

Missing or absent from placement Service Provider Requirements

1. Purpose

This document identifies the requirements for service provider personnel in non-family based placements responding to children and young people who are missing or absent from placement.

2. Scope

These requirements apply to all service provider personnel in non-family based placements who care for children and young people who are missing or absent from their care placement (referred to as carers herein).

These requirements apply to all situations when a child or young person is missing or absent from placement. If a child or young person is not where they are expected or required to be and there are concerns for their safety or wellbeing:

- they are **missing** if their location is not known
- they are **absent** if their location is known.

Situations where children or young people are late returning to their placement or absent for short periods and there are no concerns for their safety and wellbeing are not in scope for this procedure.

When deciding whether a child or young person is absent, service providers should consider the reliability of the source of the information and whether this is a confirmed location or a suspicion. A reliable source could include DCP staff, SAPOL, service provider personnel, another professional or any other person that the service provider considers a reliable source. If the information is not reliable and cannot be confirmed by a reliable source, or the location is only suspected then the child or young person should be considered missing.

If the child or young person is sighted briefly at a location but they do not remain there, they should also be considered as missing.

It is noted that South Australia Police (SAPOL) use the terms 'missing' and 'absent' differently from the Department for Child Protection (DCP). SAPOL use the term missing to refer to reports raised by them that receive an active response and absent to refer to reports that may not result in SAPOL resources being deployed. The SAPOL use of these terms does not relate to whether the location of the child or young person is known.

3. Authority

3.1 Legislative context

These requirements are underpinned by the priority of the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* (CYPS Act) that the safety of the child or young person is paramount (Section 7).

For public releases of information in relation to a missing child or young person, the following people have delegated authorisation to disclose information under regulation 42(1) of the CYPS Act:

- Deputy Chief Executive, DCP
- Executive Director, Service Delivery and Practice, DCP
- DCP regional directors.

Only the Deputy Chief Executive, DCP and the Chief Executive, DCP may authorise media publications or broadcasts that identify the child or young person as being under guardianship.

Please refer to the [Legislation and standards](#) service provision requirement page on the service provider area of the DCP website.

3.2 DCP requirements

- [DCP Contract Management Framework](#)
- [DCP Contract Performance Management Framework](#)
- [DCP Performance Measurement Specification](#)

4. Requirements

If it is an emergency situation (for example, the child or young person has been abducted, is suicidal or is in immediate or life threatening danger), call SAPOL immediately on 000. It is important to record the report number provided by SAPOL so that this can be used in future communication. In the event of an emergency, the below steps should be followed after the call to SAPOL has occurred. When the service provider becomes aware that the situation is an emergency they should manage the situation in accordance with the [Significant Incident Management - Requirements for Service Providers](#).

4.1 Maintaining records

The service provider is responsible for maintaining a written record of all actions taken from when a child or young person goes missing or is absent until they are returned to placement. This includes keeping written records of what occurred and when, the [Missing/Absent Person Report](#), communications with SAPOL and attempts to locate or contact the child or young person and return them to placement.

A [Missing/Absent Person Report](#) must be used to record all information when the child or young person is missing or absent even if there are only minimal concerns for the safety or wellbeing of the child or young person. A new Missing/Absent Person Report must be completed when the child or young person initially goes missing or becomes absent and can be updated with new information if the situation changes.

4.2 When a child or young person is missing

The below initial response should be provided even if the child or young person was absent prior to going missing.

If the child or young person goes missing while in the care of DCP staff (for example, during contact or transport), DCP staff will be responsible for completing the steps outlined in this section. The service provider is still responsible for following the steps in section 4.3.

4.2.1 Attempt to locate the child or young person

As soon as it is known that the child or young person is missing, the service provider must undertake immediate reasonable efforts to locate and return them to placement. Attempts may include:

- searching the immediate area where they were last seen and nearby locations where the child or young person regularly goes (if safe to do so)
- calling and/or messaging the child or young person if they have a mobile telephone
- calling and/or messaging their friends or known associates (where appropriate)
- calling and/or messaging their family (if approved by the DCP case worker).

These efforts should be a quick initial search for the child or young person and further search activity can be undertaken once urgency has been assessed and SAPOL have been contacted, if appropriate.

4.2.2 Assess urgency

The [Missing/Absent Person Report](#) must be completed or updated as soon as possible every time a child or young person goes missing. This document outlines the information SAPOL may require to help locate the child or young person and/or return them to placement. This form should be completed with the best information available at the time. Contact should be made with DCP if additional information is required. DCP should be contacted after making a report to SAPOL (if the urgency assessment indicates this is required). The service provider should also ensure that any additional information is provided to SAPOL.

