



Children who are Missing or Absent from Education Policy

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1. Children Absent from Education – KCSIE 2024

KCSIE 2024 (Paragraph 178): “Children being absent from education for prolonged periods and/or on repeat occasions can act as a vital warning sign to a range of safeguarding issues including neglect, child sexual and child criminal exploitation - particularly county lines. It is important the school or college’s response to persistently absent pupils and children missing education supports identifying such abuse, and in the case of absent pupils, helps prevent the risk of them becoming a child missing education in the future. This includes when problems are first emerging but also where children are already known to local authority children’s social care and need a social worker (such as a child who is a child in need or who has a child protection plan, or is a looked after child), where being absent from education may increase known safeguarding risks within the family or in the community. Further information and support, includes:

- Guidance on school attendance: **‘Working together to improve school attendance’** including information on how schools should work with local authority children’s services where school absence indicates safeguarding concerns.
- Information regarding schools’ duties regarding children missing education, including information schools must provide to the local authority when removing a child from the school roll at standard and non-standard transition points, can be found in the department’s statutory guidance: **‘Children Missing Education’**.

KCSIE 2024 (Annex B, pg 152): “All staff should be aware that children being absent from school or college, particularly repeatedly and/or for prolonged periods, and children missing education can act as a vital warning sign of a range of safeguarding possibilities. This may include abuse and neglect such as sexual abuse or exploitation and can also be a sign of child criminal exploitation including involvement in county lines. It may indicate mental health problems, risk of substance abuse, risk of travelling to conflict zones, risk of female genital mutilation, so-called ‘honour’-based abuse or risk of forced marriage. Early intervention is essential to identify the existence of any underlying safeguarding risk and to help prevent the risks of a child going missing in future. It is important that staff are aware of their school or college’s unauthorised absence procedures and children missing education procedures.”

2. Definition of Children Missing Education

In Children Missing Education - Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities (2016), children missing education are defined as those who are not on a school roll or receiving suitable education otherwise than at school. Those who are regularly absent or have missed 10 school days or more without permission may be at risk of becoming ‘children missing education’.

There will not always be a safeguarding concern for children and young people who are missing education. Most children and young people are moving schools supported by their parents/carers, schools and local authority admissions services. A smaller number, however, are at risk of dropping out or disengaging from education and, being out of school, they are at risk of exploitation, going missing and significant harm.

3. Risks

These ‘missing’ children can be vulnerable; it is essential that all services work together to identify and re-engage these children back into appropriate education provision as quickly as possible. It is important to establish, at the earliest possible stage, the reasons for the child being missing. Possible reasons that should be considered include:

- Failure to start appropriate provision and never enter the system;
- Stopped attending, due to illegal exclusion or withdrawal by parent/carers;
- Failure to complete a transition between schools;
- Children from refugee and asylum -seeking families;
- Children from families who are highly mobile;
- Children at risk of a forced marriage;
- Children experiencing abuse and neglect;
- Children supervised by the Youth Justice System.
- Children who remain disengaged from education are potentially exposed to higher degrees of risk such as anti-social behaviour and/or sexual exploitation.

- Families moving between local authority areas can sometimes lead to a child becoming 'lost' in the system and consequently missing education. When a child has moved, local authorities should check with other local authorities, either regionally or nationally, and share information to ascertain where the child is living. Once the location of the child is established, the relevant local authority must ensure that the child is receiving an education either by attending a school or otherwise.

4. Recognition

a. Schools

As a result of daily registration, schools are particularly well placed to notice when a child has gone missing. If a member of school becomes aware that a child may have gone missing, they should try to establish with the parents/carers, what has happened. If this is not possible, or the child is missing, the designated safeguarding lead (DSL) should, together with the class teacher, assess the child's vulnerability.

Enquiries into the circumstances surrounding a child who is missing from school can be effectively supported by schools adopting an admissions procedure which requires a parent/carer to provide documentary evidence of their own and the child's identity, their status in the UK, and the address at which they are residing. Schools should ensure that a family's contact details are regularly updated and that there are at least two emergency contacts on file. These checks, however, should not become delaying factors in the admissions process.

In the circumstances of a child going missing who is not known to any other agencies, the Headteacher should inform the LA's Children Missing Education (CME) Officer of any child who has not attended for 10 consecutive school days without provision of reasonable explanation. Prior to doing so, the school should have made enquiries to ascertain whether the child is still residing at the home address and is not attending or whether the child is missing.

b. Other Agencies

Where any agency in contact with children and families believes that a child is not on the roll of a school or receiving education otherwise, this information should be passed to the CME Officer with any details they have of the child in question.

5. Response

From the first day that a child does not attend school and there is no explanation or authorisation of the absence, the following steps should be taken:

- A staff member will contact the parents/carers (person with parental responsibility for the child) to seek reassurance that the child is safe at home;
- The outcome of the contact should be assessed and if there are any concerns a consultation with the school/establishment Designated Safeguarding Lead should take place to consider the child's vulnerability.

In the following circumstances a referral to children's social care and /or the police should always be made promptly:

- The child may be the victim of a crime;
- The child is subject of a Child Protection plan;
- The child is subject of section 47 enquiries;
- The child is looked after;
- There is a known person posing a risk to children in the household or in contact with the household; The answers to further questions could assist a judgement whether or not to inform children's social care and the police
- In which age range is the child?
- Is this very sudden and unexpected behaviour?
- Have there been any past concerns about the child associating with significantly older young people or adults?
- Was there a significant incident prior to the child's unexplained absence?
- Has the child been a victim of bullying?
- Are there health reasons to believe that the child is at risk? e.g.: Does the child need essential medication or health care?

