

How I Handled...

A Child Who Was Reported Lost or Missing

In a large school, it is inevitable that a frantic parent will call to report that his child has not made it home from school according to the normal schedule. In order to help keep the parent calm while we get to the bottom of the situation, it is important to have a plan.

The Problem:

In my elementary school of more than 900 students, sometimes a child is “misplaced” during the end-of-day dismissal. The child might end up on the wrong bus, or he might have gotten off the bus and gone home with a friend without parent permission. When that happens, no matter what the reason, things can get frightening and tense until the child is located. There is no time to waste.

The Solution:

Because the adult responsible for the lost child is usually frantic -- or angry -- we developed a plan for handling situations such as this. Our plan can be launched as soon as we get word of a missing child. One of us in the school can keep the responsible adult calm while somebody else follows our plan.

We developed the checklist below based on our past experiences with missing students. We keep this checklist in a special red binder by the phone at our main office desk. If someone calls trying to locate a child after school, the staff member has immediate access to the steps that need to be taken, as well as the phone numbers of those who might be called on to help resolve the situation.

LOST STUDENTS - AFTER SCHOOL HOURS

If we receive word that a student has not arrived home safely after school, the person who answers the phone should take the following steps:

1. Ask the caller the student's name, age, grade, and homeroom teacher's name.
2. Take the name and phone number of the caller *and* the name and phone number of a person who will stay by a phone to be the contact person.
3. Before hanging up, remind the caller to call the school if the child is located.
4. Check the sign-out sheet in the school office to see if child was picked up early. If the child was picked up, by whom was s/he picked up?
5. Pull the emergency card for the student.
6. Pull the child's transportation form to see where s/he should go. How does the child usually get home? Was today a change in routine or has s/he recently changed routines?
7. Call the homeroom teacher at home to see if s/he knows of any change in routine or any specific after-school plans the child had. Ask the teacher if s/he recalls what the child was wearing that day.

8. Call principal and assistant principal:

Principal Name _____
Home Phone: _____
Cell Phone: _____
Asst. Principal Name: _____
Home Phone: _____
Cell Phone: _____

9. Check with teachers on bus duty, daycare duty, and car/rider duty.

10. Call Transportation (Phone: _____) Talk to the bus driver to see if s/he knows where the child got off, who the child was sitting/visiting with on bus

11. Call the child's friends in the homeroom to see if they know anything.

12. Call District Security (Phone: _____) Provide a description of the child, the clothing s/he was wearing, and emergency card information.

13. Drive through the neighborhood; inquire of other children in the neighborhood to learn if any of them might have seen the missing child or know where s/he was going.

14. Check the student's desk and coat closet to see if anything is unusual. (Is it empty? Were any notes left behind?)

The Reflection:

Our checklist really helps us focus. Having a written plan in place enables staff members to take immediate steps to locate a child even if an administrator is not available at that moment. When parents see that we have a long list of actions we can take, it helps them stay a little calmer.

We encourage the parent/caller to stay put. Parents who are panicked often want to come to the school or start searching the neighborhood; but, if the child is simply on the wrong bus or if someone finds the child, then the parent is not at home when the child arrives late.

When an incident is behind us, we have a written record [the checklist] of the incident. That record enables us to analyze problem areas that might cause these situations to happen. Most of the time, the child went home with a friend, got on the wrong bus, or the "other" parent picked up him/her without telling the spouse or ex-spouse.

About the How I Handled... Team of Principal Problem Solvers

The How I Handled series is intended to be practical resource for all principals and principals-to-be. Each week, members of Education World's How I Handled team share how they solved actual problems relating to school leadership, parent involvement, professional development, and a host of other "principal" responsibilities. How I Handled team members are anonymous; in that way, they can share freely the range of issues/problems they are called on to solve each day.

Procedure for Schools - Children who go missing throughout the school day

This protocol refers to pupils who register at school in the morning and then go missing during the school day without a satisfactory explanation.

Schools will have procedures for pupils who fail to register, if there are concerns about the level of attendance the Enforcement Guidance should be used.

A separate procedure exists for Children Missing Education. The Department for Education (DfE) defines a child missing education as a child who is not on a school roll and has been out of education for more than 4 school weeks. The term Children Missing from Education (CME) therefore refers to all children of compulsory school age who are neither registered at a school nor educated otherwise (i.e. home educated or privately educated.)

Missing Definition:

When a pupil's whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be the subject of a crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.

Is the pupil at significant risk?

A pupil missing during schools hours incident would be prioritised as significant risk' where:

- The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the child/young person is in danger through their own vulnerability. Vulnerability characteristics may include;

- Ø Children on a plan (Early Help, Child in Need, Looked After or Child Protection Plan)

- Ø A disability and/or special educational needs

- Ø Substance misuse

- Ø Education health care plan

- The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger.

- There are indications that the child/young person has already come to harm (CSE, grooming, radicalisation etc.)

Other contributory factors should be taken into consideration when determining if the pupil is at significant risk, for example;

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Have there been past concerns about this child and family which together with the sudden disappearance are worrying?

- Ø Is there any known history of drug or alcohol dependency within the family?

- Ø Is there any known history of domestic violence?
- Ø Is there concern about the parent/carer's ability to protect the child from harm?
- Ø Is this very sudden and unexpected behaviour?
- Ø Have there been any past concerns about the child associating with significantly older young people or adults?
- Ø Was there any significant incident prior to the child's unexplained absence?
- Ø Has the child been a victim of bullying?
- Ø Are there health reasons to believe that the child is at risk? e.g. does the child need essential medication or health care?
- Ø Was the child noted to be depressed prior to the child's unexplained absence?
- Ø Are there religious or cultural reasons to believe that the child is at risk? e.g. rites of passage, female genital mutilation or forced marriage planned for the child?

Procedure:

Once a pupil is identified as missing by any member of school staff, the Designated Safeguarding Lead will be informed.

Staff will use professional judgement and risk assess the urgency of the situation to help inform the timeframe required in establishing the pupils' whereabouts before notifying the Police. Timeliness should be on a case by case basis.

Designated Safeguarding Lead should, together with the class teacher, assess the child's vulnerability.

School staff will try to locate the pupil and try to establish the whereabouts of them.

School staff will contact home and try to contact the pupil via their mobile telephone if known.

Notifying the Police

The information required by the Police to assist in locating and returning the pupil to a safe environment is as follows:

- The pupils name/s; date of birth; status (for example looked after child); responsible authority;
- Where and when they went missing;

- Previous missing episodes and where they went;
- Who, if anyone, they went missing with;

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- What the child was wearing plus any belongings they had with them such as bags, phone etc.; include mobile number.
- Description and recent photo;
- Medical history, if relevant;
- Time and location last seen;
- Circumstances or events around going missing with relevant safeguarding information;
- Details of family, friends and associates;
- Contact details of safeguarding lead if it was after school hours.

Whilst the search is ongoing, the school will continue to liaise with the police and act in accordance with police instructions.

Option 1 – if the child returns before the police have arrived then the Police must be informed and own school procedures need to be followed.

Option 2 - if the child returns to school of their own volition, then the Police must be informed and own school procedures need to be followed.

Option 3 - if the police locate the child and bring them back to the school the Police will conduct the safe and well interview and the school will follow School procedure.

Where a pupil has a known risk of being missing, a risk assessment for the pupil will be written and put in to place.

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