

Preparing parents for when their child returns after being missing: Prompts for practitioners

Parents, carers and family members can be a vital protective factor for children who are missing and as such are a key safeguarding partner. However, people tell us that they often feel judged or blamed for their child going missing. Many feel unsupported, isolated and describe feeling angry, frustrated, anxious or scared. All these feelings are normal.

When a child returns from being missing, whether they are found by the police, a family member, or come back of their own accord, we need to acknowledge that it can be an extremely stressful and difficult time for the whole family. It can be helpful to talk through and prepare parents/carers for their child's return, as well as considering what support they might need to understand what's happening for their child.

There is no right or wrong way to welcome a child home. It is important to remember that the moment of return can be really difficult for the child themselves, and every missing episode is different. A child might be exhausted, hurt, angry, scared, upset, or struggling to understand their own feelings or situation. It can be hard to know what to say, which is why it can be helpful to prepare parents around this in advance. Each family is different so a nuanced approach will be needed based on trusted and relational working.

It can help to think about how you would be feeling if it were your child: how would you want to be treated? What would you want to see in the response from professionals?

Creating a welcoming space

Encourage parents to create a safe, calm, welcoming space for when their child returns. What do parents need to be able to do to ensure this happens?

Parents will have lots of questions and may be angry and upset but preparing the parent in advance to be thinking of the impact of the missing episode on their child may help parents to listen and focus on what their child may need.

Where possible try and encourage a consistent approach between family members to create calmness.



Give them time

It is normal for parents to want to find out what happened to their child or why they went missing. Some children might want to talk straight away but many need some space first before they can talk.

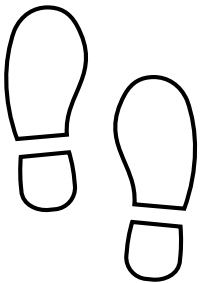
Supporting parents to recognise this and for the child to know that their parent is there to listen and not blame or judge, is key to building strong family connections.

***“It would be nice to be comforted first. Think about it. Maybe discuss what happened later on.”
(Young person)***

Talk about being missing

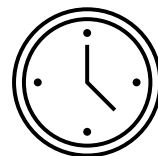
If the child does want to talk to their parents, the following tips might be helpful for parents to ensure they don't make it overwhelming:

- Don't rush the conversation, there is no objective or tick-list you need to work through. Try to just give space and time with no pressure. If they want to talk about something other than being missing, go with it!
- Avoid telling them off or becoming angry even if you feel frustrated. Take a break if you need to. Try not to act shocked if they tell you something difficult. There will be time to work through everything.
- If possible, give the child some choice over the conversation (e.g. “I know it's late, but I really want to spend some time together and see how you are. We can talk for as little or as long as you like. Or do you want to talk in the morning?”)
- The most important thing is that home should feel like a safe space that they want to come back to



Self-care

Explore with parents their self-care so that they can continue to support their child and to keep reporting their child missing, especially when there are regularly missing.



Show you care

Sometimes all a parent can do is give their child a hug and say, “we love you and are worried about you”, but this is important for their child to hear. Encourage parents to think about basic needs such as food, warm drinks, clean sheets, shower, sleep, responding to physical discomfort etc. Check in with the child by asking if they are OK and find out anything they might need at that moment. Enable parents to continue with the family’s routine to create stability where possible.

Next steps for professionals

- Have the police been notified and has a safe and well check/prevention interview taken place?
- Have return home interviews taken place and information shared with key partners?
- Is anyone providing ongoing support to the parents/carers? Have you considered how partner organisations are working with the family, if it is safe to do so?
- If there are concerns around trafficking or exploitation, has an NRM referral been considered and information gathered on potential perpetrators?



Creating stability

Prepare parents that when their child returns this can be a trigger for high emotions and can cause further conflict especially when there have been repeated missing episodes.

To try and create stability parents may need to identify strategies such as time out, making drinks/food, tag-teaming with other family members so that they themselves can be calmer and think about how they can support and talk to their child.

Helping parents to understand the impact of being reported missing and that the child is not to blame can help parents to understand what is happening to their child.

*“I need time. I need to reassure myself. I need to ask myself why I ran away. Not a long time. I need to talk about what happened in the first place.”
(Young person)*

You can find out more about Missing People’s services, including SafeCall if you are worried about a child being criminally exploited, at

[Make a referral - Missing People.](#)

NWG is a national networking charity working together to inform, educate and prevent child exploitation and abuse throughout the UK. You can find resources, training and membership information at **[NWG Network.](#)**

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