"If their parents are constantly arguing, they just might feel […] like their whole world is crashing down and they don't want to be in a place where they feel like they're not secure"

AN EXPLORATION OF THE LINKS BETWEEN, AND RESPONSES TO, PARENTAL CONFLICT AND CHILDREN GOING MISSING

missing people

A lifeline when someone disappears

About Missing People

Missing People is the only charity in the UK which is dedicated to supporting those affected by missing. The charity provides specialist support to people who are at risk of going missing, those who are missing, and the families and friends left behind. For more information about the support services the charity provides, please visit our website: **www.missingpeople.org.uk**.

Understanding missing and the impact on those left behind enables Missing People and our partners to provide better services. Missing People's research team conducts research and evaluation projects on a range of topics. Recent reports can be found on our website: **www.missingpeople.org. uk/for-professionals/information-and-policy/information-and-research**.

Thank you

Thank you to all of those who took part in this research, particularly to participants with lived experience.

Project funding

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BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY

Research aims

Over 60,000 children went missing in England in 2023-24.[1] While there is a relatively good understanding of some of the factors influencing children to go missing, including exploitation, mental health, and living in the care system, little is known about the interaction between parental conflict and missing.[2] This is the case both regarding how experiencing parental conflict can influence a child to go missing, and regarding whether having a missing child can result in parents experiencing conflict.

This research explores:

1. What are the links between parental conflict and children going missing?

2. How do professionals identify and respond when a child is going missing and it is linked to parental conflict?

3. What good practice exists in responding to missing incidents that are linked to parental conflict?

Methodology

A mixed methods approach has been used in this research.

Young people
- 25 young people, aged up to 25, took part in 4 focus groups
- A public insights survey was conducted with 1,000 people aged 18 – 24 years old

Parents
- 3 parents took part in qualitative interviews
- A public insights survey was conducted with 512 parents of children under the age of 18

Professionals
- 82 professionals completed an online survey
- 31 professionals were interviewed or took part in focus groups

Literature review
- A literature review was completed

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1 National Crime Agency (2025) Missing Persons Data Report, 2023/24, **https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/images/mpu/downloads/UKMPU%20Statistical%20Report%202023-24.pdf**
What is missing? In England and Wales the definition of a missing person is: "anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located and their wellbeing or otherwise confirmed."
This definition is primarily used by police forces in determining whether to record and respond to someone as a missing person, but exactly how they respond will be an operational decision depending on the circumstances of the missing episode.

2 Missing People, Research about missing, **https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/policy-and-research/information-and-research/research-about-missing**
What is 'parental conflict'? Some level of arguing and conflict between parents is often a normal part of everyday life. However, there is strong evidence to show how inter-parental conflict that is frequent, intense and poorly resolved can have a significant negative impact on children's mental health and long-term life chances.
Damaging conflict between parents can be expressed in many ways such as:
- unresolved arguing
- silence
- lack of respect
- lack of resolution
Conflict can affect all types of parental relationships, including:
- parents who are in a relationship, whether married or not, including same-sex couples
- parents who have separated or divorced
- biological and step parents
- other family members playing a parenting role
- foster and adoptive parents
Parental conflict is distinct from domestic abuse, which is indicated by controlling behaviours and/or where one parent may feel fearful of the other. Approaches to reduce parental conflict are not where appropriate domestic abuse is present.

Freedom of information requests

- Data was sought from all English police forces
- Data was sought from all English local authorities

Missing People data

- 655 records held by Missing People were reviewed

Limitations

This research was delivered over a short period of time (February – March 2026), therefore it has not been possible to fully explore all related information and it should be seen to be exploratory research.

The area where this is most significant is the engagement with parents of missing children: only 3 parents took part in interviews, sharing their in-depth experiences, alongside 512 who took part in a public insights survey. In order to identify more parents to share their experiences, it is likely that relationships would need to be built up with third party organisations who could facilitate contact with parents with experience of parental conflict and their child going missing. This should be a key area of exploration in the future.

This research is primarily focused on the response to missing and parental conflict in England, however some of the data used in this research is not exclusive to England:

- It is likely that some of the Missing People records reviewed were contacts from children in Scotland and Wales, but it is not possible to exclude those records from this research. It is estimated that 95% of contacts to Missing People are from people in England
- The public insights survey was completed by residents of the UK, however the majority of responses were from residents of England

OVER 60,000 CHILDREN WENT MISSING IN ENGLAND IN 2023-24.

LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT THE INTERACTION BETWEEN PARENTAL CONFLICT AND MISSING. THIS IS THE CASE BOTH REGARDING HOW EXPERIENCING PARENTAL CONFLICT CAN INFLUENCE A CHILD TO GO MISSING, AND REGARDING WHETHER HAVING A MISSING CHILD CAN RESULT IN PARENTS EXPERIENCING CONFLICT.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are strong links between parental conflict and children going missing

"Parents engaged in conflict tend to focus on their own needs before the child's needs. Children may then seek guidance and comfort from peers. This may lead to changes in behaviours, resulting in missing episodes as the young person feels they [are] wanted by their peers but not wanted at home" **– local authority survey**

The vast majority of those taking part in this research felt that parental conflict can be an influence in children going missing.

- **87% (59 of 68)** of professionals working primarily in missing who completed a survey as part of this research felt that parental conflict is sometimes, fairly often, or very often part of the reason children go missing
- **93% (13 of 14)** of those working in reducing parental conflict teams felt that parental conflict plays a role in children going missing very often, sometimes or occasionally.

Professionals who think that parental conflict plays a role in children going missing at least sometimes
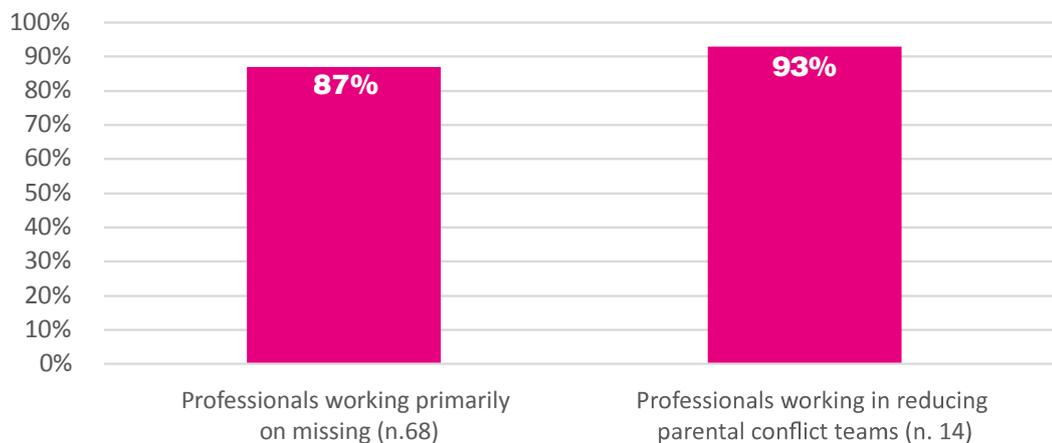
In data shared by 10 local authorities, parental conflict was identified in **19.3% (1,271 of 6,574)** of return home interview records from the past year

- **65% (649 of 1,000)** of the young people and **49% (251 of 512)** of parents of under-18-year-olds taking part in the public insights survey said that they thought 'conflict between parents / carers (i.e. between Mum and Dad)' could contribute to someone under the age of 18 running away from home

There were various reasons why parental conflict can contribute to a child going missing, including:

- The child may not feel like they belong, are part of a community, or are prioritised by parents
- They may feel psychologically unsafe and want to get away from that environment
- Differences in parenting styles can be difficult for the child to deal with
- Children can feel pressure to manage the conflict

These themes were shared in interviews and focus groups, as well as in the survey with professionals:

In your view, what motivations related to parental conflict most commonly contribute to a child going missing? (n. 68)

Bar chart showing percentages for each motivation:
- Conflict leads the child to become emotionally overwhelmed or dysregulated: 76%
- A lack of appropriate boundaries as a result of ongoing conflict: 72%
- Conflict between the child and parents: 66%
- Conflict resulting in the child generally being unhappy at home: 62%
- The child is trying to escape the situation: 46%
- The child feeling that they are not a priority because of the ongoing conflict: 38%
- The child is experiencing fear: 21%

100% (68 of 68) of professionals completing the survey felt parental conflict is a factor that is ordinarily in combination with another factor, as opposed to being the sole factor, influencing the child to go missing.

> "*It may not be like the only factor, but it can often be quite a big contributing factor and one of them kind of pushes to go missing.*" **– RHI interview**

Parental conflict can also result in a child being missing for longer than they otherwise would be, because the child does not want to go home, and can increase the risk of a child going missing repeatedly, or the risks surrounding them going missing otherwise escalating

Conversely, in some cases parental conflict can result in a child not being reported missing when they otherwise would have been. This is sometimes linked to the fact that, when parents are separated and not communicating well, neither may in fact know where the child is and can assume that they are with the other parent when they are not.

As well as being a driver for children to go missing, experiencing parental conflict can also increase a child's vulnerability to other associated risks, in particular poor mental health and risks around exploitation. Children who are experiencing parental conflict may be more vulnerable to exploitation because they are looking for community and care that they are not receiving at home, or because parents are less vigilant to warning signs and therefore less able to act as protective factors.

> "*Many occasions a missing episode begins due to parental conflict. I do believe this opens children up to forms of grooming, and because they have felt neglected at home, feel the groomer is providing what they don't have.*" **– police survey**

Returning from missing is a key intervention point

When any missing incident is reported to the police it will trigger professional involvement on the child's return, regardless of the circumstances of the missing episode. At minimum the child will receive a safe and well check, also known as prevention interview, from the police, and they will be offered a return home interview via the local authority.

> **"***The safe and well checks regarding the children is probably key [...] to understand the voice of the child and understand how they interact in their surroundings and what the family dynamics are***" – police interview**

Professionals completing the survey and taking part in interviews felt that returning from missing is a key point for professionals to engage with the child about why they went missing, including if parental conflict was the driver, and whether they want or need any help. It might be the moment when a child feels able to tell someone what is happening, or the point at which the conflict or the impact it is having on them has escalated enough that they have to tell someone.

> **"***[Yes] based on the approach I have developed when delivering RHIs which has empowered the young person to feel confident about disclosure without fear of judgement or disbelief***" – RHI survey**

There are significant and varied barriers to disclosing parental conflict linked to a child going missing

Professionals and young people taking part in interviews, focus groups, and completing the survey were clear that there are significant barriers for young people in disclosing their experience of parental conflict. They might be worried about the implications of telling professionals; may fear it will make the parental conflict worse; might not recognise parental conflict as something they can try to get help with; or may not think it is serious enough to share with professionals.

> **"***He might just feel like it's not a big enough deal to go to social services about the fact that your parents are arguing, because if there isn't like violence or threat to life or anything like that, I don't know, I'm just thinking personally myself. I don't think I ever would have gone to social services or the police and said 'my parents are arguing a lot.' I would have just felt like, well, that's just how home life is***" – young person**

Parents may present differently to professionals, or may not recognise the impact that the conflict is having on their child. Parents may also feel afraid to tell professionals about the conflict. Professionals may assume that the missing episodes are the child's fault, or at least that they are driven by issues in the child's life and relationships, as opposed to recognising that the root cause of missing is the parental conflict. In some cases, other factors may over-shadow the existence of parental conflict.

> **"***Children and young people will often not disclose parental conflict for fear of it escalating and them being held accountable or blamed for telling someone***" – health sector survey**

> **"***Parents can be quite quick to blame other factors for leading to missing episodes rather than addressing their role***" – local authority survey**

RECOMMENDATION 1

All professionals working with children who have been reported missing, including police, social workers and RHI workers, should have some understanding of parental conflict. Any training for those conducting safe and well checks and return home interviews should include reference to parental conflict.

This will enable them to effectively explore the issue with the child, take action to engage with parents if appropriate to do so, or signpost or refer into more specialist services if a disclosure is made.

The level of understanding required will vary depending on the professional's role. Professionals who will only have fleeting contact with a returned missing child (for example a response officer conducting a safe and well check) will only need a basic understanding; RHI workers will need greater depth of training, including guidance on how to sensitively investigate parental relationships; and professionals providing long-term missing support would benefit from in-depth training on how to intervene in situations of parental conflict.

Having some level of understanding across all professionals is important to ensure that no one minimises what is happening for a child if they do disclose parental conflict, which is possible if that knowledge is absent and they assume conflict will not necessarily have a significant impact on the child's wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Professionals working with families who are experiencing parental conflict should be aware of the risks associated with missing, and how the conflict might contribute to the child going missing.

They should talk to parents about this in a supportive, non-blaming way, and be ready to identify warning signs of associated risk factors like worsening mental health or exploitation and what support is available if the child does go missing.

The need for a trusted relationship

"I feel like, first, before jumping into like big questions, they should get to know the young person and let the young person get to know them as well." **– young person**

Many of those taking part in the research felt that one-off conversations or interventions will not be enough to build the trust needed for a child to talk about parental conflict. Safe and well checks and return home interviews can be delivered quickly, and by people the young person has no connection with. The need for a trusted relationship and ongoing support was highlighted by professionals and young people in interviews, focus groups and in survey responses.

"When completing return home interviews we often do not have existing relationships with the young person, therefore they are less likely to be truthful about what's going on for them" **– RHI worker survey**

RECOMMENDATION 3

Where children are going missing repeatedly, they should be offered specialist, intensive support.

Safe and well checks and return interviews will not provide effective opportunities for a lot of children to disclose parental conflict, or for children to access the ongoing support they need to deal with the impact of conflict.

Specialist, intensive support would allow for trusted relationships to be built, and would enable greater identification of harm and more in-depth support. This is not specific to only children who are going missing as a result of parental conflict, but should be made available for all repeat missing children, and would result in a better response for the former. Evidence suggests that this kind of service can help young people respond to the causes of missing and can reduce incidents of repeat missing.[3]

There is limited provision for those not already 'known to services'

Professionals taking part in interviews, focus groups and completing the survey felt that where children and families were not previously known to services and did not have an existing social worker there appeared to be limited support if parental conflict was identified.

"If there wasn't a lead worker kind of involved, that's when it's like a bit trickier because we need to feedback their voice and we assess actually is the level of risk a safeguarding one? Is it early help, like where they can do a bit more low level support?" **– RHI worker interview**

Return home interview workers referred to the fact they would, with consent, inform the social worker if a young person disclosed something about parental conflict, but were less sure what they would do if the child did not have a social worker. It was also sometimes said to be unlikely that a child who was not already known to services would meet thresholds for wider support if the only, or sole, factor linked to them going missing was parental conflict.

"Maybe if the social workers are aware, they can do some kind of protective work with a young person." **– RHI worker interview**

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3 Missing People, Intensive Support Services, https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/121-intensive-support.

Children going missing can cause or exacerbate parental conflict

"We felt completely lost because we'd reached out to everybody. And then in that stress, it's like you turn against each other half the time. And we're very, very, very, very lucky that both of us are so family oriented that we didn't split up. Because I think it's so easy… What I do know is that the people [in a peer support group for families of exploited children] that are still married, who I do communicate with, all say 'all we do is argue all the time about our children or what's going on and the authorities.'" – **parent**

Parental conflict can be caused or exacerbated by the stress of having a child go missing. This was seen as particularly prevalent when a child is going repeatedly missing. A child going missing is an inherently stressful experience for parents. This can be linked to disagreements about whether to report a child missing, how to respond when the child is missing, and how to engage with professionals who become involved in their lives. Parents completing the public insights survey felt that a range of reactions were likely as a result of a child going missing, including experiencing regular unresolved arguments.

