

Conducting good return interviews for young people who run away

What are return interviews

A return interview is an in-depth conversation with a young person who has run away. It should be led by an independent, trained professional whom the young person trusts.

The statutory guidance states that local authorities must offer an independent return interview to all children who run away or go missing from their family home or care.¹

Children in care should be offered the choice of speaking to a representative or advocate who is independent of their placement or the responsible local authority.

The interviewer should know how to communicate with young people and have a good knowledge of risk indicators.

A return interview can:

- **Help understand and address the reasons why a child has run away** such as abuse, neglect or exploitation, involvement in gangs or crime, use of alcohol or drugs
- **Identify harm** that may have occurred while the child was away
- **Allow professionals to identify actions** they need to take to address and prevent further risks
- **Help the child feel safe** and understand how and where they can seek help if they feel overwhelmed and want to run away again
- **Provide them with information on how to stay safe** if they choose to run away again and to understand the risks of running away.



Seven steps to a successful return interview

A return interview should fit with local safeguarding responses. Local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols should specify referral routes for return interviews and how information about young runaways is shared between all local safeguarding services. This should include information collected through return interviews.

1. The initial contact

- **You should decide on the most appropriate way to approach a young person to offer them a return interview.** This can be done via phone, letter or text. It is important that unsuccessful initial contact is followed up with several more attempts using different methods.
- **If you are making contact by phone, you have about one minute to engage the young person successfully.** The importance of getting your first phone call right cannot be emphasised enough.
- **If you are making contact in writing, make sure that you use young person friendly language.**
- **A letter can allow you to clearly explain to the young person why they should talk to you** so they have time to digest the information before you call them.
- **Explain who you are and what the service does.** The important things to get across quickly are: You are independent, talking to you is voluntary, they don't have to talk to you, you are worried about them and care what they think, you want to find out what going on for them, you are not telling them off!

2. The first meeting

- **Hold the interview in a neutral place** where the child feels safe, if possible.
- **If you have to conduct the interview at home,** it is important that you speak to the young person alone, but also make sure you give parents or carers space to talk about their concerns.
- **Turn up on time;** you said you cared when you phoned.
- **Don't be surprised if they have forgotten** they are meeting you or don't want to talk to you now.
- **Be friendly** and listen to how they want to proceed. It is important to ensure that they feel they can talk to you in the future; some young people run away frequently and may be referred to your service again.
- **Have a conversation with them first** before you start taking notes; you need to gain trust.



3. The conversation

- **Push and pull factors.**

The conversation should focus on 'push' factors such as bullying, abuse at home and 'pull' factors such as child sexual exploitation that caused the young person to run away.

- **Discuss confidentiality at the beginning.** Make sure they understand what information will need to be shared with other services and what information will always be kept confidential.

- **Conversation principles:** your conversation needs to be caring, creative, conversational and courageous to develop a sharing culture and relationship.

- **Use child friendly discussion techniques.**



Issues to explore in the conversation

Return interviews provide an opportunity to hear from the young person why they ran away, understand the risks and issues they experienced while they were away and identify any future risks. The return interview should aim to establish whether the young person:

- Has gone missing or run away before
- Has been frequently away from placement (or their home) without authorisation
- Has been hurt or harmed while they were away
- Been at known or suspected risk of sexual exploitation or trafficking
- Been at known or suspected risk of involvement in criminal activity or drugs
- Had contact with people who pose a risk to children
- Ran away with anyone and where they ran to.

This conversation also helps the young person understand the risks of running away, how to seek help and where to get help next time.

