

PREOCEDURE

When a Child leaves the Group unaccompanied

This should never happen, and very rarely does. Groups should have in place the following systems for the protection of the children.

- All exits from the premises should be locked/guarded in a way which makes it impossible for a child to leave unobserved/unattended, while allowing rapid exit for the whole group in the case of emergency.
- An accurate and up-to-date register must be kept and both adults and children, including visitors, should be signed in and out whenever they enter and leave the premises.
- Key-workers of new children should take especial care to ensure that both children and their parents know where they may and may not go. Key-workers will also seek advice from parents new to the group so that they are forewarned about particularly adventurous children.
- All children in the group should know the rules and the reasons for them.
- Prominent notices should alert any visitors to the need to keep doors closed and to the reason for this.
- Premises vary, and each has its own particular hazards. Groups should conduct a risk assessment in consultation with parents so that all the adults in the group are aware of any potential dangers and can work together to avoid them.
- Parents and staff should work together for the safety of all the children in the group. New parents should be helped to take an active role by being made aware of the group's safety procedures and being encouraged to alert a member of staff if they notice a child whose behaviour suggests that s/he might be thinking of trying to leave.

In the best regulated situations, however, accidents can and do happen. These are the procedures to follow if you cannot find a child.

1 Find out quickly

The chances of finding a missing child safe are greatest if the child's absence is soon discovered. Know how many children should be present and make someone responsible for regular counted checks. The key-worker system offers enormous advantages, as it is very easy for a key-worker to be aware of the few children for whom s/he is especially responsible – and if one seems to be missing, the key-worker will know at once who it is.

2 Search systematically

The group is responsible for the missing child and also for the other children in the group. One advantage of the high adult: child ratio in pre-schools is that in any emergency some adults can be freed to respond to the new situation without neglecting the needs of the other children. It can be useful to gather the remaining children into one large group – having a story, perhaps, with one adult – while the rest search.

Without alarming them, ask the children themselves whether they have seen the child who is missing. They can sometimes be a useful source of information.

Check that all the adults are present and that all know the problem. It is useful to establish, if you can, who last saw the child, when and doing what. It can also be helpful to have prepared in advance a checklist of possible hiding-places in and around the pre-school's premises.

Check every room in the building and also any accessible outside area.

If the premises are used by other people/organisations, inform them and, if appropriate, seek their co-operation.

3 Parents

Alarming them as little as possible, call the child's parents to warn them that the child may be attempting to get home. If they are out or at work, the group should have an alternative number to call in emergencies. If the child lives within walking distance of the group, one adult should make the journey on foot in order to catch up with or intercept the child if possible. Remember that as soon as parents are informed, they will need advice and support.

4 The police

If the above steps do not locate the child, the police must be called. They have the resources to conduct a search and speed is important.

5 Informing other people

Make regular checks to ensure that if an incident of this sort does happen, you have all the necessary phone numbers at hand – correct, up to date and kept together.

- If you have to call the police, tell the Social Services department that you have done so. If the relevant social worker is not in the building, leave a message with the duty officer. The Social Services department will need to know-

- What systems you operate for preventing such occurrences
- What happened
- What you did, at what time and in what order
- Whom you informed, and when.

They will want to conduct their own investigation

- If the chair/owner is not on the premises, s/he must be informed as soon as possible.
- If you are insured through the Pre-school Learning Alliance, call the Insurance Manager at National Centre (0171 833 0991). S/he will advise you and will contact the insurers on your behalf. Otherwise, call your insurance company direct.

6 The Accident & Incident book

Start to build up a record of the event as soon as an adult has time to do so. This is important, even if, as is likely, the child is found safe with a few minutes. Your accident & incident book provides an invaluable ongoing record of potential hazards as well as actual accidents. Include in the record the last definite sighting of the child and anything unusual that day about the behaviour of that child or any of the other children.

7 Dealing with people's reactions

The child's parents will be frightened, distressed and probably angry. These feelings are natural. If in the past the group has talked through safety issues with parents, sharing concerns and establishing systems with which both group and parents feel comfortable, the situation will be easier for all the adults because they will be working from within a framework of mutual trust and understanding.

Because powerful emotions are involved, people's behaviour can be unpredictable. People who seem quite calm about the incident at the time can later on become very angry, threatening legal action or recourse to the local press.

It is therefore important to be very careful from the beginning about the words you use to talk to people about the incident. Do not say anything which might invalidate your insurance by implying that you accept liability. However, that does not mean that you have to appear uncaring. Do not say, "No comment," which can make you appear indifferent and unhelpful. Say:

- How sorry you are that the incident has happened
- That a full investigation is in hand
- That the Social Services have been informed and will also be investigating

7 Dealing with the media

Distressed parents may contact local press, or reporters might hear about the incident if the police are involved. It is sensible for one person – usually the chair or owner – to be the one who speaks for the group to the media. However, you cannot be sure that reporters will approach the group direct; they may call other staff or parents for views. As early as you can advise all adults about what they should say, as above, or ask them to refer all enquiries to the agreed spokesperson.

8 Informing other parents

Other parents need to be given brief, accurate information as rapidly as possible. This is the best way to prevent the spreading of gossip. It might be possible to call a brief meeting when parents and carers come to collect children, or when they arrive next day, or to send home a short note with each child.

9 When the child is found

During the time a child is missing, however briefly, all the adults involved – parents and others – suffer great fear, guilt and distress. It is not always easy to control all these emotions when the child is found. It is important to remember:

- That the child also might have been afraid and distressed and might now be in need of comfort
- That the child may be completely unaware of having done anything wrong (One child found quite safe after a terrifying few minutes said simply “I just went to get mummy”)
- That the incident provides a good opportunity to talk to all the children to ensure that they understand that they must not leave the premises, and why.