Thinking about parents/carers reactions, which, if any, of the following do you think are more likely as a result of a young person (under the age of 18) running away from home? (n. 512)
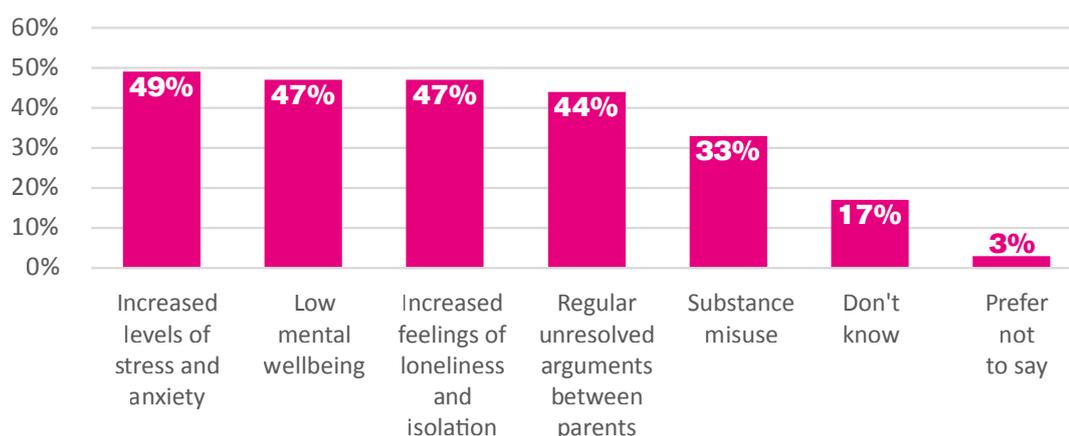
Professionals and young people participating in this research urged caution around any sense that children could be blamed for this however, and that instead it should mean a greater focus necessary support being put in place for parents to be better able to manage these impacts.

There is limited support for parents of missing children, particularly where parental conflict was identified

Professionals taking part in the research were clear that it is critical to work with parents as well as the child. Professionals felt that focussing on the child, while important, did not address the root causes for them going missing where this was linked to parental conflict. It also risked the child thinking that the parental conflict is their problem rather than acknowledging the parents' responsibility for failing to handle disagreements and conflict effectively.

This finding was strongly echoed by young people who participated in focus groups, who spoke strongly about the need for professionals to work with parents to change their behaviour, rather than only working with the child to manage the impact of that behaviour. However, professionals spoke of limited support provision for parents of missing children, and many wanted to see more support available for parents experiencing conflict.

"We need more specialist workers who can work directly with parents and help them to understand how their behaviours impact on their child whilst understanding that people can have relationship patterns that are not helpful for them, more support for parents to understand their patterns of interacting with their parents" **– local authority survey**

None of the most common interventions currently available for returned missing children, primarily safe and well checks and return home interviews, have a focus on engaging with the parent. This leaves a potential gap in addressing the causes of missing where it links to parental conflict.

The small number of parents interviewed for this research spoke of their need for support when their child was missing, but of not being able to find or access support that met their needs.

"I asked for family therapy, family mediation. I asked for us all to be in the room together. And I explained what an impact it had on my whole family, which was obviously a risk because these people take things and sort of put it together and make 10 or whatever." **– parent interview**

It can be challenging to self-identify parental conflict as the root cause of issues that a child is facing

"Identifying parental conflict as a factor in a young person going missing can be challenging because the adults often focus on the child's behaviour rather than the wider family dynamics. Parents may describe the young person as "difficult" or "not listening," without recognising how their own reactions, communication breakdowns, or inconsistent boundaries are contributing to the situation. This can make it hard to explore the root causes, as the narrative becomes centred on the young person being the problem." **– local authority survey**

Evidence shows that parental conflict can impact on lots of different elements of a child's life, potentially affecting their mental health, vulnerability to exploitation, and vulnerability to going missing. However, those taking part in this research commonly reflected that it can be hard for parents and children to identify that parental conflict is the root cause. This is particularly the case when considering the intergenerational impact of parental conflict, and the learned behaviours that can involve. It can be difficult for professionals to have those conversations without appearing to be blaming or judgemental. Those taking part in this research were clear that spaces for self-reflection and self-identification are key, however this can be challenging to do when people are in the midst of experiencing parental conflict.

RECOMMENDATION 4

To inform good practice in support services, further research should be conducted on this topic, in particular with parents of missing children who have experienced parental conflict.

This should focus on what support would have helped them, both to deal with the parental conflict, and to help safeguard their child from going missing.

Parents of missing children must be offered specialist support, including support focused on parental conflict, particularly where their child is going missing repeatedly.

While this would be beneficial for parents of all missing children, this could be targeted specifically at parents of repeat missing children, as they are particularly likely to experience ongoing issues with parenting and better supporting their child.

This support should aim to help the parents themselves, improving their wellbeing and resilience to cope with the situation, but vitally would also increase protective factors for the child: ensuring the parents are better able to safeguard their child from further harm.

It is clear that where parental conflict is driving a child's missing episodes, this needs to be addressed with the parents: without doing this we are failing to deal with the root causes and it is likely that the child will continue to go missing. However, there is currently a significant gap in services, with no consistency in what professional would be expected, or well placed, to hold this intervention. Most services responsible for responding to a missing incident will only engage with the child, and many families in this situation will not meet threshold for more formal safeguarding procedures. Having services specifically for parents of missing children would fill this gap.

In the meantime local authorities must consider which professional or external service they can assign to hold these conversations with parents. Otherwise we risk leaving children to continue to go missing as a result of their parents' behaviour.

There is limited official data on parental conflict and missing, however there is some resistance to adding 'another thing' to record

"It's just putting more burden on people recording more data" **– third sector focus group**

Most police forces, local authorities, and Missing People charity do not collect information about parental conflict linked to missing in a manner that can be easily reported: no police forces were able to share data on this, and only 10 local authorities were.

There was a sense of resistance from professionals to adding another thing to record in a 'tick box.' Professionals spoke of the importance of meaningful conversations and record keeping, which can be used to best support the child, rather than just marking another issue linked to missing.

Further work should be undertaken to consider how best to explore and record parental conflict in safe and well checks and return home interviews.

There should be consideration of introducing 'parental conflict' as a specific factor recorded in return home interview forms so that local areas can better understand its prevalence amongst their cohort of missing children and how they are being supported following any disclosures of parental conflict.

There is a disconnect between the available support for parental conflict and how a child going missing triggers that support

"Each offer for support for missing children and addressing parental conflict are strong, but we are unsure of the connection between the two" **– professional survey**

Most professionals taking part in this research spoke of the varied support available for parents and children when the parents are experiencing conflict. There was feedback about the strengths and areas for development around some of these services. However there was very limited information about how missing incidents could trigger this support. It was unclear from many involved in this research how a child who had gone missing, or their parents, could access specialist support, even once parental conflict was disclosed or otherwise identified.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Local policies, in particular multi-agency missing children protocols, should set out clear pathways between services responding to missing children, and services responding to parental conflict.

Local policies can aid in improving multi-agency working and create clarity on services and professionals working together. The inclusion of parental conflict and the pathways between services in local missing children policies can ensure that professionals working in different teams are clear about what to do if parental conflict is identified when a child has gone missing.

There is a grey area between parental conflict and domestic abuse

Some professionals felt that it was important to distinguish between parental conflict and domestic abuse, as the appropriate response and support for parents in conflict will be very different from that which should be offered to victims of abuse, whether that be a parent or a child.

However, there is a grey area between the two experiences. Some professionals spoke of examples where parental conflict had escalated to abuse, or where it was hard to identify exactly what was happening based on the limited information that was disclosed.

While it is crucial not to conflate the two issues, it is important that any further work on the response to missing incidents driven by parental conflict considers the differentiation from abuse, and any support offers are developed with this grey area in mind.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Background

What is 'missing'?[4]

In England and Wales the definition of a missing person is: *"anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located and their wellbeing or otherwise confirmed."*

This definition is primarily used by police forces in determining whether to record and respond to someone as a missing person, but exactly how they respond will be an operational decision depending on the circumstances of the missing episode.

What is 'parental conflict'?[5]

Some level of arguing and conflict between parents is often a normal part of everyday life. However, there is strong evidence to show how inter-parental conflict that is frequent, intense and poorly resolved can have a significant negative impact on children's mental health and long-term life chances.

Damaging conflict between parents can be expressed in many ways such as:

- unresolved arguing
- silence
- lack of respect
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Conflict can affect all types of parental relationships, including:

- parents who are in a relationship, whether married or not, including same-sex couples
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- foster and adoptive parents

Parental conflict is distinct from domestic abuse, which is indicated by controlling behaviours and/or where one parent may feel fearful of the other. Approaches to reduce parental conflict are not where appropriate domestic abuse is present.

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4 College of Policing, Missing Persons, https://www.college.police.uk/app/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/missing-persons.

5 Department for Work and Pensions, Reducing Parental Conflict: what is parental conflict, https://www.gov.uk/guidance/reducing-parental-conflict-what-is-parental-conflict.

Over 60,000 children go missing in over 180,000 missing incidents every year in England,[6] however there is very little research demonstrating how parental conflict interacts with children going missing.

Some research exists which has found links between children going missing and experiencing unhappiness or arguments at home. However, it is important to note that none of the existing research identified for this report specifically focuses on parental conflict. Rather existing research focuses on conflict or arguments at home more broadly.

A number of studies in the UK have pointed towards the quality of family relationships as a factor pushing children away from home. Research reviewing 926 missing incidents in 22 police forces found that over a third of cases involved children going missing as a result of prior adverse situations such as a family argument.[7] Another study using data from a predominantly rural police force found that a history of family conflict was associated with an increased likelihood of a young person going missing more than once.[8]

Research published in 2011 found that almost 1 in 4 children who had been characterised as living in a 'low warmth-high conflict' household had gone missing.[9] Research also exists in America and Australia which evidences family conflict being a push factor in child going missing.[10]

Much of the research in this area was conducted a number of years ago, with very few relevant research publications in the last 10 or so years. This may be linked to a move in the policy agenda around missing towards a stronger focus on extra-familial harm, including an increased focus on exploitation and trafficking, as well as an increased focus on children going missing from care.

While these subject areas are important, it appears as though factors like parental conflict have been overlooked in recent years. The composition of families in Britain has become more diverse, as divorce, separation and re-partnering, or changing household living arrangements have become more common,[11] so it is likely that research that was published over 10 years ago is not entirely relevant to society in 2026. Additionally, there have been changes in the response to missing since much of the above research was conducted.

6 National Crime Agency (2025) Missing Persons Data Report, 2023/24, https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/images/mpu/downloads/UKMPU%20Statistical%20Report%202023-24.pdf

7 Woolnough, P. S., & Cunningham, S. (2021). Developmental perspectives on the behaviour of missing children: Exploring changes from early childhood to adolescence. Psychology, Crime & Law, 27(6), 539–561. https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2020.1837130

8 Babuta, A., & Sidebottom, A. (2020). Missing children: On the extent, patterns, and correlates of repeat disappearances by young people. Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice, 14(3), 698–711. https://doi.org/10.1093/police/pay066

9 Rees, G. (2011). Early findings from the Children's Society's third national survey of young runaways. The Children's Society.

10 Kipke, M. D., Palmer, R. F., LaFrance, S., & O'Connor, S. (1997). Homeless youths' descriptions of their parents' child-rearing practices. Youth & Society, 28(4), 415–431. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X97028004002); Whitbeck, L. B., & Hoyt, D. R. (1999). Nowhere to grow: Homeless and runaway adolescents and their families. A. de Gruyter Blood, L., & D'Angelo, R. (1974). A progress research report on value issues in conflict between runaways and their parents. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 36(3), 486. https://doi.org/10.2307/350719; Schmitz, R. M., & Tyler, K. A. (2016). Growing up before their time: The early adultification experiences of homeless young people. Children and Youth Services Review, 64, 15–22. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.02.026; Radu, M. B. (2017). Who runs away from home and why? How families, schools, and bullying influence youth runaways. Sociology Compass, 11(11), e12537. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12537; Mallett, S., & Rosenthal, D. (2009). Physically violent mothers are a reason for young people's leaving home. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 24(7), 1165–1174. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260508322188; Mallett, S., Rosenthal, D., & Keys, D. (2005). Young people, drug use and family conflict: Pathways into homelessness. Journal of Adolescence, 28(2), 185–199. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2005.02.002

11 Šťastná, M., Mikolai, J., Finney, N., & Keenan, K. L. (2026). Complex families in the United Kingdom: Mapping children's diverse family pathways and their correlates from birth to age ten. Longitudinal and Life Course Studies, 17(1), 56–82.

What happens when someone is reported missing and when they return in England?

MISSING JOURNEY

| Child is reported missing from home or care to the police | > | Police make an initial assessment of risk | > | Missing child is found or returns to home or care | > | Police complete Safe & Well check with the child | > | Return Home interview is offered/ completed |

When a child is reported missing the police will complete a risk assessment process, assessing the perceived likelihood of harm to the missing child or the public. This is based on the information disclosed by the reporting person at the point of contacting the police and any investigations the police subsequently undertake.

Once a child returns, two separate mandatory interventions should be offered / take place:

1. The police complete a safe and well check / prevention interview with the child. The police will usually see them to check that they are OK and to close the missing investigation. This should take place as soon as possible after the person comes home or is found, and in England and Wales is delivered by the police. These checks should be an opportunity to find out where the person went while they were missing and whether the person came to any harm while away. They should also be used as an opportunity to identify any safeguarding concerns.

2. The child should be offered a return home interview ('RHI') by the local authority.[12] This is an in-depth conversation with a child when they return from being missing. It should be offered to the child after every missing incident, within 72 hours of them returning home. It should be delivered by someone who is not directly involved in that young person's care. It is an opportunity for the child to talk about why they went missing, what happened while they were away, whether they came to any harm while away, and whether they are vulnerable to any ongoing harm. They are an opportunity for professionals to identify any support needs that the child may have. Because they should be offered to every child on their return from being missing, they are a key opportunity to identify any support needs for children, particularly when they are not already known to services.

Both safe and well checks and return home interviews are a key opportunity to identify why the child went missing and any support needs they may have. They are therefore a key area of exploration in this research.

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12 Department for Education, Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care, January 2014, https://assets. publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7e089340f0b62302688bd0/Statutory_Guidance_-_Missing_from_care__3_.pdf.

1. How does parental conflict influence children going missing?

Key findings

It is clear that parental conflict can act not only as a driver of children going missing, but can also result in a reduction in protective factors, potentially increasing the risks or vulnerabilities faced by children when they do go missing.

No police forces were able to share data on parental conflict held in their missing person reports

- 10 local authorities were able to share data on the identification of parental conflict in return home interviews: for those local authorities it was identified in **19.3%** of all return home interview records
- Those taking part in interviews, focus groups and surveys were clear that parental conflict can be a factor influencing children to go missing, although ordinarily in combination with other factors

    - The child may not feel like they belong, are part of a community, or are prioritised by parents
    - They may feel psychologically unsafe and want to get away from that environment
    - Differences in parenting styles can be difficult for the child
    - Children can feel pressure to manage the conflict

- Conversely, parental conflict can in some cases result in the child not being reported missing when they otherwise should be
- A child going missing can act as a driver for or can exacerbate parental conflict
- Parental conflict can increase other risks associated with children going missing, particularly mental health and exploitation

1.1. Parental conflict as an influence in children going missing

What does the data show? Police and local authority data

There is no publicly available data about how often parental conflict is a factor in children going missing. In this research, police forces and local authorities in England were asked:

- Whether they gather data about parental conflict, and if so, in how many missing incidents was it identified
    - Police were asked whether it had been identified in the missing person record
    - Local authorities were asked whether it had been identified in return home interview records

- If not, whether any equivalent or similar risk factor was recorded, and if so, in how many missing incidents those risk factors were identified

This data was requested via freedom of information request. The majority of police forces and local authorities do not specifically record parental conflict in their missing incident reports or return home interview records, and where they do this is often in open text fields.