- Was the child noted to be depressed prior to their unexplained absence?
- Are there religious or cultural reasons to believe that the child is at risk? e.g.: Rites of passage, female genital mutilation or forced marriage planned for the child?
- Has the child a disability and/or special educational needs?
- Have there been past concerns about this child and family which together with the sudden disappearance are worrying? e.g.
 - Is there any known history of drug or alcohol dependency within the family?
 - Is there any known history of domestic violence?
 - Is there concern about the parent/carer's ability to protect the child from harm?
 - Is there any concern about extremist views?

6. Children missing from education but not missing from home

The length of time that a child remains out of school could, of itself, be an alerting factor of risk of harm to the child. A judgement as to timeliness is required in respect of the referral to the local authority. This timeliness should be on a case-by-case basis.

In exceptional circumstances, a leave of absence can be authorised by the Headteacher, at which point a return date is set. In these cases, the timeline for enquiries starts from when the child does not attend school on the expected return date, not from the day the authorised leave started.

7. Notifications and Actions for Children Missing from Education where there are Safeguarding Concerns

If the answers to any of the points set out in the previous section indicate that there are concerns about the child's safety, then a referral should be made to Children's Social Care and the Police on day one.

Children's social care, who must be contacted as soon as possible in these circumstances, will also liaise with the Police to identify, and act upon, any suspicion of child abuse or child related crime.

The school should work in collaboration with children's social care and the police, and the Designated Safeguarding Lead should participate in any strategy discussions, section 47 enquiries and child protection conferences which may arise.

Reasonable enquiry: If the judgement reached on day one is that there is no reason to believe that the child is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm, then the school should delay making a referral to allow them to make further reasonable enquiries. Reasonable enquiries include staff checking with all members of staff with whom the child may have had contact, with the pupil's friends and their parents, siblings and known relatives at school, and others. The speed at which these reasonable enquiries are made will depend upon any known or concerning factors that may arise through the enquiry process. School staff should also make telephone calls to any numbers held on record or identified and send a letter to the last known address. Home visits can be made by school-based staff in consultation with local authority staff.

Further Actions: If the above response is unsuccessful, the school should contact the relevant CME Officer, referring the child as missing in education and providing the details of the completed enquiries made by the school. The local authority should make enquiries by visiting the child's home and asking for information from the family's neighbours and their local community - a risk assessment of this activity will be needed along with a decision about whether this is appropriate.

The CME Officer should also check databases within the local authority, use agreed protocols to check local databases, e.g. housing, health and the police; check with agencies known to be involved with the family, with any local authority the child may have moved from originally, and with any local authority to which the child may have moved. The child's circumstances and vulnerability should be reviewed and reassessed regularly and jointly by the CME Officer in consultation with children's social care and the police, as appropriate.

Children missing education are vulnerable and, when reviewed, plans should be put in place to proactively find children. As time progresses, missing education will become a more significant factor as well as needing to be considered alongside any other known factors that were already present.

8. Child missing from school for more than four weeks

A child may not be removed from the school roll before the end of four weeks, unless located in an alternative educational provision. After 4 weeks the child's Common Transfer File should be uploaded to the Department for Education secure site for the transfer of pupil information when a pupil moves between schools. The CME Officer will inform the school when they can remove from roll.

CHILD MISSING FROM SCHOOL PROTOCOL

As soon as you discover a child is missing:

STEP 1 Alert the Headteacher and Office staff **immediately** stating last known location of the child.
All exits should be secured. The Office staff should instruct staff to monitor school's main reception and prevent any person from leaving the building. (Even if an adult leaving the building does not have the missing child with them it is important they remain as they may have information to help locate the child).

STEP 2 The Headteacher should instigate a controlled search starting at the last known location. This should be carried out systematically and include all school buildings and grounds. Care should be taken to prevent panic.

STEP 3 If the child is not located the Headteacher/SLT should inform the Police **immediately** or delegate someone to dial 999 and provide relevant information.

STEP 4 Unless otherwise directed by the Police the Headteacher/SLT should inform parents/ guardians (by telephone) of current status. This conversation should be carefully managed and pertinent details shared with the Police. School's Office Manager should prepare a room to support parents/ guardians should they arrive on-site.

STEP 5 On arrival of the Police the Headteacher should ensure all known facts are given to officers.
A request can be made for the Police to assist with further school and parent / guardian liaison.

STEP 6 Headteacher/SLT to commence a critical incident log and accurately document all actions / relevant factual information. Ensure times and dates are recorded.

STEP 7 If the child is not located or known to have been abducted the Headteacher/SLT should alert the Local Authority Director of Education and school's Chair of Governors (in their absence the Vice Chair should be notified).

STEP 8 No press briefing should be made unless directed by the Police with the input from the Local Authority Media Relations Office.

STEP 9 The Headteacher/SLT to hold a staff briefing when possible to advise of the current situation. Ensure staff are aware of information sharing protocols.

STEP 10 Under the direction of the Headteacher/SLT, all staff should work with multi-agency partners to ensure parents, guardians and family members are supported whilst the matter is resolved.

STEP 11 Post Event: The Head Teacher/SLT to arrange an emergency governing body meeting to review school's critical incident paperwork and safeguarding arrangements.