

Family based carers: Missing or absent from placement fact sheet

This fact sheet provides guidance for family based carers (referred to as carers in this document) responding to children and young people who are missing or absent from placement. This does not apply when children and young people are late returning to their placement or absent for short periods and there are no concerns for their safety and wellbeing.

If it is an emergency situation (for example, the child or young person has been taken, is suicidal or is in immediate or life threatening danger), call South Australia Police (SAPOL) immediately on 000. It is important to record the report number provided by SAPOL so that this can be used in future communication. If it is an emergency, carers are required to follow the below process after the call to SAPOL has been made.

Deciding if a child or young person is missing or absent

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.

When deciding whether a child or young person is missing or absent, carers are required to 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, another professional or any other person that the carer 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 carer is required to consider the child or young person as missing.

If the child or young person is sighted briefly at a location but they do not stay there, the carer is to consider the child or young person as missing.

The carer can contact their support service provider or [DCP](#) at any point to request assistance with this process, if needed. The carer is required to also follow any other guidance that the support service provider has given them that is relevant to the situation.

Keeping notes

The carer is required to maintain written notes of actions taken from when the child or young person goes missing or is absent until they return to the placement. This includes but is not limited to keeping written notes of:

- details of when the child or young person became missing or absent
- any information that would assist in locating them (including descriptions of clothing, or people they are suspected to be with)
- attempts to locate or contact the child or person
- contacts with SAPOL.

The carer can contact [DCP](#) for assistance with this process, if needed.

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.

When a child or young person is missing

Attempt to locate the child or young person

As soon as it is known that a child or young person is missing, the carer is required to try to find the child or young person as quickly as possible. This 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).

The carer is required to conduct a quick initial search for the child or young person at this stage and the carer can continue to search for the child or young person once SAPOL have been contacted, if appropriate.

Contact SAPOL to report the child or young person missing

If attempts made to locate the child or young person have not been successful and there are concerns for their safety or wellbeing, call SAPOL on 131 444 as quickly as possible, to report them as a missing person. It is important to record the report number provided by SAPOL, which begins with the letters 'SAP' so that this can be used in future communication. The carer can contact their support service provider for assistance with contacting SAPOL, if needed.

If SAPOL has 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. If SAPOL advise the carer they need further information to be able to record the Missing Person Report, the carer is required contact [DCP](#) and DCP staff will contact SAPOL to make the report.

Contact DCP

The carer is required to contact [DCP](#) as soon as possible to inform them of the situation. If contact has been made with SAPOL, the carer is required to provide DCP details of the report made to SAPOL. The carer can contact their support service provider for assistance with contacting DCP, if needed.

Media campaigns/queries for missing children and young people

SAPOL may recommend a media campaign to help locate a child or young person, including a request to use a photograph of the child or young person. DCP will coordinate these requests.

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

While the child or young person remains missing

Until the child or young person returns to placement, the carer is required to:

- continue to actively look for and contact the child or young person. This may include checking places the child or young person is known to visit regularly (for example, shopping centres, parks, skate parks etc), if safe to do so.
- notify relevant people (where appropriate) such as the child or young person's school or therapist that the child or young person is missing
- contact [DCP](#) with any relevant further information
- keep their support service provider updated if the carer wants their support
- continue to keep notes.

When the child or young person is located

The carer is required to contact SAPOL and DCP to advise them that the child or young person has been located if they are not already aware. If the child or young person will not return to placement but has been located, the carer is required to follow the guidance under [When a child or young person is absent](#).

When a child or young person is absent

The carer is required to attempt to contact the child or young person and help them return to placement, if it is safe to do so. The carer is required to contact DCP as soon as possible if:

- there are concerns that the child or young person is at risk or there are safety concerns for the carer in attempting to return the child or young person to placement
- the child or young person cannot be contacted or refuses to return to placement
- the carer is unable to attend the location where the child or young person is
- the carer suspects that there is criminal activity at the location where the child or young person is.

The carer can contact their support service provider for assistance with contacting DCP, if needed. If the child or young person does not return to placement, DCP will provide the carer with guidance.

Unless advised otherwise by DCP, the carer is required to:

- continue to remain in contact with the child or young person and encourage them to return to placement

- notify relevant people (where appropriate) such as the child or young person's school or therapist that the child or young person is absent
- contact DCP with any relevant further information
- keep their support service provider updated if the carer wants their support
- continue to keep notes.

If the child or young person leaves this location and their location is no longer known, the carer is required to follow the guidance under [When a child or young person is missing](#).

When the child or young person is located and returns to placement

Transport

If SAPOL locates the child or young person, they will contact [DCP](#) or the carer to advise the child or young person has been located and requires transport.

The carer is responsible for transporting the child or young person back to placement. The carer is required to contact SAPOL as soon as possible if there is a delay with collecting the child or young person. If the carer is unable to provide transport to collect a child or young person, they are required to contact [DCP](#) to seek assistance.

Responding when the child or young person returns

The carer is required to contact [DCP](#) when the child or young person returns to placement.

After the child or young person returns to placement, it is important for the carer to show the child or young person that they are happy to have them back and that their safety is the primary priority. Showing the child or young person that they have come home to a nurturing environment where people genuinely care about them will be important to the child or young person. 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. Consideration includes:

- attending 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)
- trying to talk to the child or young person about their experience once they are calm and settled. It is important not to put pressure on the child or young person and ensure they are comfortable with the pace of the conversation. 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, family crisis, trauma related behaviours, problems at the placement, family crisis or behaviours related to disability such as autism)
- attempting to understand why the child or young person went missing or became absent and what had led up to the event



- informing 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
- as soon as possible, providing any important information to the DCP case worker. For example:
 - details about 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
 - as much information as possible about where the child or young person has been, including the names and addresses of people where they may have been staying
 - 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 refuses to speak with their carer, the carer is required to advise the DCP case worker so that they may attempt to speak with the child or young person as soon as possible to gather the necessary information.