29 police forces responded to the FOI request, however none were able to share data about parental conflict. A small number of forces collect data on linked factors, such as 'are there family / relationship problems or recent history of family abuse', 'domestic abuse,' and 'family conflict.' However, these factors are much broader than parental conflict and could cover a much wider range of relationship issues, including domestic abuse.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES

100 local authorities responded to the FOI request, and 18 collect data on parental conflict. Only 10 of those local authorities were able to share the data itself.

For those 10 local authorities, 6,574 return home interviews were conducted, and parental conflict was identified in 1,271 of them. This means that it was identified in 19.3% of return home interviews. As will be discussed later in this report, this is likely to under-represent the issue as children may not disclose parental conflict, so while this data does suggest a relatively high prevalence of the issue, in reality it is likely to be higher still.

What does the data show? Missing People data

655 Missing People records were reviewed for this research. 488 of these were contacts from children under the age of 18 to Missing People's helpline, and 167 were return home interviews delivered by Missing People on behalf of a local authority. There was very limited evidence of parental conflict in these records: only 16 helpline cases had concrete evidence of parental conflict; and only 3 of the RHI records had evidence of this.

There were, however, very frequent references made to factors which may be linked to parental conflict, but the records were not recorded in such a way as to enable further exploration of the existence of parental conflict specifically. For example, of the 488 helpline records, **14% (70)** had 'felt unsafe at home' and **33% (163)** had 'relationship breakdown / conflict at home' coded as a factor in the child going missing. These categories are much broader than parental conflict, however it is likely that parental conflict would have been a factor in some of these cases.

Challenges with reporting the data

In interviews and focus groups with professionals some participants referenced the fact that parental conflict is not routinely recorded on their systems in a way that would be reportable.

> **"***It happens, I just don't know how we would evidence, it'd be quite a difficult [thing] to evidence***"** – local authority focus group

> **"***We don't have anything that would be a nice tick box […] that I could pull out for you.***"** – local authority focus group

There were competing views about whether it would be helpful to amend safe and well checks and RHI forms to include something specific about parental conflict. While some thought that it would be helpful, others were more resistant.

> **"***We don't use the word directly around parental conflict and I think that's something we need to start to think about and also add as an indicator. So I'm going to change our form to include that, because there is a difference [between parental conflict and relationships with parents and siblings]***"** – RHI worker interview

Views from professionals, children and parents

"They might be feeling just overwhelmed in general, like emotionally overwhelmed. Because the stuff that's happening outside of their private life can be a bit stressful. When they come back home, when they're hit with another layer of like arguing, they can feel drained and distressed. And they may think that they're responsible in order to keep peace between the parents. So if the parents are arguing, they may think that they're responsible for the parents to get back to stop arguing. And this can put unnecessary pressure on the child, even though it's not the child's fault, and they may think they need to stop, they need to behave extra well, they need to do things they wouldn't do just to please the parents and make them stop arguing." **– young person**

The majority of professionals, children and parents taking part in this research were clear that parental conflict can act as a driver in children going missing.

87% (59 of 68) of professionals working primarily in missing completing the survey thought that parental conflict is sometimes, fairly often, or very often part of the reason children go missing.

In your experience how often is parental conflict part of the reason that children go missing? (n. 68)

Legend:
- Very often
- Fairly often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- I'm not sure
- Never
- Very rarely

Pie chart values: 22%, 28%, 37%, 9%, 1%, 1%, 1%
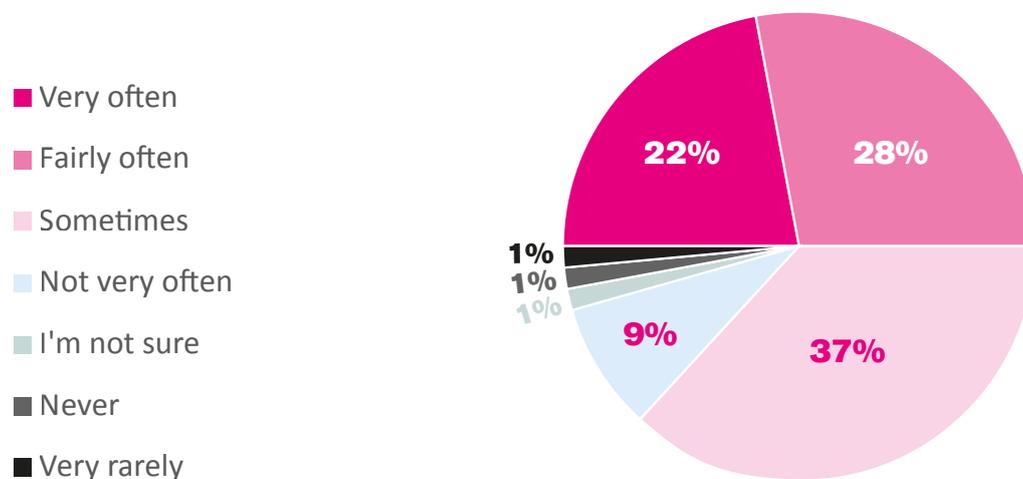
For those working in reducing parental conflict teams, they similarly felt that parental conflict plays a role in children going missing, with 93% (13 of 14) feeling that it did play a role to a greater or lesser extent.

Do you think that parental conflict plays a role in children going missing? (n. 14)
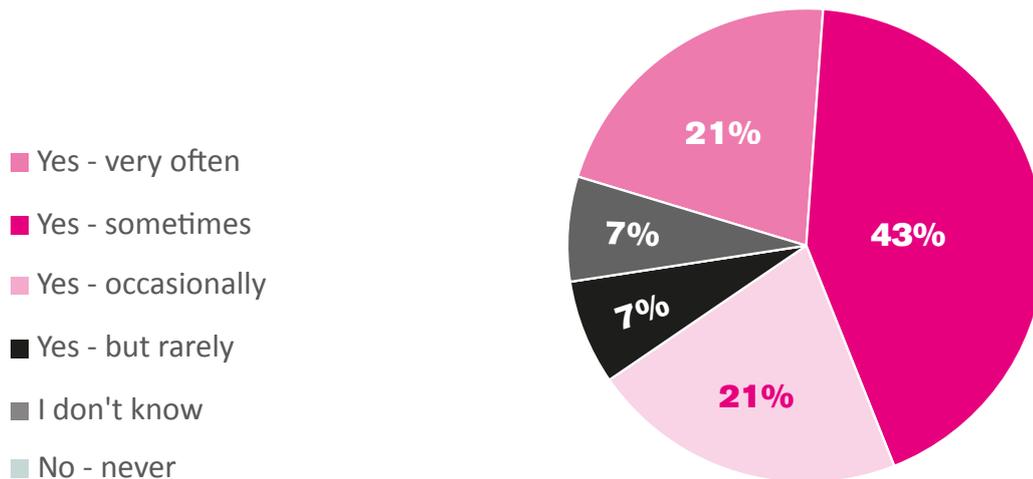
Legend:
- Yes - very often
- Yes - sometimes
- Yes - occasionally
- Yes - but rarely
- I don't know
- No - never

Pie chart values:
- 43%
- 21%
- 21%
- 7%
- 7%

65% (649 of 1,000) of the young people and **49% (251 of 512)** of parents of under 18-year-olds taking part in the public insights surveys said that they thought 'conflict between the parents / carers (i.e. between Mum and Dad)' could contribute to someone under the age of 18 running away from home.

Interviewees were also clear that parental conflict can act as a push factor for children going missing. There were various reasons for this including:

- The child not feeling like they belong, are part of a community with, or are prioritised by their parents, and trying to find that elsewhere

> *"Parents engaged in conflict tend to focus on their own needs before the child's needs. Children may then seek guidance and comfort from peers. This may lead to changes in behaviours, resulting in missing episodes as the young person feels they [are] wanted by their peers but not wanted at home"* **– local authority survey**

> *"I would say that parental conflict is the stressor which leads to the wider issue of young people not feeling like a priority or feeling very unhappy in the home environment as a result of the conflict"* **– local authority survey**

> *"Due to parents having own conflict they sometimes do not work as a team or undermine one another dismissing the others concerns as opposed to working as a team to support the child."* **- RHI worker survey**

> *"I think you would feel overwhelmed, like on top of school stress, stuff about GCSEs, it also like you go home, then you have your parents fighting, so you like kind of get overwhelmed with stuff. It's like the world crashing down at you at the same time. And it kind of looks like you have no one to talk to because your parents are always in these like arguments"* **– young person**

- Children feeling psychologically unsafe and wanting to leave that environment

> *"Conflict leaves gaps in relationship understanding, it can often contribute to creating an unsafe space for children and young people to return to"* **– third sector survey**

> *"Sometimes children reported that the home environment is either not, they don't feel safe psychologically in that environment, they don't feel held, supported, they might be doing their, I don't know, going through critical times like to do exams and things like that. And actually that [parental] conflict has not prioritised their needs and if anything, to them has served as a push [factor]"* **– RHI worker interview**

> *"If their parents are constantly arguing, they just might feel unsafe, they might just feel like almost their whole world was crashing down and they don't want to be in a place where they feel like they're not secure"* **– young person**

- Children wanting and needing to get away from the arguments or conflict that is ongoing. This sometimes includes children who have felt pulled into the conflict by one or both of the parents

> *"They, you know, want to go to a space where this isn't happening or that's not impacting on them"* **– RHI worker interview**

> *"In my experience, parental conflict can act as a significant push factor in children and young people going missing. While every situation is unique, there are clear patterns in how communication breaks down and strained relationships can lead a young person to leave, even if only for short periods."* **– local authority survey**

Case study

Leah*, 16, lives at home with her mother and her mother's partner. There is parental conflict at home, which has had an impact on Leah's relationship with her mother. Leah has felt unhappy at home linked to the conflict, and eventually went missing to get away from the continuing arguments.

*not real name

> *"the child knowing far too much adult information about what was being argued about between parents, for example infidelity, housing issues, mental health struggles, finances"* **– local authority survey**

> *"The child being witness to heated arguments; the child being the role of messenger or spy between parents"* **– local authority survey**

> *"Frequent [conflict] between parents role models poor behaviour and lack of respect for others in the children, making them more likely to lash out and go missing"* **– police survey**

> *"The child would most definitely run away because he just like, it comes to a point where he just doesn't like his parents anymore, he doesn't like his family, like if, because there's children that just decide to run away from their family if they don't want to stay"* **– young person**

"They might stop coming home because they always realise that as soon as they come home, their parents are just going to be fighting and they might not want to be in that area. So they might just end up hanging around with bad people and end up with a wrong life because their parents are always fighting" – **young person**

- Where two parents have different parenting styles this can be difficult for the child

"Parental conflict in regard to parenting styles allowed a child to push boundaries which then led to more parental conflict, which then led to the child getting involved with a negative peer group who influenced the child to push boundaries at home. This in turn led to parental conflict which led to the child going missing" – **local authority survey**

"There have been instances where young people have gone missing due to different boundaries between separated parents" – **youth worker survey**

"It's a bit of a stereotype, unfortunately it does tend to occur quite a bit, where we'll have parents who are together, dad may be quite like [...] authoritarian about the approach, mum may be more protective and kind of undermining dad's approach, so the two of them are constantly clashing. Eventually, it just becomes too much for the young person and they take themselves out of it" – **local authority interview**

- Conflict between separated parents was highlighted in particular as something that can influence children to go missing

"I have worked with numerous young people where there is family conflict, parents separated where the conflict remains, young person prefers to be out of the home" – **local authority survey**

"My experience has been conflict between separated parents who struggle to communicate effectively" – **local authority survey**

- Feeling pressure to manage the conflict happening between parents was referenced as resulting in a lot of stress for children, which can culminate in them going missing. Some children referenced that feelings of blame might impact this

"I think that parental conflict often leads to the child feeling divided loyalties between parents and then doing whatever they can to maintain an alliance between both parents and so this then leads to them feeling under immense pressure. I think that this can then lead to missing episodes. I have suspected that the motivations for this may bring parents together in some ways, alleviate the stress that the children feel temporarily and also mean that they are for a time a focus of the parents attention again for a period." – **local authority survey**

"They might feel as if, for some reason, they're at fault for the parents arguing, as if, as you know, as if they're the reason why the parents aren't getting along. So, in order to stop them arguing, they may feel as if they need, they need you know, run away or disappear in order to make the argument or the conflict stop" – **young person**

*"If you're going through something, you don't feel like you can go
to your parents because they're constantly arguing. So you feel like you're just
going to add to the burden or add to their upset. So you learn to kind of just deal
with things on your own and figure things out on your own. So you could be in
serious trouble and you could be like missing because of that. But it could have
been avoided if you were able to have that conversation."* **– young person**

- In some circumstances what appears to be conflict between parent and child is in fact as a result of parental conflict: it may have started as that then the child sticks up for one parent and the argument is turned onto them

*"You might initially view it as parent and young person conflict and being the trigger,
when you actually then delve into it and get the young person's voice, you actually see the
bigger picture of it actually starting from parent to parent conflict"* **– RHI worker interview**

The young person can be sticking up for one parent and then *"the parents have then focused on them being the problem and causing issues"* – RHI worker interview

Those completing the survey were asked for their opinion about why parental conflict can influence young people to go missing. The responses are very similar to those highlighted in interviews.

In your view, what motivations related to parental conflict most commonly contribute to a child going missing? (n. 68)

Conflict leads the child to become emotionally overwhelmed or dysregulated	76%	
A lack of appropriate boundaries as a result of ongoing conflict	72%	
Conflict between the child and parents	66%	
Conflict resulting in the child generally being unhappy at home	62%	
The child is trying to escape the situation	46%	
The child feeling that they are not a priority because of the ongoing conflict	38%	
The child is experiencing fear	21%	
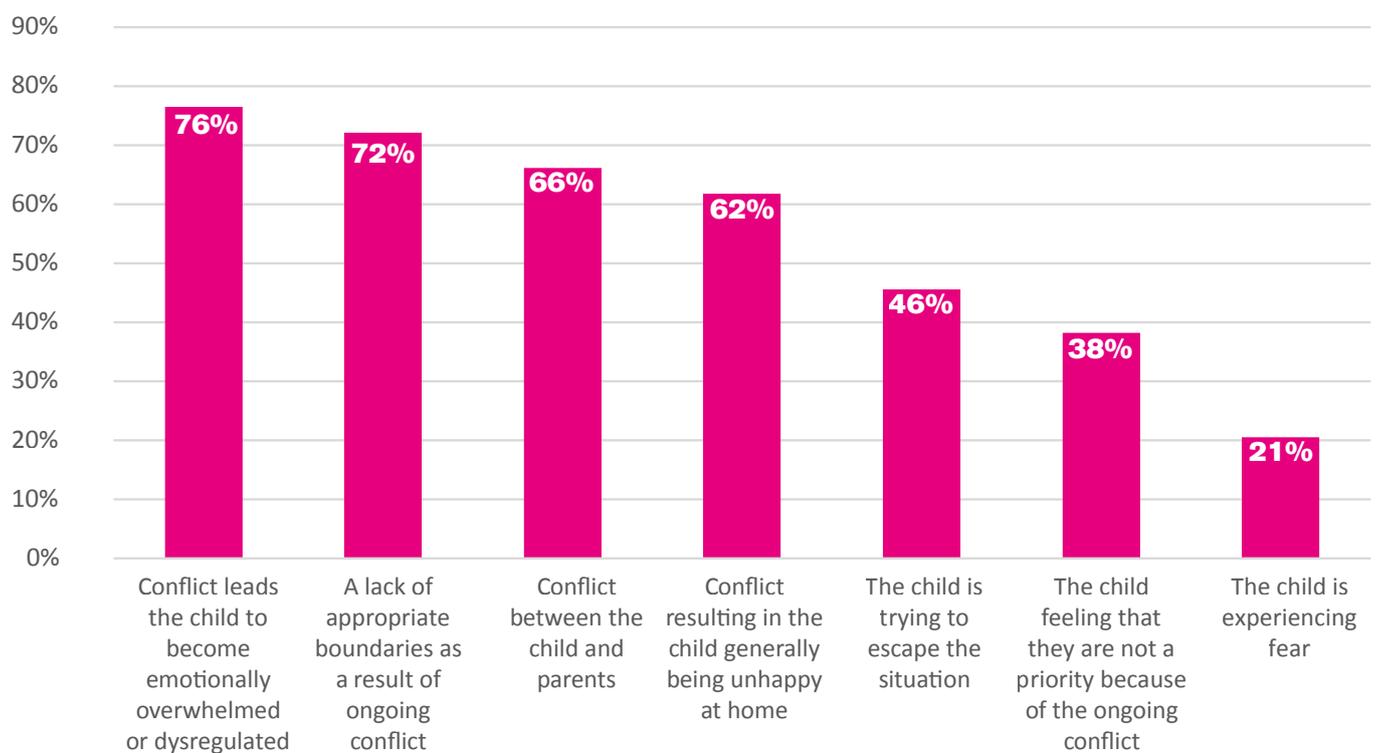
Not all the young people consulted felt that parental conflict would cause children to go missing: a couple felt this was very dependent on the child and their circumstances.

