

Community Pre-schools Missing or Lost Children Procedure

The safety and wellbeing of children is the highest priority in any community pre-school setting. While every precaution is taken to prevent children from going missing, it is essential to have a robust, clear, and well-understood procedure to follow in the rare but critical event of a child becoming lost or missing. This document sets forth the comprehensive procedures, responsibilities, and best practices for pre-school staff and stakeholders in the event of a missing or lost child.

This procedure applies to all Managers, staff, volunteers, students, and visitors within community pre-school settings. It aims to:

- Ensure the immediate safety and swift recovery of any missing or lost child.
- Reduce the likelihood of children going missing.
- Minimise panic and confusion by providing a clear, step-by-step protocol for staff to follow.
- Ensure parents, carers, and relevant authorities are informed promptly and appropriately.
- Review and improve safety procedures following any incident.

Preventative Measures

Prevention is always better than cure. Community Pre-schools implement a range of proactive steps to reduce the risk of children going missing:

- Ensuring appropriate staff-to-child ratios are always maintained in accordance with statutory requirements.
- Conducting regular headcounts and roll calls, especially during transitions such as outdoor play, trips, and at arrival and departure times.
- Maintaining secure boundaries, with gates and doors locked or monitored when not in use.
- Supervising all visitors, ensuring they are never left alone with children or allowed to wander around unsupervised.
- Educating children about boundaries and the importance of staying with the group or their designated adult.
- Ensuring up-to-date contact information for all parents and emergency contacts is always accessible to staff.
- Risk assessments for outings and regular safety drills, including missing child scenarios.

Immediate Actions When a Child Is Discovered Missing

If a child is found to be missing, staff must remain calm but act quickly and methodically:

- Alert the most senior staff member or designated safeguarding lead immediately.
- Conduct a thorough sweep of the area, checking all rooms, toilets, cupboards, outdoor areas, playgrounds, and any hiding places.
- Gather all other children into a safe and supervised area, ensuring their continued safety and reassurance.
- Assign specific staff to search specific areas, avoiding duplication and confusion.
- Check the attendance register and confirm which child is missing, noting the time and circumstances of the last sighting.
- Ask children (if appropriate) and staff if they have seen the missing child and where.

If the Child Is Not Found On-site

If, after a swift and thorough search, the child is not located on-site:

- Contact the emergency services (police) immediately and provide them with:
- The child's full name, age, gender, physical description, clothing, and any distinguishing features.
- The time and location where the child was last seen.
- Any factors that may increase the child's vulnerability (medical needs, SEND, etc.).

Inform the child's parents or carers as soon as possible, providing all known details and the steps being taken.

Continue to search local and surrounding areas, including nearby roads, parks, shops, and public spaces, without leaving the other children unsupervised.

Designate a staff member to remain as the point of contact for police and parents, ensuring clear and consistent communication.

Document all actions taken, including times, names of those involved, areas searched, and communication logs.

When Outings or Off-site Visits Are Involved

Additional precautions apply during off-site activities:

- Ensure higher staff-to-child ratios as appropriate for the outing's risk level.
- Carry an up-to-date list of all children, including emergency contacts and medical needs.
- Conduct frequent headcounts: on arrival, during activities, after toilet breaks, and before departure.
- Assign each child to a specific staff member or small group ("buddy system").
- Ensure children wear identifiable clothing, wristbands, or badges if appropriate.
- Have a clear meeting point and ensure all children are familiar with it.
- Follow the same search and notification procedure as above if a child is missing during an outing.

Communication Protocols

Clear communication is critical at every stage:

- Inform all staff immediately and ensure everyone remains calm and focused on the procedure.
- Designate one staff member to handle external communications while others continue searching and supervising children.
- Keep parents and carers updated regularly, providing factual information and reassurance.
- Maintain privacy and confidentiality when sharing information about the incident.

Post-Incident Actions

Once the child is found, or the situation is resolved:

- Reassure and check the wellbeing of the child, providing necessary medical or emotional support.
- Notify all relevant parties (parents, police, Ofsted, local authority, if involved) of the child's safe recovery.
- Hold a debriefing session with all staff involved to review the incident, what went well, and any areas for improvement.
- Complete a detailed incident report, including timelines, actions taken, outcomes, and any recommendations.
- Offer support to other children and staff who may be distressed by the incident.

Review and Improvement

After any missing or lost child incident, the pre-school must:

- Review all relevant risk assessments and safeguarding policies.
- Identify and implement any necessary changes to procedures, staffing, or the physical environment.
- Provide additional training to staff if required, focusing on lessons learned from the incident.
- Communicate any changes in policy or procedure to staff, parents, and governing bodies.

Training and Awareness

All staff, volunteers, and students should receive regular training on:

- The missing or lost child procedure.
- Supervision and headcount best practices.
- Safeguarding and child protection basics.
- Risk assessment and emergency response protocols.

Training should be a part of induction for new staff and refreshed annually or after any related incident.

Roles and Responsibilities

- Designated Safeguarding Lead: Oversees the procedure, leads searches, liaises with authorities and parents, and ensures reporting.
- All Staff: Responsible for supervision, headcounts, and immediate action during an incident.
- Manager/Head of Setting: Supports all processes, ensures training, and leads post-incident reviews.
- Parents/Carers: Keep contact information updated, support staff, and follow communication protocols.

Supporting Children and Families

Incidents of missing or lost children can be traumatic for all involved. The pre-school should:

- Provide reassurance and emotional support to the missing child and their peers.
- Offer guidance and support to parents and families, maintaining transparent and compassionate communication.
- Liaise with professional services or counselling as needed.

Record Keeping and Documentation

Accurate and detailed record-keeping is vital:

- Maintain incident logs, search records, and communication notes.
- Store records securely in line with data protection requirements.
- Use records to inform policy review and continuous improvement.

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