
In Whose Interest?

DCI-A Secretary Michael Beresford-Smith, Co-ordinator of Frontyard Youth Services, offers some practice tips for workers who come across missing children and young people.

Many thousands of children/young people go missing from their legal care providers every year. Only a minute number of these cases involve the dramatic circumstances of “abduction”, and international intrigue concerning the whereabouts of the child/ren. Fortunately, the vast majority of children/young people reported to police authorities as “missing” return home within a comparatively short period of time and a significant proportion of them appear to return home of their own volition.

Adolescent maturation is, in part, about testing adult norms and the creation of an individuality distinct from those who have reared or cared for the child/young person. Children/young people leaving home, however temporary, is nothing new. In the past, running away to sneakily join the armed forces offered an institutional option for young males to explore their individuality or to seek refuge from inappropriate family circumstances.

Today we have a range of laws that both prohibit the liberty of children/young people and which require parents/carers to be proactive when their youngster goes “missing”. These laws are, generally, viewed by the community as protecting children/young people in order to ensure their well-being.

They do, however, often raise considerable dilemmas for social welfare workers who encounter “missing” children/young people, and the context in which they are found often determines, not always appropriately, our response. The dilemmas often revolve around the child/young person’s rights to privacy and immediate physical protection versus the rights of parents/carers to know that their young one is safe and being appropriately cared for.

Overlaying complexities concern the capacity of a worker without formal legal authority to ‘place’ a child/young person without the approval of the legal guardian/custodian, and any liability which might accrue to the placing worker should the child/young person be hurt or involved in other activities whilst in the placement.

There is also the question of the worker’s role and the professional paradigm within which they work.

Are they solely there for the child/young person or do they operate within a context of family reconciliation and mediation? If the latter, their relationship with the child/young person might be different and to some eyes might not be seen to be “acting for the young person”.

Despite these issues, practice experience suggest that there are some basic principles that should guide social welfare professionals’ practice with “missing children/young people”. These principles particularly apply when there appear to be no overt protective issues and when a missing child/young person is located outside of usual working hours.

- 1 Accept at face value the child/young person’s reason for leaving home and if appropriate secure their immediate safety/accommodation;
- 2 Contextualise the events for the child/young person as an outcome of normal adolescent/parental conflict and advise the child/young person that contact will be made with their legal guardian/custodian advising them that their ‘charge’ is safe but that their whereabouts will not be immediately disclosed if the child/young person does not agree;
- 3 Advise the guardian/custodian that their child/young person is safe, outline the reasons stated by the youngster for their leaving home and invite parental/carer comment on their perceptions of the “crisis”. Contextualise the outcome of the conflict as not that unusual and establish a time to meet (within 24 hours) to discuss in greater detail issues surrounding the conflict;
- 4 For the majority of cases it is imperative for the worker to convey to all parties an expectation that the issues can be resolved and within a short period of time;
- 5 Plan for some short-term intensive work and then withdraw completely.

Practice experience suggests that the sooner a missing child/young person is found and reunited with their family/carers the more successful the reunification is. On the other hand, the longer the separation or the extensive involvement of external parties, the less successful the reunification and the greater probability that the issues leading up to the running away are indicative of more fundamental issues within the care arrangements.