The service provider must also complete an urgency assessment either as part of the [Missing/Absent Person Report](#) if this is the first urgency assessment since the child or young person became missing or absent or using the [Urgency Assessment form](#).

The following additional considerations should be incorporated into the urgency assessment where relevant:

- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child or young person (see section 4.6.1)
- child or young person from a culturally or linguistically diverse background (see section 4.6.2)
- child or young person with a disability and/or developmental delay (see section 4.6.3).

If the person providing the initial response is away from their usual place of work and cannot easily access the required documents, they should contact another member of staff for assistance and not delay this process. In the event that there is no assistance available (for example, after hours) the person providing the initial response should contact SAPOL on 131 444 and report the child or young person as missing and then complete the [Urgency Assessment form](#) and/or [Missing /Absent Person Report](#) as soon as possible afterwards.

4.2.3 Contact SAPOL to report the child or young person missing (if required)

If the urgency assessment rating indicates that contact should be made with SAPOL, carers are responsible for making the report to SAPOL on 131 444. Carers will need to provide the information detailed in the urgency assessment and/or Missing/Absent Person Report to SAPOL.

If SAPOL have already been contacted due to an emergency, there is no need to re-contact them unless there is new information to add to the initial report.

SAPOL will then make their own assessment and determine whether to record either a Missing Person Report (MPR) (Missing) or MPR (Absent).

The service provider must record the MPR report reference number provided by SAPOL which begins with the letters 'SAP' as this will be needed for all future communication with SAPOL. The service provider must report any changes in circumstances to SAPOL immediately as per the urgency assessment.

4.2.4 Contact DCP

DCP must be contacted as soon as possible to advise of the situation, including:

- details from the urgency assessment and/or Missing/Absent Person Report
- any other relevant information including actions taken to locate the child or young person and return them to placement
- if it is suspected that the child or young person may be planning to or has left South Australia
- the MPR report number provided by SAPOL and whether a MPR (Missing) or MPR (Absent) has been raised.

Who to contact at DCP?

- During business hours: DCP case worker or other DCP office staff (for example, supervisor/senior practitioner)
- After hours: DCP After Hours Call Centre 131 611.

4.3 While the child or young person remains missing

While the child or young person remains missing, the service provider must:

- continue to actively follow up the child or young person's whereabouts by regularly checking locations the child or young person is known to frequent (for example, shopping centres, parks, skate parks etc) if safe to do so. Consideration should be given to attending with SAPOL if this is appropriate
- attempt to contact the child or young person and encourage them to return to placement
- complete an updated urgency assessment using the [Urgency Assessment form](#) whenever there is any new information relating to the child or young person's safety or wellbeing that could change the level of response
- update DCP and SAPOL (where appropriate) with any new information
- notify DCP and SAPOL (where appropriate) if the child or young person may be planning to leave or is believed to have left South Australia
- notify relevant people (where appropriate) such as the child or young person's school or therapist
- record follow up actions and any further information that will help continue efforts to locate the child or young person.

Refer to the [Significant Incident Management - Requirements for Service Providers](#) for further actions required if the urgency assessment is extreme or if there are other circumstances which indicate it is a significant incident (for example, serious criminal activity or media interest).

4.3.1 Media campaigns/queries

SAPOL may recommend a media campaign to help locate the child or young person, including a request to use a photograph of the child or young person. To ensure the safety and wellbeing of the child or young

person and any other impacted parties, decisions regarding media campaigns/queries are to be referred to DCP. DCP will determine the appropriateness of such a campaign based on a case-by-case basis.

If SAPOL have not recommended a media campaign but the service provider believes that this would be beneficial, they should contact DCP to discuss this.

4.3.2 When the child or young person is located

The service provider must advise DCP and SAPOL (if a MPR has been raised) if the child or young person is located and they are not already aware. SAPOL will then close the report and no further assistance will be provided unless this is requested.

If the child or young person does not return to placement the guidance in section 4.4 should be followed.

4.4 When a child or young person is absent

The below initial response should be provided even if the child or young person was missing prior to being located.

If the child or young person becomes absent while in the care of DCP staff (for example, during contact or transport), DCP staff will be responsible for completing the steps outlined in this section. The service provider is still responsible for following the steps in the section 4.5.

4.4.1 Attempt to return the child or young person to placement

As soon as it is known that the child or young person is absent, immediate reasonable efforts must be undertaken to contact them and return them to placement, if it is safe to do so.

4.4.2 Assess urgency

The Missing/Absent Person Report must be completed or updated as soon as possible every time a child or young person becomes absent. This form should be completed with the best information available at the time. The service provider must also complete an urgency assessment either as part of the [Missing/Absent Person Report](#) if this is the first urgency assessment since the child or young person became missing or absent or using the [Urgency Assessment form](#). The urgency assessment will assist DCP in determining the appropriate response.