"I think it depends on, depending on the age of the child, that environment might be the only environment they know or they're used to. So it just seems normal. So they may not have any, they may not see the need to move or run away because they don't know anything more healthier or they don't know anything better than that environment. So they might just see it as the norm or the what's regular." **– young person**

Another young person felt that children might indeed distance themselves or be less present, but that they could do this within the home:

"They might just seclude themselves into their rooms and speak less with the family and interact with them." **– young person**

However, the majority did feel it was a very likely driver for missing episodes, and was likely to regularly play a role.

While this project is focussed on parent to parent conflict, it's important to acknowledge that many of the young people consulted spoke about the impact of experiencing parental conflict on a child's wider relationships including:

• Their relationship with their parent, for example, having to 'pick a side', or increasing parent to child conflict
• Their relationships with their siblings, with tension in the home spilling into all interactions
• Their relationships with partners, with patterns of unhealthy conflict and inabilities to resolve that becoming patterns of behaviour that they would in turn repeat

Multiple young people spoke about the intergenerational impact of this, and reflected on their own experience of having to work hard to unlearn what had seemed normal for them. This really highlights the long-term impact of the issue for some children.

How common is parental conflict as a factor in children going missing?

There were some competing reflections about the commonality of parental conflict as a factor influencing missing. Some of those interviewed felt it was very common, whereas others felt it was not very prevalent.

"[Parental conflict] plays a factor, but isn't a high prevalence of occurring, or if it is it isn't reported." **– Police interview**

"It's something that sort of pops up very frequently […] not like a data point that I could pull off. I can go 'yes, anecdotally,' but I couldn't give you a number" **– Local authority interview**

"I don't think we've had any children lately say it's because of the parents. It will be the conflict between them and the parents or them and the sibling" **– Local authority interview**

There was broad agreement however that it is very rarely the case that parental conflict on its own causes missing. For those completing the survey, no-one thought that parental conflict was ordinarily the sole factor. However, nearly 2 in 3 thought that where it is a contributing factor it is ordinarily a main factor. Around 1 in 3 though it was ordinarily a minor factor when being experienced with other factors:

In your experience, where parental conflict is a factor in why a child goes missing, is it the sole driver or normally combined with other factors? (n. 68)

- ■ It is ordinarily the sole factor

- ■ It is ordinarily in combination with other factors, but is ordinarily the, or a, main factor

- ■ It is ordinarily in combination with other factors, and is ordinarily a minor factor

35%

65%
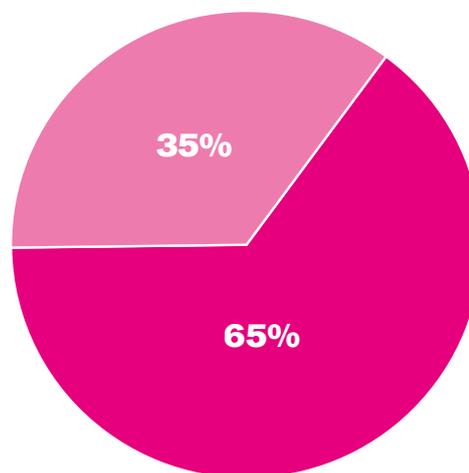
This was also clear in interviews.

> *"It may not be like the only factor, but it can often be quite a big contributing factor and one of them kind of pushes to go missing."* **– RHI interview**

> *"I feel the parental conflict is not the primary driver behind missing incidents, but more a contributing factor"* **– Survey**

Professionals also spoke of the fact that, as well as acting as a driver of missing, whether solely or in combination with other factors, parental conflict can result in a child being missing for longer than they otherwise would be.

> *"If you are missing with that parental conflict and not having a kind of safe place or safe space for them to go back to"* **– RHI worker**

> *"They say 'I'd rather stay out'"* **– RHI worker**

> *"The child returned home and due to continued parental conflict has gone missing for a further day"* **– local authority survey**

Increased risk of further missing episodes

Professionals were clear that unresolved parental conflict can result in an escalation of missing incidents.

Do you think there is a link between unresolved parental confict and repeat / more frequent missing episodes? (n. 47)

■ Yes, my experience is that missing often escalates if parental conflict is not addressed

■ Yes, missing can sometimes escalate if parental conflict is not addressed

■ No

4%

36%

60%

10 LOCAL AUTHORITIES WERE ABLE TO SHARE DATA ON THE IDENTIFICATION OF PARENTAL CONFLICT IN RETURN HOME INTERVIEWS:

FOR THOSE LOCAL AUTHORITIES IT WAS IDENTIFIED IN **19.3%** OF ALL RETURN HOME INTERVIEW RECORDS

1.2. Increasing risk by not reporting the child missing

> **"***I think what's important to pull out from this research is unreported missing as well and the impact of that***"** –RHI worker interview

A number of interviewees spoke about parental conflict resulting in a child not being reported missing when they otherwise would be.

This was commonly due to two different factors:

1. The parental conflict meaning that the parents were not aware of where the child is
2. Parents being worried about involving professionals

Parents not aware of where the child is

Professional interviewees spoke of issues in communication between parents meaning that each parent was not always aware of where their child was or what they were doing. They may have assumed they were with the other parent when actually they were elsewhere, in situations that would otherwise have resulted in them being reported missing.

Some young people felt that parents who were in conflict with one another would have reduced vigilance around their child's wellbeing, or reduced focus on supporting the child. At its worst this could result in negligence and leave children to fall through the gaps.

> **"***If your parents are usually going through conflict or your caregivers, a lot of the times their focus is not really on you, which is 100% necessary when you're young and you're growing up, because we're kind of learning what's right and what's wrong and learning how to live essentially and when the parents are not there guiding, you can be led by the wrong influences. It kind of goes hand in hand.***"** – young person

Some young people spoke about this being exacerbated when parents were separated and having significant conflict in co-parenting, with one young person sharing that they hadn't been reported missing when they should have been because of their parents failing to communicate with one another.

> **"***From my personal experience, there were times where I went missing and legally missing, but my parents didn't call, but they weren't together and they didn't even know really, they weren't in contact either. So I think one just thought I was with the other and the other one thought I was with the other. So there was a lot of miscommunication there. So yeah, I definitely agree. It's easier, I guess, to get away with going missing if your parents are not, you know, on the best of terms.***"** – young person

Linked to this, some professionals spoke of children themselves being aware of this, and using it to have more freedom away from either parent.

"The parents are completely in conflict all the time, they don't communicate with each other. So the young person will say they're staying with the father, the father then doesn't contact the mother, and then they, you know, there's no communication, so we don't know where the child is, so they're missing, but they're not always reported missing because the parents are in conflict" **– Local authority interview**

"[Parental conflict] might not be the reason that they're going missing, but they're kind of using it to their advantage and way of going missing" **– Local authority interview**

"So the conflict is between the two of them around their parenting styles. And then you've got the other parent who's a lot different in their parenting. And then also that then becomes under reporting of missing. Because when they're in that parent's care, the response to missing is totally different to the response that you would get from the parent who is very boundary driven [...] that drives missing episodes because of misreporting or under-reporting" **– local authority focus group**

Parents being worried about involving professionals

A few professionals mentioned that some parents do not report their child missing because they do not want to involve professionals in the situation.

"They don't want the spotlight on their parenting. So that creates a conflict" **– RHI worker interview**

"They don't want like professionals looking at them under the spotlight because actually they can see what is going on and they don't want their life to be opened up" **– RHI worker interview**

Case study

Ezra*, 15, had been going missing and was vulnerable to experiencing serious violence. This was being compounded by parental conflict between his separated parents.

His parents did not agree about reporting him missing, with his mother wanting to contact the police to report him as missing, but his father not wanting this to happen. His father considered Ezra to be 'senior' to his mother, and his mother therefore did not feel that she could report him missing, although he did continue to be away from home when neither of them knew where he was.

Ultimately the risk he was facing while he was away escalated and he fell victim to exploitation and an incident of serious violence did occur. As a result the entire family had to relocate and significant safeguarding actions were taken.

*not real name

Inappropriate reporting

On the flip side, some interviewees spoke of examples where parents had used the threat of reporting missing, or actually reporting a child as missing, as something punitive towards the other parent. This was most commonly the case where parents were separated, and one parent would report the child missing as a way to show that the other parent was not able to parent the child appropriately.

"That parent actually using that as a weapon against the other parent to almost sort of say, you know, the police are involved now [...] you know, you're going to get in trouble" **– local authority focus group**

"I have dealt with situations where communication between parent who had separated had completely broken down, and the child preferred staying with one parent over the other. The child was regularly reported "missing" to police simply because the less favoured parent was unable to confirm that they were safe with the other parent during arranged time staying with them as neither the child or ex-partner would communicate. This caused an escalation in aggression and counter allegations of inappropriate contact from both parents." **– police survey**

1.3. A child going missing as a driver for parental conflict

As well as parental conflict acting as a driver for children to go missing, this research explored whether a child going missing can cause or exacerbate parental conflict.
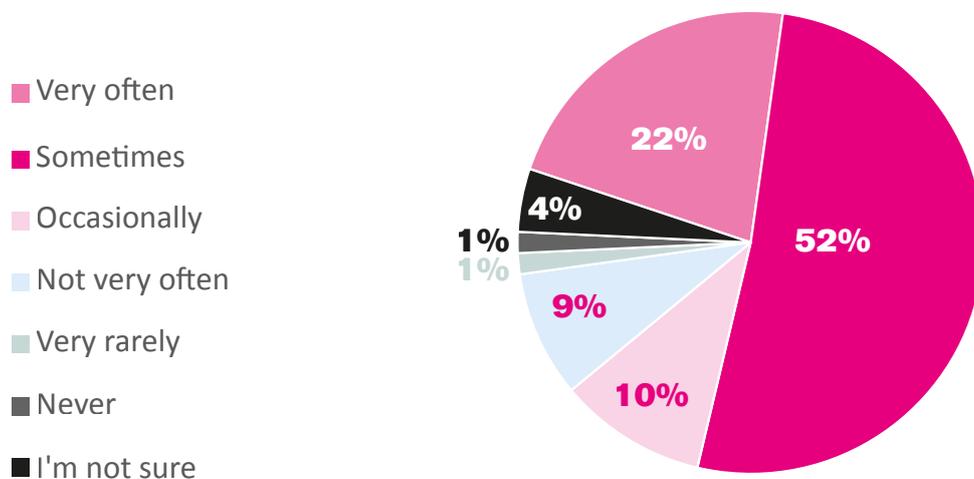
Children generally go missing because they are in crisis, or at the least they are struggling with something. Most of those drivers, whether they are mental health, bullying, exploitation, or other factors, are likely to cause real distress for parents to try and navigate or support their child through. Previous research has clearly demonstrated the many complex impacts that missing incidents can have on family members.[13] Having a missing loved one can be traumatic, having a significant impact on an individual's mental and physical wellbeing. Parents of missing children have expressed that it can cause extreme levels of stress.

A child going missing will also trigger professional intervention in family life. The police and the local authority will be involved in some way, and while this is vital for safeguarding, it can put additional pressures on families who may not have had any engagement with these professionals before.

It is therefore unsurprising that professionals and parents who took part in this research shared that a child going missing can act as a driver for parents to start to experience parental conflict or to exacerbate existing parental conflict.

Almost all of those completing the survey who work primarily on missing said this happens 'occasionally' (10%), 'sometimes' (52%), or 'very often' (22%).

In your experience, how often can a child going missing act as a driver for parental conflict? (n. 68)

Legend:
- Very often
- Sometimes
- Occasionally
- Not very often
- Very rarely
- Never
- I'm not sure

Pie chart values: 22%, 52%, 10%, 9%, 1%, 1%, 4%

100% (14 of 14) of reducing parental conflict professionals completing the survey said that they thought a child going missing could result in parents experiencing conflict.

Those taking part in interviews agreed:

> *"It is absolutely 110% a driver for, you know, conflicts between parent and parent, parent and step-parent, carers, wider family"* **– Third sector interview**

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13 https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/policy-and-research/information-and-research/research-about-missing

"[children] that go missing, which again, as I say, is about 70% of the young people we work with, I would say it's almost 100% a cause of conflict in parental relationships. It's rare that parents are completely aligned on how to manage that kind of bit and I think that's really natural and normal, and I think you know some of the families that we're working with often have experienced multiple other adverse experiences, so are experiencing poverty or experiencing marginalisation for other reasons. So, it intersects into that" **– local authority interview**

"I think the message that […] I send to workers when doing training is ultimately anything that causes stress can cause conflict in the relationship. A child going missing is stressful […] to go through and that can start to create a bit of a tension point" **– local authority interview**

One parent who took part in this research shared how her happy and stable marriage of 17 years had been affected when her child began going missing repeatedly:

"It's almost like a truck or a bomb comes and it just blows up everything. And it also affects like, so kind of like it affected our relationship, it affected other people that were around us." **– parent**

There were various reasons why professionals thought that having a missing child may act as a driver or an exacerbating factor for parental conflict.

Disagreements about reporting the child as missing

Firstly, professionals shared examples of parents disagreeing about whether it was appropriate to report the child missing in the first place. Parents had different levels of risk tolerance, different views about what the child would be doing while away, and fundamentally did not agree with each other about whether or not to contact the police.

"Dad did not feel Mum needed to call the police when she did as he felt she was not really missing but would instead be with a friend, and this caused ongoing arguments and conflict between the parents" **– local authority survey**

"Disagreements about risk" **– local authority survey**

"Parents disagree on when to report missing / one parent will sometimes tire more quickly and this can result in difference of opinion and internal frustrations" **– RHI worker survey**

"Mum and dad are separated, but dad's very dominant in that sense […] so there's no reported missing […] because actually mum feels quite powerless in that conflict and that dynamic to do anything that means she can't go against that" **– RHI worker interview**

Disagreements about how to respond to the missing episode

Parental conflict can also be triggered when there are disagreements about how to respond to the missing episode, for example in how to talk to the child when they return, or in how to manage any behaviours that are linked to missing.

