



SOCIAL SERVICES INSPECTORATE PRACTICE GUIDELINES ON: ¹ RESPONDING TO UNAUTHORISED ABSENCES

30th November 2005

1. Introduction

The majority of children's residential centres have written policies and procedures for staff to follow when a child is absent without permission, including notification requirements. While these policies are very thorough they are generally suitable to be applied in instances where children are either known to be at serious risk to themselves or where a risk assessment has indicated that this is likely. Inspectors were concerned at the number of instances, where as a matter of routine, Gardai were notified of an absence when staff had no real concern for the child's safety, and where the notification was made as a procedural step.

This guidance note is an attempt to differentiate between two types of absences. It is hoped this will assist the HSE and non statutory providers of children's residential services to meet their statutory obligation to have *suitable care practices and operational policies* and a system for the *notification of significant events* as required by Articles 5 and 15 of the Child Care Regulations 1995.

2. Purpose and Function

The definitions and principles outlined below distinguish between absences that are considered to place the child at risk and those that do not. While in the main this guidance could be applied across a range of residential care services, it should be considered alongside the purpose and function of the centre and relevant legal orders. For example, the broad principles may apply to absences from Special Care Units, but the fact that children are placed under detention orders requires that Gardai are routinely notified of absences.

3. Definitions

Absent without permission

A child should be considered absent without permission if they leave the centre without informing staff of their intentions or destination, or if they have failed to return at an agreed time, in circumstances where staff are generally aware of their activities or whereabouts.

Absent at risk

¹ The term child is used throughout to refer to children and young people under the age of 18 years.

A child should be considered absent at risk if he or she is absent without permission in circumstances that give rise to concern for the safety of the young person. Even where the staff may know the whereabouts of a child, he or she could be considered 'absent at risk' due to their vulnerability, previous patterns of behaviour, and other level of risk.

Distinguishing between the two categories is the first step to responding appropriately, as both categories require separate responses.

4. Underlying principles for both categories of absence

'Absent without permission'

Being absent without permission does not in itself place a child at risk. Leaving the centre without the staff's permission, prearranging activities and going to them without consent, not returning on time, leaving but being on the grounds of the centre or in the locality, and so on, do not, as a general rule, warrant the implementation of an unauthorised absence procedure. Instead the response should reflect the fact that children test boundaries. Formal reporting of a young person to the Gardai in these circumstances is not appropriate nor does it assist the development of responsible social learning.

Key principles underlying policy and practice when a child is considered 'absent without permission' include:

- An agreed response to persistent lateness or leaving without permission should be included in the child's placement plan
- Practice should take into account the staff's knowledge of the child, and his/her age, maturity and individual circumstances
- There should be a general ethos that promotes personal safety. Children should know the rules and expectations regarding time keeping, their need to inform staff when they are leaving the centre, and their destination
- Staff should have a good knowledge of the children's relationships with significant adults and peers. As a general rule they should know the activities and whereabouts of the children
- Practices such as regular mobile phone contact and age-appropriate 'checking-in' should be routine. Agreement about the circumstances in which the children are required to contact staff should be reached through centre rules and consultation.
- The care and placement planning process is the appropriate forum to review absences and to put in place plans to respond to them
- The overall pattern or numbers of absences should be monitored and evaluated by external line management.

‘Absent at risk’

Residential staff are in a key position to judge which circumstances involve boundary testing and which give rise to safety concerns and come within the definition of ‘absent at risk’. In some instances, even short periods of absence can evoke the unauthorised absence procedure, including notification to the Gardai. This occurs where the vulnerability of particular children who go missing is such that they are considered at risk as soon as they are unsupervised.

Key principles underlying policy when a child is considered ‘absent at risk’ include:

- The safety and welfare of the child is paramount
- The centre has a duty of care for the wellbeing and safety of the children. This involves locating and returning them to a safe and suitable environment
- The nature of the absence and action taken is informed by a risk assessment (see section 5)
- Staff should take reasonable measures to dissuade and discourage children from leaving the centre without permission, including addressing risk taking behaviour.
- The issue of child protection is often closely linked to that of behaviour management, including being absent at risk. Children who clearly put themselves at serious risk in the course of unauthorised absences should be processed through the child protection system in accordance with Children First Guidelines
- Notification to the Gardai should take place as per the written protocols of the centre and following risk assessment
- On admission to the centre, parents, social workers and children should be given written protocols on what the centre will do if a child is absent without permission or absent at risk.
- The care and placement planning process is the appropriate forum to review ‘absences at risk’, where in consultation with all, a suitable response can be agreed.

5. Risk Assessment

The centre manager and staff should do all in their power to ensure children do not come to harm while under their care. The key to the management of absent with permission or absent at risk is to have agreed a response in advance of it occurring. Placement planning provides an opportunity to ascertain the likelihood of it happening; the supervision/support necessary; and, consultation with parents; so that specific measures are incorporated into care and placement plans. Expectations should be discussed with the child to ensure an understanding that safety is the priority.

One cannot plan for every event. The risk for children may vary at different stages of their placement or in response to specific life events. In assessing the significance of a child's absence from the centre, all staff should apply the above definitions, be informed by the placement planning process and, in addition, undertake a risk assessment. Whatever assessment tool is used, the following should be taken into consideration:

- The age, developmental stage, and personal circumstances of the child
- Decisions already agreed and incorporated into the child's care plan
- Previous behaviour patterns – does the child have a history of absencing him or herself
- Length of time absent
- Likely use of drugs/solvents/alcohol
- Risk of self-harm
- Previous actions whilst absent
- Any special needs
- Whether the child is perceived as running to someone, or running from a situation
- The staff's knowledge of the child's friends/peer group
- Whether the child is familiar with the area
- The child's risk to others
- Whether the child is being targeted or exploited by adults in the community
- The child's physical health

The level of risk for children will vary depending on their circumstances. Carrying out a risk assessment assists staff in making a professional judgement on the most appropriate action to take.

6. Practice on return from an unauthorised absence

While the majority of centres have agreed policy and procedures in response to being absent from the centre, not all provide guidance on the manner in which children should be received back into the centre on their return.

Children should:

- be able to return to a centre no matter how late it is and transport should be arranged if required
- receive a message that they are welcome and that the staff are glad that they are safe
- be provided with something to eat or drink
- be given an opportunity to discuss where they were and what happened to them

- depending on the length of absence and level of risk, be offered an opportunity for a medical examination/consultation
- be monitored as appropriate for signs of distress or illness

Parents, social workers and Gardai should be notified of the child's return as soon as possible.

It is good practice for social workers to meet with the child as soon as possible after their return. This is particularly important where the absence was unexpected, or in the case of children who were absent from a special care unit.

It is important to ascertain whether absences were motivated by an attraction to a situation outside of a centre or a desire to get away from a situation inside it.

7. Monitoring and evaluation

External line management have a responsibility to monitor the pattern, number, and nature of absences from children's residential centres. They should periodically review procedures for dealing with absences to ensure that they provide an effective response to the needs and safety of the children.

Absences that warrant the implementation of an absent at risk procedure should be notified to the monitoring officer.