

Missing from care – Practice advice

The *Framework to reduce criminalisation of young people in residential care* (the framework) draws on a number of recent Victorian reviews and reports on the experiences of children and young people in the out of home care and youth justice systems. A key finding from these reviews is that children and young people in residential care are more likely than other children and young people to have contact with police and the criminal justice system. The framework outlines 8 Guiding Principles as well as a decision-making guide for when to call police. The framework also supports practice for working and caring for young people when they are missing from care. To read the framework in full go to: <https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/framework-reduce-criminalisation-young-people-residential-care>

Guide to the framework

The framework outlines expectations of how police, residential care providers, the Department of Health and Human Services and other agencies should work together to limit the exposure of children and young people in residential care to the youth justice system or place themselves at further risk. This includes children and young people who are missing from care.

The thinking behind the practice

Behaviours such as missing from care may be as a result of, or impacted by, factors such as previously experienced trauma, disability, mental health, alcohol and other drugs and a young person's environment.

Along with their personal histories of trauma, missing from care can place young people at increased risk of further harm.

It is unsafe to assume that a young person who has repeated episodes of missing but always returns to placement decreases the risk; in fact, at times this is evidence of increasing risk.

There are obligations on residential care services to contact police when a young person is missing (check your organisations policies and procedures).



Your role

Every episode of missing should be assessed, considered independently and cumulatively, and treated as a serious event. Understanding and assessing every missing episode is important. Critical reflection following each missing episode helps build an understanding of the behaviour and the potential responses to it.

A return to care conversation is an important part of addressing this behaviour and reinforcing to young people that someone cares about them. It is an opportunity to speak and listen to them about missing episodes – highlighting their serious and dangerous nature – and if unknown, to determine their recent whereabouts and the people they may have been in contact with.

Return to care conversations

The focus of a return to care conversation is to hear from the young person about any reasons for leaving and to emphasise care and concern. It should:

- address any immediate health, emotional and safety needs.
- be completed by a worker the young person trusts
- used to inform planning to prevent future episodes of the young person missing from care
- not be an opportunity to reprimand or reinforce rules that the young person may have broken

If there was a missing person's report or a Children's Court warrant:

- consideration should be given to completing the return to care conversation jointly with police
- Police require information about the person's absence to help when investigating future missing persons reports
- this should be used as an opportunity to engage with the young person and to build relationships with local police