> **"***Parents disagreeing on how a young person should be treated once they return from being missing***"** – local authority survey

> **"***Frequent missing episodes putting pressure on one of the parents who are taking things seriously and wanting to act responsibly, and the other parent wanting to be punitive towards the child***"** – local authority survey

> **"***Disagreements about strategies for managing missing episodes [and] strategies for managing behaviour***"** – local authority survey

> **"***Parents can feel kind of blamed and shamed if they aren't reporting frequently. They can also feel blamed and shamed if they're reporting too frequently.***"** – Local authority interview

One parent similarly shared that she had experienced conflict with her husband when they disagreed about how to respond to their son's frequent missing episodes. Her husband disassociated from what was happening, and saw it more as a disciplinary issue, whereas she had identified that her son was being exploited and she was primarily concerned with his vulnerability. These different perceptions were compounded by taking different approaches: she went into overdrive engaging services to try and protect her son, whereas her husband found this ever-present focus really challenging.

> **"***In the middle of the night I would be going downstairs and doing paperwork to do with his education tribunal and not sleeping properly. And I remember my husband getting really cross with me and saying, at one point he said to me, we were just, he was saying, you've got to stop. He was literally sort of saying to me, you've got to stop this. You're doing too much. You're making yourself ill. And I obviously had already had a breakdown at that point. But he was saying, if you carry on, you know, you've got to stop. And I remember, yeah, we were kind of like talking about the possibility of I was kind of like saying, I'm going to put, I'm always going to put my children first. And if that means, and I remember sort of saying, and if that means I've got to leave you, I will.***"** – parent

Something that was discussed frequently by professionals was the level of blame that parents can attribute to one another when a child goes missing. This appeared to particularly be the case when parents were separated and not living together.

> **"***I have experienced parents blaming each other for a child going missing, suggesting that they have no boundaries or they run away due to the other parent's behaviour***"** – local authority survey

"If separated and co-parenting, it can create a space of blame between one parent & the other, but actually what happens is the young person internalises the blame which can lead to […] risk factors […] – poor mental health, contributing factor to CSE, drug & alcohol misuse as a coping strategy" – **local authority survey**

"Parents blaming one another for either over parenting or under parenting. When neither were a factor" – **police survey**

"A father blamed the mother for the child always going missing as the mother did not parent with boundaries. Due to not agreeing on boundaries the parents arguing escalated" – **residential care staff survey**

The inherently stressful nature of a child being missing

A child going missing can be an inherently stressful thing to be managing, and this stress can result in conflict.
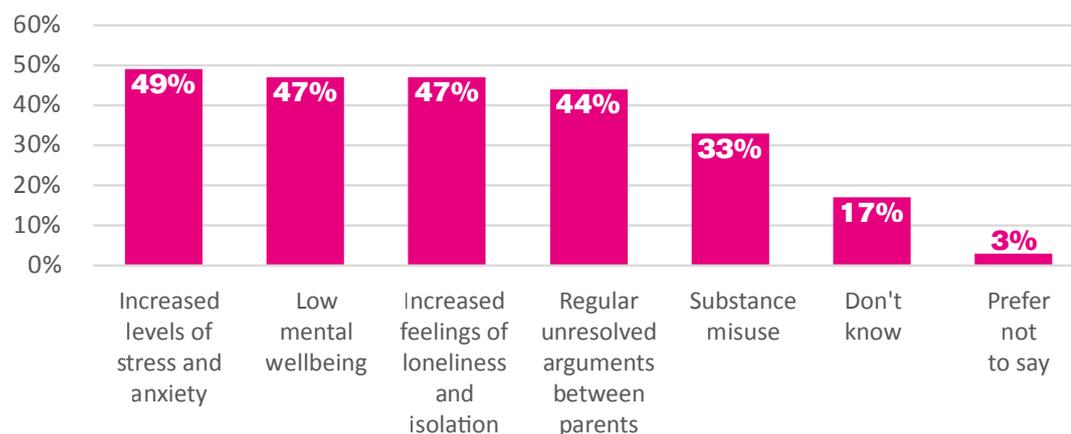
"Parents are overwhelmed with the responsibility of how to manage a child being missing" – **local authority survey**

One parent spoke about the stress, anger and frustration that both she and her husband were left with, and the years it took to rebuild a positive relationship, even after things with her son had started to improve.

"We felt completely lost because we'd reached out to everybody. And then in that stress, it's like you turn against each other half the time. And we're very, very, very, very lucky that both of us are so family oriented that we didn't split up. Because I think it's so easy… What I do know is that the people [in a peer support group for families of exploited children] that are still married, who I do communicate with, all say 'all we do is argue all the time about our children or what's going on and the authorities.'" – **parent**

In the public insights survey parents of children under the age of 18 were asked if they thought a young person going missing would make any of the following things more likely. The below chart broadly mirrors some of the factors highlighted by professionals and parents contributing to this research.

Thinking about parents/carers reactions, which, if any, of the following do you think are more likely as a result of a young person (under the age of 18) running away from home? (n. 512)

| Category	Percentage
Increased levels of stress and anxiety	49%
Low mental wellbeing	47%
Increased feelings of loneliness and isolation	47%
Regular unresolved arguments between parents	44%
Substance misuse	33%
Don't know	17%
Prefer not to say	3%

1.4. Links between parental conflict and risks associated with missing

> "*I feel like it [parental conflict] can also cause their mental health to go down as well. Because just feeling alone, feeling like you don't have anyone to speak to when you come home, because every time you come home, it's like it's an issue between your parents that is ongoing and it's kind of like you're stepping on shells with them. And this is the you know, this is where they lay their head to go to sleep, so I feel like it should be a safe environment, but I feel it's quite traumatic to constantly hear shouting as well and not really have any peace of mind.*" **– young person**

Professionals were asked whether they felt that experiencing parental conflict can make children more vulnerable to experiencing some of the risks that are already known to be associated with children going missing. In the survey most respondents thought that parental conflict did increase a child's vulnerability to a range of risk factors, in particular poor mental health, criminal exploitation, and self-harm.

Do you think that experiencing parental conflict can make children more vulnerable or likely to experience these issues?

■ RPC workers (n 14)   ■ Other professionals (n 46 or 47)
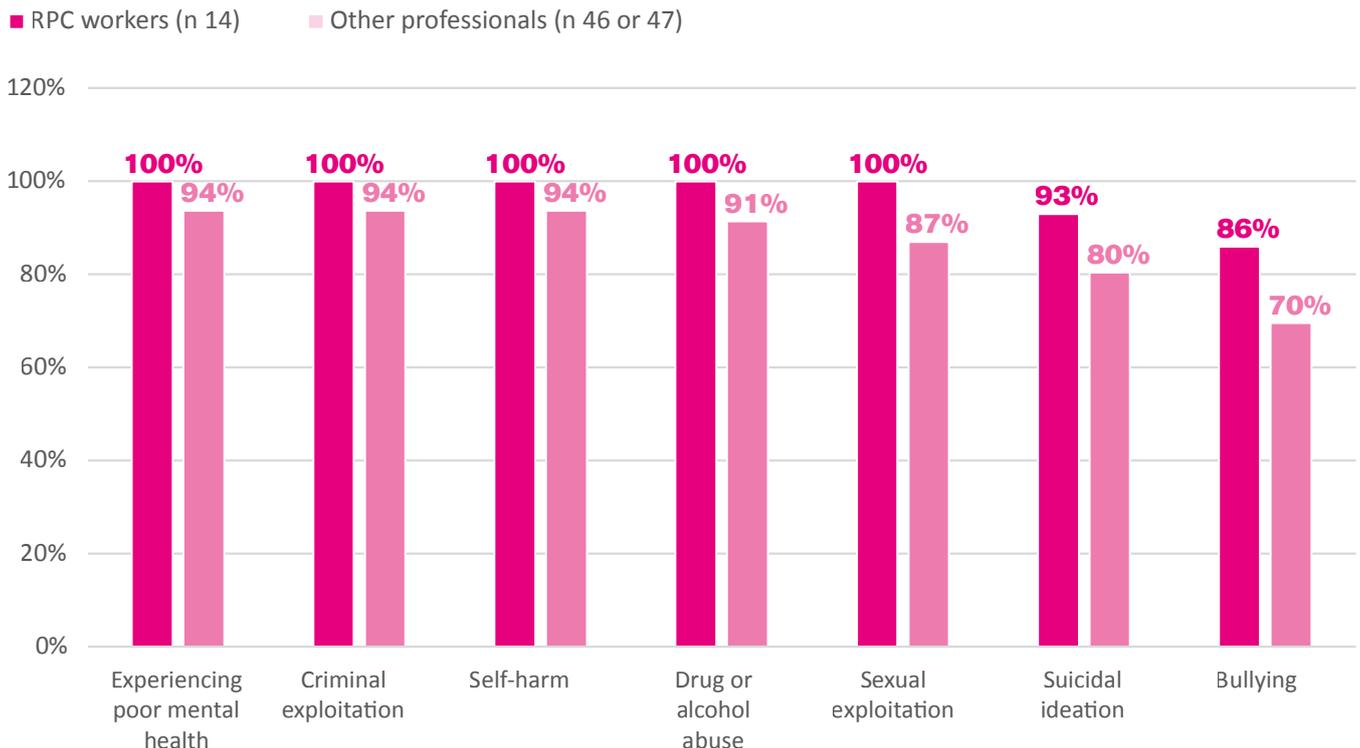
Young people completing the public insights survey were asked about this too. The most common factor they identified as being more likely was mental health issues, followed by feeling unhappy.

Which, if any, of the following do you believe are more likely as a result of a young person witnessing regular, unresolved arguments between parents or carers? Please select three options you think are most likely. (n. 1,000)

Category	Value
Mental health issues	69%
Feeling unhappy	46%
Wanting to spend time with people away from home	35%
Wanting to harm themselves	31%
Problems at school	29%
Spending time with unsafe or much older people	28%
Struggling with friendships	19%
Don't know	3%
Prefer not to say	2%
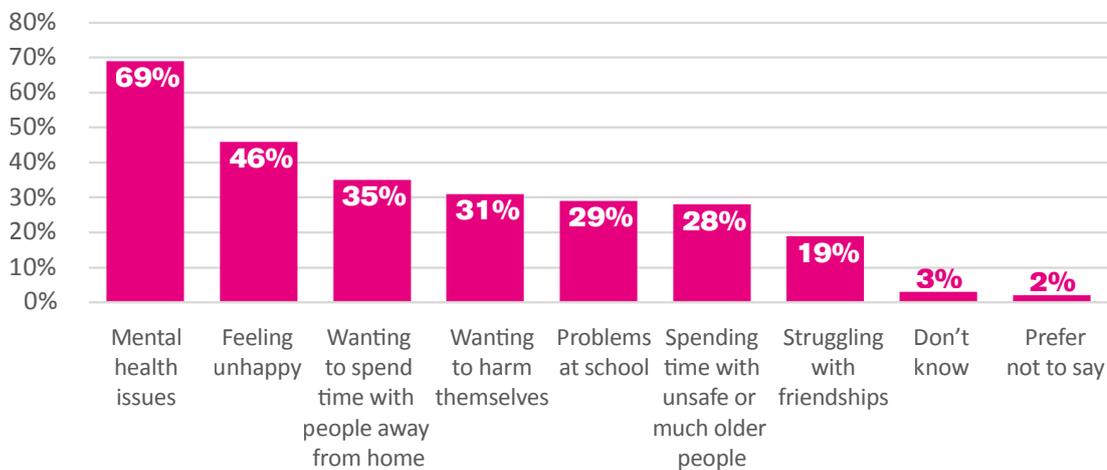
Increased risks of exploitation

In interviews and open text responses to the survey, an increased risk of exploitation was referenced repeatedly as a concern for children going missing linked to parental conflict. Previous research has shown that there are strong links between children going missing and exploitation, so this finding is not unexpected, however many people were clear that experiencing parental conflict was a particular risk factor increasing vulnerability to exploitation.

Participants spoke of children feeling neglected or not listened to at home, and of wanting to find that community elsewhere.

"I think it's about finding comfort. So finding comfort in things that's outside of the home, whether it's good or bad, usually bad, and working with it because that's all you have, especially if you're like, again, with not really having any attention or, you know, not really having that family support when you get home to be able to communicate. But then maybe you have found a group that aren't necessarily the most, the best of influences, but you feel comfort with them. So which can lead the person to just getting involved in a lot of things they shouldn't be, or being in places they shouldn't be, which can in turn lead to them being missing." **– young person**

Case study

Eva*, 14, lives primarily with her mum, her parents having separated last year. There have been ongoing arguments between her parents which has resulted in neither parent providing much oversight of what Eva is doing. Eva started going missing and was spending time with harmful peers. She was ultimately groomed by some of the people she was spending time with, and was a victim of serious harm while missing.

*not real name

"Many occasions a missing episode begins due to parental conflict. I do believe this opens children up to forms of grooming, and because they have felt neglected at home, feel the groomer is providing what they don't have." **– police survey**

"Parents do not always see that their negative behaviour is impacting their children, parents that are suffering from substance abuse find it difficult to cope with themselves, let alone their children. Young people often go missing to escape what's going on at home and seek other usually negative relationships, which often results in them going missing and open to exploitation" **– local authority survey**

"[Young person] tried to find a sense of belonging, a place where they matter, young person is then targeted by adults wishing to exploit them" **– local authority survey**

"Lack of communication between parents often leads to safeguarding opportunities for the child being missing. It opens them up to exploitation, seeking attention and security outside the home. Each parent only appreciates part of the child's behaviour and significant risks are not always noticed" **– police survey**

"Because things are not comfortable at home, that exploitation, as an example, that exploitation becomes even more vulnerable because then they start seeking, you know, that comfort from someone, you know, that wanting to be seen, heard and understood from someone." **– third sector interview**

"So they seek that in other relationships out in the community sometimes, some of which might not be very safe, but also they're not equipped to be looking after themselves anyway" **– RHI worker interview**

"The first event, so they don't get on with their parents, and they're then drawn to peer groups, they're drawn to outside influences, which then become the bigger focus in their life. And we are potentially missing that first element, that there are issues within the family home that we haven't got recorded anywhere." **– RHI worker interview**

Summary

It is clear from professionals, young people and parents that there are links between parental conflict and children going missing. While the data that is available is limited, that is more reflective of access and quality of data rather than suggesting that there are no or limited links.

Parental conflict can be a factor in influencing children to go missing in the first instance, but it is not as simple as just that. Parental conflict can result in children not being reported missing or reported missing inappropriately. It can reduce protective factors that prevent children from going missing. If it is not addressed it can escalate the duration of missing incidents, or lead to repeat incidents, and it can increase children's vulnerability to other risks that are associated with missing, in particular mental health issues and exploitation.

2. How is parental conflict identified if it is influencing a child to go missing?

Key findings

- Neither police safe and well checks nor local authority return home interviews typically collect easily extractable data on the existence of parental conflict as an influence for a child going missing
- Safe and well checks are not always delivered in a way that enables police officers to explore parental conflict
- Return home interviews are typically delivered in a way that more easily enables children to disclose parental conflict
- There are limitations in one off interactions in identifying parental conflict, including in safe and well checks and return home interviews
- Various barriers to disclosure and identification exist:
    - Children may be worried that professionals will get involved with their family
    - Children may fear that talking to professionals will make things worse
    - Children may not recognise that their situation is something that they can get help with
    - Parents may present differently to professionals or not want to engage with them
    - Blame may be placed on the child as opposed to recognising that the root of the problem is parental conflict
    - Parents may not recognise the impact the conflict is having
    - Other factors may over-shadow parental conflict
- It is important for children to be able to build a relationship with a trusted professional before disclosing anything about parental conflict

There are various routes through which parental conflict might be identified if it is a factor in a child going missing. Two of these routes are in routine or statutory processes that exist when a child returns from being missing, namely:

1. Prevention Interviews / Safe and well checks

These are delivered by the police when a child returns from being missing. They should be an opportunity for the police to ascertain the child's immediate safety and to briefly explore the missing episode.

2. Return Home Interviews

Local authorities have a statutory duty to offer a return home interview every time a child returns from being missing. They should be delivered by someone not involved in the child's direct care, and provide an opportunity for a more in-depth conversation about why the child went missing, what happened while they were away, and what support they need.

