

Procedures for when a child leaves the group unaccompanied

1. This should never happen. The following systems are in place for the protection of 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 an 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.
 - Keyworkers of new children should take especial care to ensure that both children and their parents know where they may and may not go. Keyworkers 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.
2. In the best regulated situations, however, accidents can and do happen. These are the procedures to follow if you cannot find a child:

2.1 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 keyworker system offers enormous advantages, as it is very easy for a keyworker to be aware of the few children for whom s/he is especially responsible - and if one seems to be missing, the keyworker will know at once who it is.

2.2 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 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.

2.3 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.

2.4 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.

Procedures for when a child leaves the group unaccompanied

2.5 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 all together.

If you call the police, please also inform the MASH team that you have done so, they will want to conduct their own investigation. The Social Services department will need to know the following:

- 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.

The senior member of staff on-site must ensure that all line managers are informed as soon as possible.

2.6 The Incident Report Sheet

Start to build up a record of the event as soon as a senior member of staff has time to do so. This is important, even if, as is likely, the child is found safe within a few minutes. Include in the record the last definite sighting of the child and anything unusual that day about the behaviour of that child or of any other children.

2.7 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 of the adults because they will be working 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. 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.

2.8 Dealing with the media

Distressed parents may contact the local press, or reporters might hear about the incident if the police are involved. You cannot be sure that reporters will approach the group direct; they may call other staff or parents for views. All enquiries must be referred to the Senior Nursery Manager.

2.9 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 short meeting when parents and carers come to collect children, or when they arrive next day, or to send home a note with each child.

Beechwood Childcare Limited

Procedures for when a child leaves the group unaccompanied

There is no point in trying to hide what has happened. The important thing is to enlist the support of the whole pre-school community in learning from the event in order to ensure that it does not happen again.

2.10 When the child is found

During the time a child is missing, however briefly, all of the adults involved - parents and others - suffer great fear, guilt and distress. It is not always easy to control all of 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.
- 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.