The following additional considerations should be incorporated into the urgency assessment where relevant:

- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child or young person (see section 4.6.1)
- child or young person from a culturally or linguistically diverse background (see section 4.6.2)
- child or young person with a disability and/or developmental delay (see section 4.6.3).

If the person providing the initial response is away from their usual place of work and cannot easily access the required documents, they should contact another member of staff for assistance and not delay this process.

4.4.3 Contact DCP

DCP must be contacted as soon as possible to advise of the situation, including:

- details from the urgency assessment and/or Missing/Absent Person Report
- any other relevant information including actions taken to attempt to return the child or young to placement.

Who to contact at DCP?

- During business hours: DCP case worker or other DCP office staff (for example, supervisor/senior practitioner)
- After hours: DCP After Hours Call Centre 131 611.

4.5 While the child or young person remains absent

DCP will contact the service provider to advise them of the planned approach for trying to return the child or young person to placement or establish safety where they are. Unless otherwise advised by DCP the service provider must do the following while the child or young person remains absent:

- attempt to remain in contact with the child or young person and monitor their wellbeing and safety, if it is safe to do so. Consideration should be given to attending the location with SAPOL if this is appropriate
- complete an updated urgency assessment using the [Urgency Assessment form](#) whenever there is any new information relating to the child or young person's safety or wellbeing that could change the level of response
- notify relevant people (where appropriate) such as the child or young person's school or therapist
- record follow up actions and any further information that will help continue efforts to locate the child or young person.

Consideration should also be given to whether the situation needs to be managed in accordance with the [Significant Incident Management - Requirements for Service Providers](#) (for example, due to serious criminal activity or media interest).

If the child or young person leaves this location and becomes missing the guidance under section 4.2 should be followed.

4.5.1 SAPOL assistance while the child or young person is absent

Contact should be made with SAPOL on 131 444 to request assistance in the following circumstances:

- if there are safety concerns for the service provider in attending the location or the child or young person is considered at risk of harm
- if the child or young person is at a location where there is suspected criminal activity
- if there are delays in being able to collect the child or young person from their location and there are safety concerns for the child or young person, contact should be made to SAPOL to request a check on welfare in the interim of the child or young person being collected.

Aboriginal children and young people may require additional support when interacting with SAPOL (for example, if they are to be transported by SAPOL or held at a SAPOL office) due to potential fear or previous trauma and the use of a support person should be strongly considered, whenever possible.

4.6 Additional considerations

4.6.1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

Consideration should be given to whether the reason for going missing or absent is related to cultural issues such as wanting to see people who are culturally important to them, feeling a lack of cultural connection, concerns regarding cultural safety in the placement or related to a cultural obligation (such as attending Sorry Business).

For children and young people from remote Aboriginal communities, the additional safety concern associated with their potentially limited social understanding in an unfamiliar environment should be considered if they are missing or absent in a metropolitan environment. Consideration should also be given to the additional risk associated if the child or young person does not have English as a first language.

Aboriginal people are likely to encounter significant episodes of culture shock when experiencing values, beliefs, customs and behaviours that are different from their own. These differences can make an Aboriginal child or young person feel like they do not belong and create cultural stress as they no longer know how to act or where they fit in. This can manifest in an Aboriginal child or young person becoming detached, depressed, having negative behaviours, extreme emotional outbursts and in some cases suicidal ideation and self-harm. It is important to understand that culture shock can suppress the desire for positive action and engagement with the new culture/family and can lead to a powerful desire to leave. This may account for why Aboriginal children and young people go missing or are absent when they are placed in an unfamiliar environment or with an unfamiliar carer.

4.6.2 Children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds

Children and young people from CALD backgrounds may be more vulnerable when missing or absent from placement. They may be subject to additional safety concerns due to having limited English language and/or limited capacity to navigate systems and differing help seeking behaviours.

Consideration should be given to whether the child or young person has left the placement due to a lack of cultural safety or a desire for cultural connection. If the child or young person has recently arrived in Australia, consideration should be given to potential trauma experienced in travelling to Australia and their perception of safety in their current arrangements and whether this has impacted on them going missing or absent.

4.6.3 Children and young people with a disability and/or developmental delay

Children and young people with a disability and/or developmental delay may be more vulnerable when missing or absent from placement. They may be subject to additional safety concerns due to:

- cognitive and communication difficulties
- a lack of understanding regarding appropriate boundaries and safety
- potential for physical injury or illness if they do not receive appropriate physical or medical support.