In the survey, professionals thought that parental conflict is most often identified at RHIs (38%), followed by other safeguarding work (22%), then at safe and well checks (10%). Nearly 1 in 5 however said that it is often not identified (18%).

## 2.1. Safe and well checks / Prevention Interviews: Identification and recording of parental conflict

Identification of parental conflict in safe and well checks

In data shared via FOI requests, the vast majority of police forces shared that they do not specifically record 'parental conflict' as a risk factor / vulnerability marker or equivalent in their missing children reports. Only one police force responding to the FOI gathers this information and they were not able to share the data.

Professionals taking part in the survey and interviews shared that parental conflict is not always explored in safe and well checks. Of the 21 people who work in policing who completed the survey, only **1 in 3 (7 of 21)** said that they or their team routinely ask about parental conflict when conducting a safe and well check.

However, the majority shared that they do identify something related to parental conflict at least sometimes:

How often do you identify something related to parental conflict when conducting safe and well checks? (n. 21)
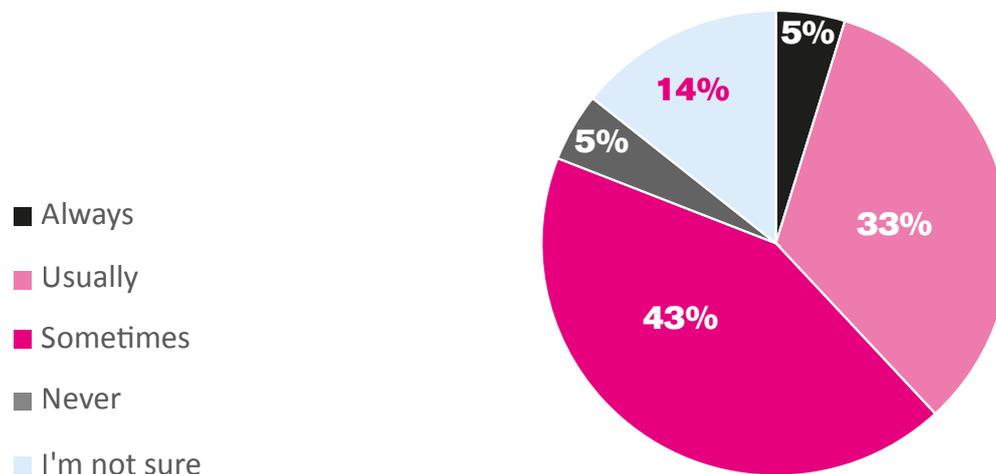
While professionals shared that it does get identified, only 6 of the 21 survey responses (29%) thought that safe and well checks are delivered in a way that enables police officers to explore parental conflict with the child.

> **"**The safe and well checks regarding the children is probably key [...] to understand the voice of the child and understand how they interact in their surroundings and what the family dynamics are**"** – **police interview**

Respondents referenced the fact that safe and well checks are often brief, without the time to fully explore what is going on for the child:

> **"**Safe and well checks by frontline officers are often brief and most don't provide much information**"** – **police survey**

> **"**Do not get the time. Parents do not want to get involved**"** – **police survey**

"It is very difficult on a single visit to gauge the drivers and to gain enough information from the parent and child. Sometimes they feel guarded and they might not want to disclose to somebody they don't know." **– police survey**

Some also referenced parents being present during the conversation, meaning that children may not be able or willing to share anything related to parental conflict:

"Often one or both parents will be present when the child is seen by police for prevention interview" **– police survey**

"Parents are sometimes present leading to the topic not being engaged upon" **– police survey**

Some however were clear that they could be delivered in a way that can illicit information about the child's home life and any parental conflict that may be happening:

"Children are asked if everything is okay at home and if they had any arguments before leaving the address. The children are also seen alongside the parents and the relationship / tension between the two are managed" **– police survey**

"We cover all sorts of questions about the lead up to the missing episode as well as what happened during the episode and how they feel about returning home" **– police survey**

"We try to obviously look beyond the obvious and that's what we deliver to all our staff when they're conducting that, that it's not what they're saying, it's what's the context behind that and that may include sort of like what's known on our systems as well [...] it's basically professional curiosity" **– police interview**

"Ultimately it's about supporting that child and understanding why they've gone missing. So, but yeah, we will try to engage that child in conversation prior so there isn't any undue influences in them giving the account, and then obviously we'll look at the interactions once they're in that setting to see sort of like, how they're dealing with the family memb ers" **– police interview**

There were references to the fact that this can depend on the officer conducting the safe and well check:

"Officers working with young people would see this, but other officers would not notice" **– police survey**

2.2. Return Home Interviews: Identification and recording of parental conflict

Identification of parental conflict in return home interviews

Similarly to police safe and well checks, the majority of RHI workers said that they do not record 'parental conflict' as a standalone risk factor. However, for the 10 local authorities that shared data via the FOI request, there was evidence of parental conflict in 19.3% of return home interview records.

In contrast to safe and well checks, many professionals spoke of the fact that RHIs are delivered in a way that should enable a child to discuss this if it was a factor in them going missing. Interviews and those completing the survey referenced RHIs being delivered in a child centred way and using professional curiosity to explore what is going on for that child, trying to delve more deeply into issues other than what might first appear to be behind their missing episode.

> *"We always talk about what's the relationship like with parents and siblings. We don't use the word directly around parent conflict"* **– RHI interview**

> *"[Yes] based on the approach I have developed when delivering RHIs which has empowered the young person to feel confident about disclosure without fear of judgement or disbelief"* **– RHI survey**

> *"We look at family dynamics, allow the child to explore who is in their life and who they can trust and what each relationship looks like for them"* **– RHI survey**

> *"The RHI teams, they are very skilled at what they do. They know [...]how to deal with [the children], how to get that information"* **– local authority interview**

Some referenced trying to talk to the child away from their parents, whether that be at home but not with the parents, or sometimes at school. However, it was noted that this can be difficult to do as parents sometimes want to be present for the discussion, or the child themselves wants their parent(s) to be there.

> *"Preferably the return interview will be conducted away from the home to get a young person's true voice, but sometimes we have to see the young person at home and if they want to have parents present we have to respect that"* **– RHI worker survey**

> *"sometimes parents obstruct us seeing a child without them there, this can result in the child not telling us how they truly feel and increase their risk of missing and exploitation. Sometimes one parent will want us to complete the return home interview while the other doesn't, this can make it challenging to see the young person and identify concerns"* **– local authority survey**

However, while professionals were clear that RHIs can be delivered in a way that would enable the identification of parental conflict, there was some feedback about the fact that a one-off conversation / intervention is always going to be limited when compared with ongoing support. This was both in terms of identification of parental conflict and in terms of support provision for the young person.

Some spoke of the fact that trust needs to be built up before a child will discuss any challenges that might be happening with their parents, and that this cannot always happen in one conversation.

> **"**I think now, where we have that relationship or where we built our relationship, they were able to be more open and actually wanted to get that burden off**"** – **RHI worker interview**

Case study

Hannah*, 15, lived with both of her parents, but her father travelled a lot for work. When her father was away, Hannah would never go missing, however she would frequently go missing when he was home. There was no evidence of exploitation or other vulnerability when Hannah was missing.

Over a number of safe and well checks and return home interviews it started to become clear that Hannah was unhappy when her father was home, because her parents were having arguments about what she should and should not be doing. Her father was much stricter than her mum, and they would frequently argue about who Hannah was spending time with and what she was doing. This often resulted in a high level of tension in the house, and Hannah never knew whether her parents would be arguing or giving each other the silent treatment. This caused her a high level of stress and resulted in her often going missing to get away from that.

not real name

2.3. Barriers to identification of parental conflict

"It can go unseen" – **police survey**

While it is clear that there are strong links between missing and parental conflict, those who were consulted for this research spoke of the many and significant barriers linked to its disclosure and identification.

"Young people do not always feel comfortable to share the information, parents do not want to look like they are doing a bad job and the young people also may not trust that professionals will support them" – **local authority survey**

The following quote demonstrates some of the complexity in this:

"Identifying parental conflict as a factor in a young person going missing can be challenging because the adults often focus on the child's behaviour rather than the wider family dynamics. Parents may describe the young person as "difficult" or "not listening," without recognising how their own reactions, communication breakdowns, or inconsistent boundaries are contributing to the situation. This can make it hard to explore the root causes, as the narrative becomes centred on the young person being the problem.

At the same time, parental conflict isn't always visible - arguments may be minimised, or adults may blame each other, making it harder for professionals to understand what is actually happening at home. Young people themselves may also struggle to express the impact of this conflict, either out of loyalty or fear of making things worse. As a result, the role of parental tension can remain hidden, even when it is a significant push factor behind a young person choosing to leave or stay away from home." – **local authority survey**

Barriers to disclosing

Professionals and young people spoke of the existence of many barriers which might prevent children from disclosing that parental conflict was a factor in their missing episode.

"Children often do not disclose this to police or other agencies even when it is apparent that there is significant parental conflict ongoing" – **police survey**

"Sometimes […] with the police being there, us being there in uniform, we don't, they don't open up to us" – **police survey**

- They might be worried that professionals will get involved with their family or their parents, particularly when they think that it might get their parents into some kind of trouble

> "*there might be barriers around kind of, you know, shame and concern that potentially you know, social care might become aware*" – **local authority interview**

> "*They are unsure what they're allowed to share as well, which is really tricky and a massive burden for them to kind of carry and a worry*" – **RHI worker interview**

> "*Children do not wish to betray their parents or get them in trouble*" – **local authority survey**

- Children may also fear that talking to professionals might make things worse. They might worry that the situation will escalate, with arguments getting worse, and their parents blaming them for that. This was something that was particularly notable for the young people who took part in this research, particularly in relation to police and social care disclosures.

> "*I think kids and teenagers have that understanding that you tell the police something, social services will get involved*" – **young person**

> "*Because the child would feel more terrified and obviously would make more arguments within like the parents since they would argue whose fault it was. And sometimes in rare cases, it might also be like attacks on to the child as well. So, the child might be scared into, like, not telling anyone, and then they'd probably become more shut off*" – **young person**

> "*Child not wanting to share the truth in case this escalates the tension in the relationship and more acrimony at home for them*" – **local authority survey**

> "*The child does not wish the conflict to get worse, so they don't share enough information with us / police*" – **police survey**

> "*The YP have to want to share this information, most will not share information of this nature as they don't want to get their parents in trouble and most of them keep their cards close to their chest*" – **police survey**

> "*Children and young people will often not disclose parental conflict for fear of it escalating and them being held accountable or blamed for telling someone*" – **health sector survey**

- Children may also feel that the situation is normal and will not recognise it as something that they may be able to try to get help with. Young people themselves thought that this was likely to act as a barrier, and that children might not know that their missing episodes are being driven by parental conflict:

> "*If that's… something he's just used to at home […]*
> *that might just be normal to him, that he might not think*
> *that that's anything strange*" **– young person**

> "*I noticed that in these circumstances that sometimes the child can like absorb the energies that are going between the parents and then sometimes it can lead them to feel like overwhelmed, stressed, frustrated, and then they can tend to like carry it into their day-to-day life and like be misunderstood by people around them because they don't really understand like the level of like stress and frustration that they're absorbing when they're at home.*" **– young person**

> "*Young people may feel that it is their 'normal'*" **– local authority survey**

- Children may not think that parental conflict is a serious enough issue to share with professionals. This is particularly the case regarding disclosures to social care or police, who are seen as quite serious professionals who would get involved in 'big' issues

> "*Because if [the parents] are having an argument, it's just like, that's pretty normal because we've all been there, let's be honest*" **– young person**

> "*He might just feel like it's not a big enough deal to go to social services about the fact that your parents are arguing, because if there isn't like violence or threat to life or anything like that, I don't know, I'm just thinking personally myself. I don't think I ever would have gone to social services or the police and said 'my parents are arguing a lot.' I would have just felt like, well, that's just how home life is*" **– young person**

One young person felt that this could actually be exacerbated by professionals, who might minimise the child's feelings if they didn't understand parental conflict and its impact.

> "*I'd say that for some adults, I mean, you know, some of them believe that, oh, you know, 'it's not really a big deal' or, you know, 'they're just arguing, it's not violent, it's not physical', but that's kind of, I don't want like an old way of thinking because people react differently. You know, everybody is different. Everybody is the one person. So what to you might say, 'oh, yeah, this is just, you know, arguing, you know, you can just tune it out' or, you know, 'you can just move somewhere else, you know, if you're feeling uncomfortable', can have quite serious mental impact on somebody else who is much more vulnerable, much more emotional, right?*" **– young person**

Parents presenting differently to professionals or not wanting to engage

A number of professionals spoke of the fact that parents themselves can present differently to professionals, including when they are reporting their child as missing to the police. Professionals gave examples of parents not sharing anything about parental conflict to professionals; declining professional interventions including RHIs; and behaving differently in front of professionals.

> *"[The parental conflict] will often get left and not acknowledged by anybody, like from then it going onto missing compact [police missing system] and getting picked up"* – **RHI worker interview**

> *"Parents may present as better parents in front of police, and / or deny wrongdoing alleged by the child"* – **police survey**

> *"Some parents will decline [the RHI] resulting in our service being unable to talk to the young person to address any safeguarding concerns"* – **youth worker survey**

> *"Good acting by parents who seem to be more credible than that of the child, or the child not being taken seriously"* – **local authority survey**

> *"Sadly the parents often come across as apathetic or anti-police, as such they don't always engage and disclose their concerns or personal circumstances which could aid in safeguarding"* – **police survey**

Professionals also referenced the embarrassment or shame that parents might be feeling, meaning they may be hesitant to talk to professionals or reach out for support.

> *"[parents] who would be embarrassed to admit to any parental conflict will not volunteer this info and it is less likely to be obvious"* – **police survey**

> *"Parents not being forthcoming with exact family circumstances out of embarrassment or other factors"* – **police survey**

> *"Sometimes the family masks their circumstances and feel shame opening up to their network for support. They want to keep their struggles a secret."* – **local authority survey**

Blame being placed on the child

Professionals spoke of it not being recognised that the issue lies with the parents, rather that blame can be placed on the child themselves. This might be linked to the behaviour that is exhibited by the child as a result of the parental conflict, or the parent trying to deflect onto the child.

> *"Adults blaming the young person stage of development and behaviours rather than the environment they have experienced in their homes"* – **local authority survey**

"Parent themselves – often parents see the child as being 'the problem' and find it very difficult to accept that conflict between the parents is the issue" **– local authority survey**

"The child being a scapegoat or blamed for parental conflict as a result of their behaviour" **– health sector survey**

Parents not recognising the impact their conflict is having

Linked to the above, there were examples of parents not realising that their conflict is affecting the child, and resulting in behaviour or actions including going missing.

"Parents unwilling or unable to recognise and accept this is a contributing factor and feel the child is being defiant" **– local authority survey**

"The challenges are usually the parents who deny that there is a problem, refusing support, not engaging with support services and failing to recognise the impact their behaviours are having on their child" **– local authority survey**

"Parents can be quite quick to blame other factors for leading to missing episodes rather than addressing their role" **– local authority survey**

Other factors over-shadowing parental conflict

Parental conflict can sometimes be over-shadowed by other factors, particularly where there are risks around exploitation or more significant factors linked to the child's missing episode. Professionals can focus on the behaviours or risks being exhibited by the child as opposed to exploring or recognising the factors influencing them to go missing in the first instance.

"People see other things first" **– RHI worker interview**

"Workers recognising this as a factor as a child going missing might only be highlighted once it is happening regularly and so could be blamed solely on the child using substances, being exploited in the community so the young person's home life experiences might take a bit of time to recognise as the initial factor of the young person going missing, their wanting to be out in the community and away from their homes" – local authority survey

"Often we see and address other behaviours rather than identifying the reasoning behind them" **– local authority survey**

"sometimes changes in children's behaviour can be pinned on other problems" **– local authority survey**

Information sharing

More practical barriers were mentioned, including information not being able to be shared in the best way across multiple agencies.

