

WHITLEY LODGE UNDER FIVES

PROCEDURES FOR WHEN A CHILD LEAVES THE GROUP UNACCOMPANIED

This should never happen and the following systems are in place for the protection of children:

- All exits from the premises are locked and guarded in a way that makes it difficult for a child to leave unobserved/unattended, while allowing rapid exit for the whole group in the case of emergency. Further details are contained in the door control policy.
- An accurate and up to date register is kept and both adults and children are signed in and out when they enter or leave. Visitors are required to complete the visitor's book.
- Door alarms are fitted to the internal door to cloakroom and the external doors to alert a member of staff should one of the children open the door
- Prominent notices alert any visitors to the need to keep the doors closed and the reason for this.
- A risk assessment is carried out regularly so that all adults in the group are aware of any potential dangers and can work together to avoid them.
- Parents and staff work together for the safety of all children in the group.
- On outings children whose parents/carers are not present are allocated to a member of staff who supervises them at all times.

In the best-regulated situations however accidents can and do happen. The following procedures should be followed if a child cannot be found:

1. Find out quickly

The chances of finding a missing child safe are greatest if the child's absence is soon discovered. The register should be completed as children arrive. A second member of staff should cross check the register and all staff should be aware of how many children are present. Counted checks should be made at talk time, when leaving for and returning from outside play, at story time and continuously on outings. This is the responsibility of the adult leading each particular activity. As soon as a child is found to be missing staff should alert the manager who checks the register to ensure no other child has gone astray.

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. All remaining children should be gathered into one large group, having a story, while the manager organises a search within the setting. On outings unaccompanied children would be supervised by the appropriate ratio of staff allowing other available staff members to conduct a 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 they all know the problem. It is useful to establish who last saw the child, when and doing what.

Check every part of the building and outside play area.

Inform the school/outing venue staff and seek their co-operation in searching the grounds/buildings.

3. The police

If the above steps do not locate the child, call the police. They have resources to conduct a search and speed is important. The manager would provide the police with a recent photo and a description of what the child was wearing.

4. Parents

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

5. The investigation

All necessary phone numbers are listed on the wall beside the phone.

Inform Ofsted (Tel: 0300 123 4666) and Social Services (Tel: 0345 2000109) giving the information listed below.

- what systems are in place to prevent such occurrences
- what happened
- what has been done, at what time and in what order
- who has been informed and when.

They will conduct their own investigation.

Inform the Chair as soon as possible who should then start an investigation with the management team. Start to build up a record of the event as soon as an adult has time to do so. This is important, even if the child is found safe within a few minutes. Record the last definite sighting of the child and anything unusual that day about the behaviour of that child or of any other children. Each member of staff present writes a detailed incident report, which is countersigned by a senior member of staff and the date and time added. This should include:

- the date and time of the incident
- where the child went missing from, e.g. the setting or an outing venue

- which staff/children were in the premises/on the outing and the name of the staff member designated as responsible for the child if applicable
- when the child was last seen including the time it is estimated the child went missing
- what has taken place

Call the Insurance Manager at the National Centre, Early Years Alliance (020 7697 2585). She will contact the insurers.

6. **Dealing with people's reactions**

The child's parents will be frightened, distressed and probably angry. These feelings are natural. As pre-school works closely and in partnership with parents it should mean that both parents and staff will work together within a framework of trust and understanding.

The staff will feel worried about the child and may blame themselves and will need support.

The other children will be sensitive to what is going on around them. They too may be worried. Our remaining staff, caring for the children, need to be focussed on their needs and not discuss the incident in front of them. They should answer children's questions honestly but also reassure them.

However, because powerful emotions are involved, people's behaviour can be unpredictable, and parents who seem quite calm about the incident at the time, may later become very angry. When meeting parents, there should be two members of staff, one of whom is the manager.

It is important to be very careful from the beginning about what is said about the incident. Do not say anything that may invalidate the insurance by implying that the group accepts liability. However it is vital not to be defensive or to appear uncaring or unhelpful. Say:

- How sorry the group is that the incident has happened
- That a full investigation is in hand
- That Ofsted have been informed and will also be investigating.

7. **Dealing with the media**

If the media become involved, it is sensible for one person - usually the Chair or Leader - to be the one who speaks for the group to the media.

Advise all adults about what they should say, as above, or ask them to refer all enquiries to the agreed spokesperson.

Contact the Insurance Manager at the National Centre who will alert the regional centre, who will in turn inform local staff and volunteers as appropriate. The ELA's PR Company will also advise.

8. Informing other parents

Other parents should be given brief accurate information as quickly as possible. This could be by holding a short meeting or sending a note home 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. Remember:

- The child may have been afraid and distressed and in need of comfort
- The child may be completely unaware of having done anything wrong
- The incident provides a good opportunity to talk to all the children to ensure that they understand that they must not leave the premises or stray from their carer on an outing, and why.