4.6.4 Transport back to placement

If SAPOL locate the child or young person, they will make contact with DCP or the service provider to advise that the child or young person has been located and requires transport.

The service provider has primary responsibility for transporting the child or young person back to placement. SAPOL should be contacted as soon as possible if there is a delay with collecting the child or young person. If the service provider is unable to provide transport to collect the child or young person they should seek assistance from DCP.

Aboriginal children and young people may require additional support when interacting with SAPOL (for example, if they are to be transported by SAPOL or held at a SAPOL office) due to potential fear or previous trauma and the use of a support person is strongly recommended.

4.7 Supporting the child or young person when they return to placement

When responding to children and young people once they are located, it is important to consider their individual circumstances and needs including cultural and developmental needs.

4.7.1 Responding when the child or young person returns

The service provider must contact DCP when the child or young person returns to placement. After the child or young person returns to placement, it is critical for the service provider to show the child or young person that they are happy to have them back and that their safety is the primary priority. The service provider should show the child or young person that they have come home to a nurturing environment where people genuinely care about them and show sensitivity. A negative experience upon return may cause emotional stress or make them want to leave again, placing the child or young person at risk. This could include spending time with them and waiting until they are calm and settled before trying to talk to them about how they are feeling and what has happened. The service provider should:

- attend to the child or young person's immediate physical and emotional needs (including positively acknowledging the child or young person for returning to their placement and expressing relief regarding their safety/wellbeing)
- engage the child or young person in a discussion about their experience once they are calm and settled. It is important to not put pressure on the child or young person and ensure they are comfortable with the pace of the conversation. The service provider should be interested and concerned about the child or young person's story, without assuming knowledge. Gather information about where and with whom the child or young person has been whilst being mindful of the possible reasons why the child or young person left the placement (including cultural considerations, crisis, trauma related behaviours, issues at the placement or behaviours related to disability such as autism) (please note that it is unlikely that a child or young person will successfully engage in this conversation soon after they return to placement)
- attempt to understand why the child or young person went missing or became absent and what had led up to the event
- inform the child or young person that the information they provide will be shared with DCP so that they can help the child or young person to stay safe in the future.

The service provider should record and report any actions undertaken or information that is important or concerning as soon as possible. The DCP case worker should be advised of:

- where the child or young person was found and how they returned
- any information regarding why the child or young person went missing or became absent

- where the child or young person has been, including the names and addresses of people where they may have been staying with
- any information that suggests the child or young person has been harboured, concealed or put at risk of harm by another person while missing or absent.

If the child or young person discloses information indicating they were at risk whilst missing or absent, the service provider should ensure that they meet any requirement for this to be reported to the Child Abuse Report Line in addition to informing the DCP case worker. Carers should refer to the [Reporting child harm/abuse](#) section of the DCP website for further information if needed. If the service provider suspects that a current or former member of service provider personnel (including contractors, sub-contractors, volunteers and carers) is the alleged perpetrator of sexual harm toward a child or young person, the service provider must ensure that they are aware of their responsibilities under sections 64A and 65 of the *Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935* (CLC Act). In alignment with section 64A of the CLC Act, it is an offence for service provider personnel not to report to SAPOL if they know, suspect, or should suspect sexual harm of a child or young person under the age of 18 years perpetrated by another member of service provider personnel (maximum penalty imprisonment for three years). In alignment with section 65 of the CLC Act, it is also an offence for service provider personnel to negligently fail to reduce or remove a substantial risk of sexual harm of the child or young person allegedly perpetrated by a current member of service provider personnel (maximum penalty imprisonment for 15 years).

In the event that the child or young person refuses to speak with the service provider, the DCP case worker should be advised so that they may attempt to speak with the child or young person as soon as possible to gather the necessary information to ensure their safety and wellbeing.

The completed Missing/Absent Person Report must be sent to the DCP case worker and supervisor.

5. Compliance, monitoring and evaluation

As part of the Policy Governance Framework, this document will be reviewed and updated in accordance with the review date shown in 'Document Control'.

Document control

Reference No./ File No.	<i>(Please complete all ** fields)</i>		
Document Owner	Lead Writer (name, position)		
Directorate/Unit: Quality and Practice	Senior Policy Officer, Operational Policy		
Accountable Director: Director Quality and Practice			
Commencement date	28 May 2023	Review date	28 May 2026
Risk rating Risk Assessment Matrix	Consequence Rating	Likelihood	Risk Rating
	Moderate	Possible	Moderate

REVISION RECORD		
Approval Date	Version	Revision description
14 April 2023	1.0	New document. Replaces the Missing children and young people under guardianship document.