> *"Important information not being shared with professionals at the right time with the right person and because of some systems in place that don't communicate"* – **youth worker survey**

Intensive support / trusted relationship

One of the common barriers shared was that often the opportunities for professionals to identify parental conflict linked to missing are one-off interactions: safe and well checks and / or return home interviews. Professionals were clear that these one-off conversations were often not enough to build the trust that is needed for a child to disclose anything about conflict between their parents.

> *"For some of our young people, they might only go missing once and we never get the opportunity to ever have a conversation with them again. The RHI is not going to tell us, you know, mum and dad have been having the silent treatment for six months"* – **local authority interview**

Often there needs to be a trusted relationship between a professional and a child before the child will speak about any conflict that is happening between their parents.

> *"In my experience children are more likely to disclose this with a person like a youth worker that they have been able to build a trusted relationship with"* – **local authority survey**

> *"If the child is not known to anyone it is extremely difficult and sometimes not possible to identify the factor"* – **RHI survey**

> *"When completing return home interviews we often do not have existing relationships with the young person, therefore they are less likely to be truthful about what's going on for them"* – **RHI worker survey**

> *"Parents are often not open about conflict between them and often a child will not disclose much during RHIs. This may be exacerbated by staff shortages and sickness where the child is interviewed by someone that they do not know or know well"* – **local authority survey**

> *"Children must be given the opportunity to explore family relationships with you in a getting to know you capacity and see that you are invested in learning about them to ensure they get the best support they can. They need to feel that you will not judge – all families will have hard times and experience challenges, their families are no different"* – **RHI worker survey**

2.4. How could parental conflict better be identified following a missing episode? Young people's views

Young people who took part in this consultation were asked what they thought might make a child more likely to disclose parental conflict.

Factors they identified included:

- Building trust before jumping into the big questions
- Making sure the most appropriate professional is asking the questions
- Asking the right questions
- Thinking about the environment the child is in when asking those questions

There was a clear sense that comfort to make a disclosure will vary from child to child, so multiple opportunities to talk about how things are at home should be provided, driven by professional curiosity to understand the drivers behind a missing episode, and a good understanding of parental conflict so professionals can identify warning signs even when the child doesn't use language directly about 'conflict'.

Asking the right questions

Some of the young people had been left with the sense that professionals tend to blame children for going missing or at least assume that it's a problem with them and their situation, rather than considering that it might be because of push factors at home.

> **"***When me and my friends would go missing a lot, it was like, they didn't view it as like problems at home. They just thought we were reckless, like, reckless, like teenagers, basically, just like, like, you know, wild and out for like no reason because, you know, you're a teenager. So I think that it's important to like see the signs of what's going on.***"** – young person

The importance of professional curiosity when responding to missing incidents cannot be overstated. Children go missing because of myriad reasons, so genuinely exploring what is happening, without assumption or judgement, is vital if there is any hope to identify drivers and offer appropriate support.

When specifically asked how the questions should be framed, the young people spoke about the importance of building trust first, which is discussed further below, but also suggested some fairly direct phrasing, for example:

> **"***You can ask, what does it feel like to be around your family?***"** – young person

> **"***They might ask, do the arguments normally get resolved or do they still linger?***"** – young person

Asking questions in the right environment

Quite a few of the young people spoke about the importance of building trust first with open questions and showing genuine care, before asking about a child's home life and parent's relationship. They felt that going straight in with invasive questions would make children feel like professionals are 'just doing a job'.

> "*I feel like, first, before jumping into like big questions, they should get to know the young person and let the young person get to know them as well.*" **– young person**

Multiple young people mentioned engaging the young person with something they enjoy, or in a place with activities they enjoy in order to build rapport, for example at a boxing gym, while doing art or at a football match. While this may not be possible for all RHIs, we recommend that something like this is explored for repeat missing children, or where escalated risks have been identified, for example where there have been significant behaviour changes or there is already reason to suspect parental conflict.

> "*I feel like maybe like a therapeutic environment, like something that might have a few activities, maybe like the person can play like a few like board games with them and then talk as they're playing if that makes sense. [...] Because you're not only just talking about just the questions and stuff like that, you're thinking about the young person and what they like as well.*" **– young person**

Young people noted the importance of holding conversations away from the child's parents:

> "*I think it probably should not, it might be important for her to like not be in the presence of the parents so that they don't influence her answers. You know, whether she's like more hesitant to see, you know, what she's feeling because they're around or something like that. Or because of a fear of like something happening to her.*" **– young person**

Having the right professional asking the questions

There was a lot of discussion of who children might feel safe to speak to about parental conflict following a missing incident.

Generally, the police were not seen as an appropriate agency to explore these questions. They were seen as having more of an enforcement role that could make children nervous of the consequences of a disclosure. Others simply had a negative perception of the police.

In light of this it is unlikely that safe and well checks will be the right space to introduce questions about parental conflict. Although it would be helpful for the police to have some understanding of the issue and referral pathways so they know how to respond if a child spontaneously discloses.

There were varied views about whether social workers would be better placed. Some young people suggested children could be fearful because of the association with children being taken away from their parents by social workers.

"If someone's coming up to me as a child, like a police officer, it's overwhelming. It's definitely overwhelming because majority of the time they don't deal with the situation sensitively... so it's kind of just overwhelming and you kind of feel like they're against you, regardless of what's happened. And the same thing with social services, you know, there's always been stigma about social services and I just feel like it's kind of like, you know, if you know two of your parents are arguing and now social services are getting involved, kind of just thinking, you know, what's going to happen. So I feel like maybe having somebody communicate that to an individual that you trust" **– young person**

However, a couple of young people did think that social workers could be best placed.

The majority of young people spoke about trusted adults, who were seen as less official, being the people children may feel comfortable disclosing parental conflict to. School was most commonly mentioned, with school counsellors and safeguarding leads specifically named. Others suggested charities and helplines, youth workers, support workers, mentors.

"Yeah, I'd say like get like a support worker or like someone that you can actually trust and talk to. And then they could probably like help you from there or show you a route of like what you could do or what could happen." **– young person**

"I think that like, instead of it being like police and social workers, I understand that they need to be involved sometimes, but maybe like a school counsellor or the safeguarding person from school, like a mentor at school, I think the young person would be more likely to open up to those kind of people and have that trust built."

One young person felt peer support would be particularly valuable:

"maybe a youth worker, a young person, that's a youth worker or charity worker that's also a young person." **– young person**
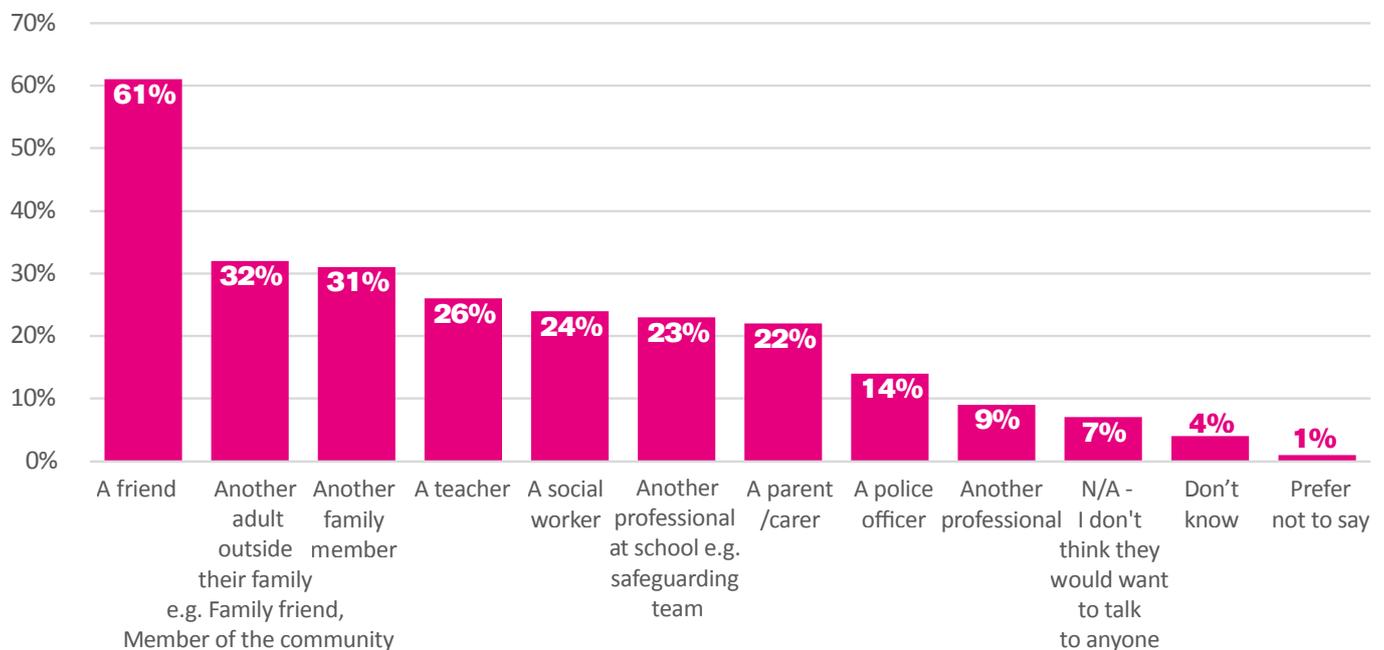
It was also identified as important that *any* professional speaking to the child following a missing incident understood parental conflict and its impact so that they wouldn't minimise the child's experience. This could be through formal training or even just by simply raising awareness amongst the professionals most likely to respond to missing incidents to ensure they know the serious impact it can have. As one young person suggested, this would ensure a more compassionate response when talking to children about conflict in the home.

"So yeah, just coming into with a lot of patience and tolerance can really, can really make the difference." **– young person**

Young people taking part in the public insights survey were asked who they thought someone under the age of 18 would want to talk to after returning home from running away due to parental conflict. By some margin the most popular choice was a friend (61%). Only 1 in 4 (24%) said they thought they would want to talk to a social worker, and less than 1 in 7 (14%) said a police officer. This suggests, as above, the existence of barriers for professionals in discussing parental conflict with children, and the importance of building relationships with them.

Who, if anyone, do you think a young person, under the age of 18, would want to speak to after returning home from running away due to witnessing regular, unresolved arguments between parents/carers? Please select all that apply. (n. 1,000)

Category	Percentage
A friend	61%
Another adult outside their family e.g. Family friend, Member of the community	32%
Another family member	31%
A teacher	26%
A social worker	24%
Another professional at school e.g. safeguarding team	23%
A parent/carer	22%
A police officer	14%
Another professional	9%
N/A - I don't think they would want to talk to anyone	7%
Don't know	4%
Prefer not to say	1%

The issue of children potentially not wanting to speak to either police or social workers does raise questions about whether safe and well checks or return home interviews will be the right place for most children to disclose parental conflict as a factor in why they went missing. This may be less of a problem where return home interviews are provided by an independent service, or by a third sector provider. However, many local authorities do not offer an independent service.[14]

It is clear that multiple opportunities should be provided for children who have been missing to disclose what caused them to go, and any harm they are experiencing. The various professionals delivering those interventions need to understand parental conflict so they can effectively identify it and work with the child to respond appropriately.

14 Missing People, Key findings: The delivery of return home interviews in England in 2023-24, Delivery-of-return-interviews-England-Key-findings.pdf

3. What support is available when parental conflict is identified?

Key findings

- Some professionals are clearly having child-centred, supportive conversations in both safe and well checks and return home interviews when parental conflict is identified, but it is clear that this is not happening consistently

- One-off interactions may not be the best space in which to thoroughly explore parental conflict

- While there is varied support available for missing children and for those affected by parental conflict, there was limited evidence of clear pathways for children who have returned from being missing where parental conflict is specifically identified as a factor

- It is likely that some children are accessing good support because the parental conflict comes to light elsewhere, or because there are good support services around missing incidents in their local area. However, the lack of clear referral pathways between missing interventions and parental conflict teams means that some children will fall through the gaps

PARTICIPANTS IN THIS RESEARCH WERE ASKED WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE WHEN PARENTAL CONFLICT IS IDENTIFIED LINKED TO MISSING.

3.1. Safe & Well check / Prevention Interview – what happens if parental conflict is identified?

Police safe and well checks are generally a light-touch check in from a police officer to confirm a returned missing child's immediate safety, to check whether they have been a victim of crime, and to ask basic questions about the missing episode. They can be used as an opportunity to identify any support needs for the child on their return, although it is relatively rare that they involve any in-depth conversations.

Police officers were asked what they would do if they identified parental conflict during a safe and well check. Quite limited information was shared about this, but broadly we found evidence of:

• Limited or no action

> *"Parental conflict is not viewed as a major issue by police, and is expected in most families we deal with"* **– police survey**

> *"Suitable advice such as try to get on better with them"* **– police survey**

• Some emotional support provided to the child within the safe and well check

> *"Empathy and hearing the child's voice"* **– police survey**

> *"Open and honest attitude, words of reassurance and understanding"* **– police survey**

> *"Come down to their level, change language, offer alternatives to reasons they went missing"* **– police survey**

• Referral or signposting to other services, although these didn't necessarily seem specific to parental conflict services

> *"Referrals to social care, signposting to NHS, GP, Samaritans, local youth groups"* **– police survey**

> *"Referrals, signposting, and ensuring familial or friend support"* **– police survey**

Share the information with other services, primarily social care, via a Public Protection Notice (PPN)

> *"PPN, social care referral"* **– police survey**

> *"PPN social services, school pastoral care being informed"* **– police survey**

> *"Record on the PPN (safeguarding form) for potential further support from a partner agency"* **– police survey**

There was varying feedback from police about whether they would take any steps to approach the parents. Some said no, or not usually, whereas some gave examples of how they would engage the parent:

"Speak to the parents to ascertain what support they are receiving and signpost them" **– police survey**

"Depending on their attitude and behaviour" **– police survey**

"Discuss the effect their actions have on the child and highlight safeguarding concerns. It would typically be discussed as it arose depending on the circumstances" **– police survey**