'I would like to be treated with respect by them (professionals), and for them to listen to me.' Young person who has run away

Good principles

- **How to communicate with young people.** Young people who have run away tell us they want to be respected, not judged, and have their views listened to.
- **Develop a trusting relationship.** Young people who have run away need to trust you before they talk to you about the often very traumatic reasons, why they ran away.
- **Explore solutions with the young person** in a way that supports and empowers them to reach solutions that they understand. Don't tell them what they should do. Many young people who run away will not accept they are at risk so you should be able to help them to understand these.
- **Ensure continuity of worker;** it's important that the same worker contacts the young person every time. Check that they are happy with the worker or if they would prefer a male or female for cultural or other reasons.
- **Persistence is right, insistence is not.** A return interview is voluntary and some young people will refuse to talk to you the first few times they are referred. If you show you will keep offering, eventually most will want a return visit.
- **While you may see the young person on many occasions, you are not a case worker.** You may conduct one return interview for several runaway episodes or you may need more than one visit to build enough of a relationship for the young person to disclose.



4. The assessment of need

A return interview must be part of a wider assessment of the child's needs, eg an Early Help Assessment (EHA) or Common Assessment Framework (CAF) to:

- **Identify any immediate or long term follow-up support** such as counselling or a police referral
- **Assess** whether they might run away again
- **Make a safeguarding referral** if appropriate in accordance with safeguarding guidance.²



5. The agreement

- **Confidentiality.** If a young person has disclosed something, they need to be reminded that you will pass this on if it is a concern. Do not break confidentiality without agreement.
- **Agreement and consequences.** Talk through any consequences of sharing information with you and get agreement.
- **Tell them what you will do,** eg follow your safeguarding procedures.
- **Agree what you will feed back** to professionals, or their parents/carers, if it isn't a safeguarding concern.

6. Feedback, review and exit

- **A return interview is only effective if appropriate follow up support is offered** to the young person to help them deal with the issues that caused them to run away or they experienced while they ran away.
- **Use a report on 'push' and 'pull' factors** to feed back to professionals and parents/carers. Always feedback verbally and in writing to the young person as well.
- **Put a plan in place to address any issues identified during the return interview.** This may include a re-assessment, EHA/CAF or a referral to specialist services such as CAHMS or voluntary agencies.
- **Follow up with the young person and any professional** within a week to see what action has taken place.
- **Your aim is to ensure that action by the relevant agencies is taken** to reduce the risks the young person faces when running away and that intelligence is passed on.
- **Be clear to the young person about the limitations of your support from now on,** while also being clear on how they can reach you if they need to.



7. Recording information

- **Information disclosed by the young person in a return interview should be collected**, eg where they were, who they were with and what happened while they were away.
- **This information should be shared with the LSCB, police or children's services** who should monitor, analyse and take action (taking into account any data protection, confidentiality or safeguarding responsibilities).
- **This can identify 'hot spots'**, areas where children are going missing to, and individuals who target children for sexual exploitation. This evidence can help the police with their investigations and the Crown Prosecution Service to build a criminal case.



'They've given me support and help. Now if I feel depressed or lonely, instead of running away I try to find someone to talk to.'
Young person who has run away

Case study: The importance of persistence

Laura, aged 13, went missing overnight and was picked up by the police at a 'party' where she was drinking alcohol and was with other unsupervised older young people. The girl was arrested by the police as she refused to return home and became uncooperative.

Laura was given a return interview by one of our project workers but did not fully engage and refused to receive any further support.

A month later, Laura went missing again. The project worker contacted her by telephone and she was much more engaged in the discussion. She refused a return interview but stated that the incident was a

'misunderstanding' and that she did not feel at risk. Her mum also advised that things were a little better at home; she was very supportive of project becoming involved if her daughter could be persuaded.

A month later, Laura had a further missing incident. At this point, children's social care visited the family and undertook an initial assessment. The project worker persuaded Laura to engage in a return interview. This was the third time she had spoken with the project worker and the young person seemed more relaxed. She stated that she would like a service from the project, which we provided.

About The Children's Society

The Children's Society delivers high quality services to children who have run away or gone missing and/or may be at risk or are victims of sexual exploitation. We provide a range of targeted and specialist services including intensive one-to-one support and advice, drop-in services and family mediation. Our services provide a safe haven where children can go for independent and confidential help, advice and support.

The Children's Society are specialists in delivering return interviews and achieving effective results.



Commission The Children's Society

Contact us today to find out how we can deliver return interviews for young runaways in your area.

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