Territory Families find the child. Police are likely to ask for the following information, if you do not know this information, do not worry, and provide Police with as much information as you know:

- Child's name, age, placement address and contact details (including afterhours contact numbers);
- School or employment information;
- A recent, clear and coloured photograph of the child;
- The child's physical appearance, including any identifying features (scars, markings, etc.);
- What the child was wearing when last seen;
- The child's last known whereabouts, or intended arrangements (walking to drop in centre, travelling with friends to the local shopping centre, visiting family, etc.);
- The child's usual habits (visit friends daily, see family weekly, use youth bus to return to placement, etc.);
- Places and addresses the child may frequent;
- The child's social media accounts/use (possibly Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat);
- The child's telephone contact details (if they have one);

- The child's vulnerabilities including
 - Age (child is under 13 years);
 - Medical condition or requires medication;
 - Physical disability or cognitive disability or difficulty;
 - Mental health issues;
 - History of self-harm and/or attempted suicide;
 - At risk of sexual exploitation;
 - Past involvement in offending;
 - Misuse of drugs, alcohol or other substances;
 - Child is being bullied, or suffering racial or homophobic abuse;
 - Child's behaviour is likely to be a risk to the community;
 - Child is experiencing difficulties in the placement;
 - Child does not want to live in the current placement;
 - Child is at risk of abduction or being prevented from returning;
 - Risk of forced marriage;
 - Has previously suffered harm whilst absent; and
 - Exhibits sexualised behaviours;
- Circumstances of their disappearance:
 - Are there any concerns that the child has been abducted or is at risk of harm or exploitation?
 - Was the child distressed at the time of leaving?
 - Did the child make any threats to themselves or others before leaving?
 - Is this typical behaviour for the child to be away from their placement/school?
- Medication the child may use and what it is used to treat. (Does the child have a medical condition Police should be aware of? Specific actions Police need to take if they locate the child);
- If the child has been reported missing before, the circumstances of this and where they were found.
- Lists of friends, acquaintances, family members and anyone else who might have information or clues about the child's whereabouts. (Try to include telephone numbers and home or work addresses wherever possible)

What will the Police do?

When Police receive a report relating to a child missing from care, they will:

- Review all information provided to them;
- Consider the vulnerabilities and risk factors associated with the child;
- Categorise the child or young person as either medium or high risk; and
- Determine the level of Police resourcing required to locate the child.

What will Territory Families do?

Where a child is absent Territory Families will work collaboratively with you to get them to return to your care. Once the Case Manager is aware that a child in care is absent from placement, the Case Manager must work in collaboration with you, as the Carer to continue to make active attempts to locate the child.

Where a child is missing, Territory Families will work with you and the Police to continue to look for the child and return them to your care.

Case Manager Responsibilities

In addition to working alongside you to attempt to locate the child, the Case Manager, with support from their Team Leader and Manager, has responsibility for the ongoing coordination of attempts to locate the child. The Case Manager must:

- Tell their Team Leader and Manager on the same working day that they learn that a child in care is missing;

- Tell the child's parents and significant family members on the same working day that they learn that the child is missing and tell the parents and family members of the actions taken;
- Keep in regular communication and collaboration with you as the Carer, the child's family, NT Police in attempting to locate the child;
- Discuss with you as the Carer who will lodge the Missing Person's Report. If you as the Carer have not made the report, the Case Manager must make it;
- Consider an interstate alert and contact the Interstate Liaison Officer if you or Territory Families think the child may have left the Northern Territory;
- Tell Northern Territory Police immediately when the child is located; and
- If the child remains missing, the Case Manager must consult with their Team Leader and Manager about whether to provide consent for Northern Territory Police to release a Missing Person's media release.

What should I do when the child returns to my care?

If a missing child is found the Police must be notified immediately.

As the child's Carer you will need to tell Territory Families' of the child's return, either via the Case Manager or Central Intake. The Case Manager should arrange a time to come and visit the child to engage with them around their reasons for leaving the placement and consider their views in future planning.

The Case Manager must tell the child's parents and significant family members that the child has been located.

Children who are Frequently Absent or Missing from Care

Some children in care will be regularly absent or missing from their placement, each time should be taken seriously and responded to appropriately to ensure the child's safety. Managing these children can often be very challenging. It requires:

- ongoing assessment of the child's needs; and
- ongoing communication and a joined up approach between the child, yourself as a Carer, the child's family, Territory Families and at times, Northern Territory Police .

As a Carer, it is important to work collaboratively with Territory Families to make every reasonable effort to increase the safety and well-being of children who are repeatedly absent or missing from their placements.

A frequently absent from care child is

- a child who exhibits a pattern of regularly leaving their placement without permission; and
- demonstrates a pattern of behaviour resulting in predictable absences from placement.

A frequently missing from care child is

- a child whose whereabouts are regularly unknown; and
- there are continuing fears for the safety and/or serious concern for the welfare of that child

Frequently absent or frequently missing from care children should be managed through the development of an [Absent from Placement Action Plan](#). An Absent from Placement Action Plan identifies the child's vulnerabilities and is shared with NT Police and key support people in the child's life in order to support a coordinated approach for responding to the child's periods of absence and missing. The Absent from Placement Action Plan identifies key responsibilities for responding to children who are frequently absent or missing.

The child's Case Manager is responsible for coordinating the development of the plan. The plan

- identifies the child's vulnerabilities;
- identifies key responsibilities for responding to children who are frequently absent or missing;

- is shared with Northern Territory Police to help support a coordinated approach for responding to the child when they are absent or missing;
- is provided to you, as the Carer, by the Case Manager; and
- the plan should be referred to during the time that the child may be absent or missing.

Authorised by:

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