Safe and well checks may not be the place for these conversations to take place, however it is crucial that police officers are aware about parental conflict and how it can impact children so that they do not minimise it if it is disclosed or suggested. They should then be equipped to refer or signpost to others who are better equipped to support children and parents with the conflict and the implications of that.
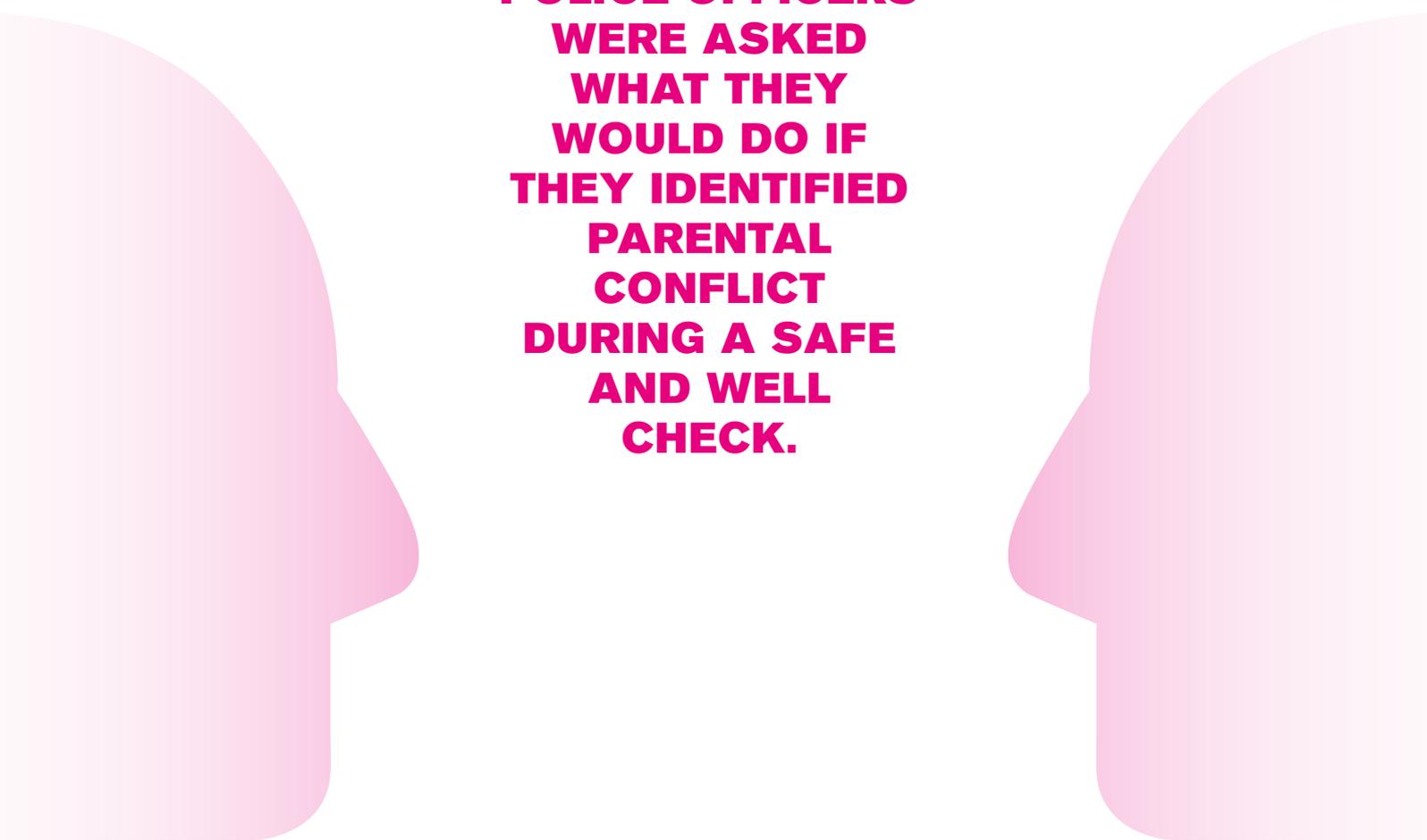
POLICE OFFICERS WERE ASKED WHAT THEY WOULD DO IF THEY IDENTIFIED PARENTAL CONFLICT DURING A SAFE AND WELL CHECK.

3.2. Return home interviews – what happens if parental conflict is identified?

"I think it's just kind of identifying risk and then managing a plan and a kind of care plan going forward and just trying to support and mitigate again, I suppose, future missing episodes" **– RHI worker interview**

As may be expected, RHI professionals were very clear that they would emotionally support the child if parental conflict was identified as a factor influencing the child to go missing.

"Listening, acknowledging concerns" **– RHI worker survey**

"Listen, reassure, encourage open environment to speak with parents with the aim of trying to improve the situation" **– RHI worker survey**

"Sometimes the young person wants to voice just how they're feeling and we then assess if it's still a risk right now, if it's still happening. If it's something that's previously happened and we talk through that with them, about them acknowledging actually it wasn't their fault that this happened and be there as that listening support. Or we assess and actually this is an ongoing thing still contributing to missing episode" **– RHI worker interview**

In terms of ongoing support, professionals spoke of the fact that RHI workers themselves have relatively limited options in terms of the practical support they can offer young people. This is primarily due to the nature of the intervention, and the fact that it is a one-off contact after each missing episode.

"It depends if we would have like a long-term relationship with them because some children could go missing just once and then we wouldn't see them again" **– RHI worker interview**

"When it comes to those longer in-depth discussions, we may not have the opportunity to have those with young people in like a one-off setting. The assessment doesn't allow for that" **– local authority interview**

"What does the professional go and do with that information [from the RHI]? Does it sit in a drawer somewhere or online somewhere? Or does it get used as an opportunity" **– local authority interview**

Some spoke of the fact that, if the young person was open to social care and had a social worker, that they would talk to the social worker to inform them about the parental conflict

"The parents might not realise the impact that's happening on the child as well. So then having a kind of social worker that's involved, they kind of take on that responsibility because they are the lead family worker, whereas we are just feeing back their voice, the child and young person's voice on the situation" **– RHI worker interview**

"If open to children's services, speak with parents about discussing additional support for them via the social worker" **– RHI worker survey**

"Maybe if the social workers are aware, they can do some kind of protective work with a young person." **– RHI worker interview**

However, if the young person is not open to social care then things are more difficult.

"If there wasn't a lead worker kind of involved, that's when it's like a bit trickier because we need to feedback their voice and we assess actually is the level of risk a safeguarding one? Is it early help, like where they can do a bit more low level support?" **– RHI worker interview**

There were references to try to identify a trusted adult:

"someone that would hopefully build that relationship and be able to support that child through positive activities, through even engaging in therapeutic support if that's what they felt they needed, or just getting, making sure they've got space and time for themselves regularly weekly to be able to get a break and away from that environment" **– local authority interview**

Others spoke of making referrals or signposting the child:

"Referral – school services" **– RHI worker survey**

"Early help hub – families need to consent to this" **– RHI worker survey**

"Signpost to […] mental health support, charities linked to supporting parents with additional learning needs etc […] also share advocacy support for the child and emotional support telephone lines where they can discuss their worries or concerns" **– RHI worker survey**

"We signpost to other services that are applicable to what they've disclosed to us, and also all RHIs get sent to the social worker or we have conversations with them to pick up any concerns that we may raise" **– RHI worker interview**

Case study

Jo*, 15, was reported missing by their school after they had not turned up at school and it transpired that they had been away overnight. Jo lives with her mum and step-father, who have very different approaches to parenting, with her step-father being very strict. Jo's mum later disclosed that she had not reported Jo as missing because the step-father did not want this to happen.

At Jo's RHI she initially spoke about the arguments that she was having with her step-dad. She then went missing on further occasions, and ultimately told her RHI worker that her arguments with her step-dad stemmed from the conflict that she frequently witnessed between her mum and step-dad.

The RHI worker referred her to a mental health support service, and made a referral to Children's Social Care. Jo was additionally referred to a charity that provides more intensive ongoing support for missing children. The parental conflict appears to have reduced, and Jo has not gone missing again since she started receiving the ongoing intensive support.

*not real name

3.3. Support for children

Participants referenced a variety of services that are available for children affected by parental conflict. This support varied from that being provided by social workers, to schools, to youth groups, to support being provided through the reducing parental conflict programme. There was significant variation in the support referenced by different local areas, as might be expected given the support provision in one area will likely be very different from other areas.

For the purposes of this research this report will briefly note down some of what participants referenced. However, a key thing to note is that most references to this support were primarily focused on parental conflict more broadly, not where it was related to missing incidents.

It is unclear how and when referrals or signposting into these services would happen when a child had been missing.

Where there was no indication that an intervention or support service was linked to, or likely to be triggered by, missing incidents, we have not explored the provision in any detail, as this will be better considered in wider evaluations of the response to parental conflict more broadly.

"I am not sure apart from the typical support through social care, school and voluntary sectors" – **local authority survey**

"While we do not have specific resources aimed at children who are missing from home, our youth based practitioners are well trained in restorative and relational based practice and more recently, life coaching [...] we have previously used local grant funding to support VCS organisations who provide mediation with children and their parents; these have been in relation to children who are excluded or unsettled in education as opposed to missing from home, but could be utilised in this area too" – **professional survey**

Support mentioned included:

- Support at school, including school wellbeing services
- Mentoring for young people
- Youth clubs and youth groups
- Therapeutic support and counselling
- Reducing Parental Conflict programmes
- Referral into early help

"Continued support from early help who have access to a parental conflict toolkit and parental conflict champions who can support further if needed" – **local authority survey**

While there was some positive feedback about these various options for supporting children affected by parental conflict, there were also some concerns raised about the capacity or availability of those services, or whether the threshold would necessarily met to access them if children were going missing and mentioned parental conflict.

"We have an RPC worker in our locality, but currently it is not clear what work they can and will undertake. If there is a team, I am unaware of this, I think there is currently only one worker" – **local authority survey**

3.3.1. What *should* happen if parental conflict is identified as a driver for a child going missing?

Young people's views

When a child does share that parental conflict is part or all of the reason why they went missing, it is really important that professionals take steps to address the issue, and to prevent them from going missing again.

Every time a child goes missing, they are exposed to risk, including being targeted by exploiters who identify their vulnerability. Every effort should therefore be made to prevent repeat missing incidents.

While there wasn't a simple consensus on what should happen following a disclosure, the young people involved in this research gave various recommendations, with decisions for what is best for each child needing to be based on their individual circumstances, and with a focus on what they themselves want to happen next.

In the public insights survey young people were asked which, if any, of a list of support services they thought would be the most important for children experiencing parental conflict. None of the options scored particularly highly, with safe spaces at school to talk to trained staff being the most popular, but with only 48% thinking this was important.

Which, if any, of the following support services for young people, under the age of 18 affected by witnessing regular, unresolved conflict between parents, do you believe are the most important? (n. 1000)
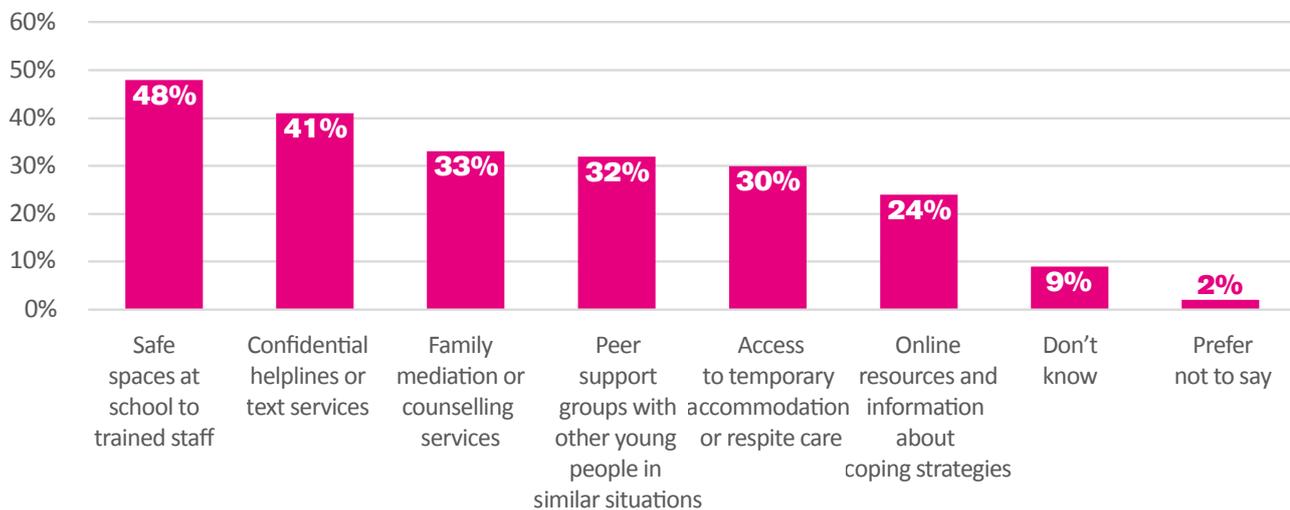
They were also asked about what features would be essential for children needing support with missing and parental conflict. Again, none of the options were particularly popular, with nearly half expressing that 24/7 was essential.

Which, if any, of the following features do you believe would be the most essential for a support programme for young people under the age of 18 who have gone missing due to witnessing regular, unresolved arguments between parents? (n. 1000)
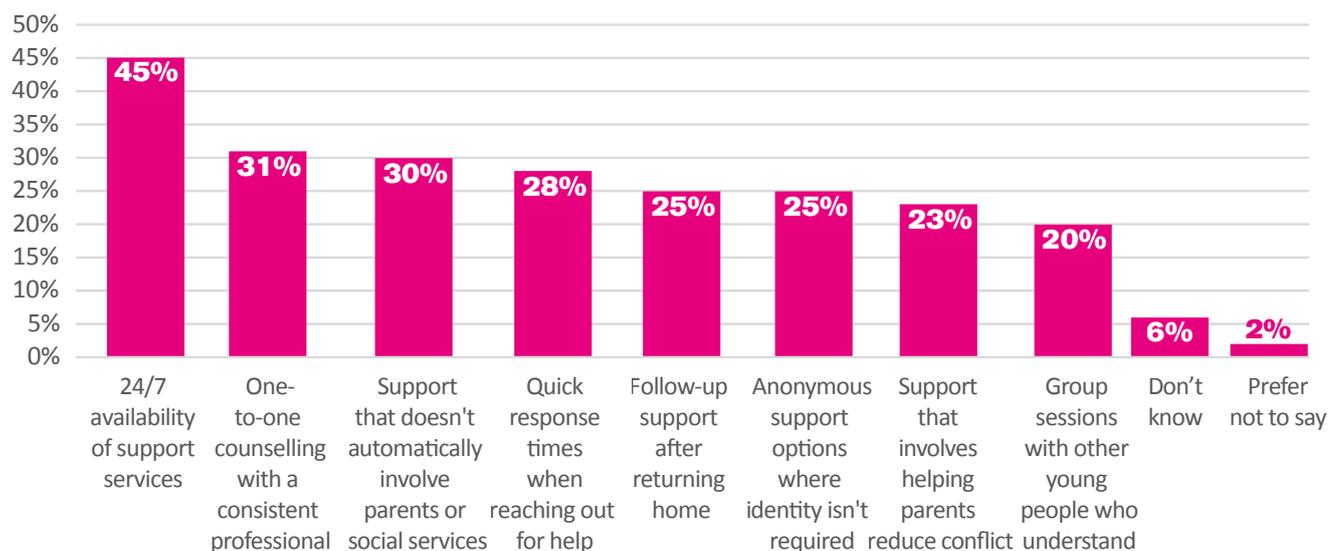
When hearing from young people in focus groups, they gave less feedback about specific types of support but were focused on broadly what should happen.

Speaking to the child's parents

Young people were asked whether they thought professionals should intervene by speaking to the child's parents if they disclosed parental conflict. For some, this was seen as a really vital step. **46% of those (460 of 1000)** taking part in the survey thought that a professional should inform the parent if the child discloses that they have gone missing because of parental conflict.

In the focus groups, young people spoke about how parental conflict is not the child's problem, and how they therefore cannot be expected to be or have the solution. They felt that focussing just on the child and how they're dealing with the situation can accidentally make it seem like they are the problem rather than acknowledging the parents are the actual cause.

> *"If they go through the young person, it does send the message that they are responsible for their parents arguing or their behaviour around each other. Whereas if they go directly to the parents, it kind of alleviates the child from any of that responsibility."* **– young person**

> *"Nobody really looked at my parents or what was happening at home or their history, you know, or my siblings, like no one really connected the dots together until later on. So yeah, I think it's important that, yeah, they just put the spotlight on the parents instead of, you know, putting a magnifying glass on the child."* **– young person**

One young person also pointed out that not telling the parents would mean failing to give the parents a chance to improve and focus on their child's wellbeing, which they saw as the parents' key role.

"I think if you don't tell the parents, you're kind of taking away their job to parent their child. And I think some people in tough positions, like parents, who are going through, for example, financial issues, kind of forget the reason they live together is for the child. And I think sometimes they just need that tough reminder, but like your child is suffering from what your behaviour." **– young person**

However, some young people felt that the parents being told could make things worse, so it is clear this needs to be done sensitively, and with support in place for the child. **36% (359 of 1,000)** of those completing the insights survey said they did not think professionals should inform the parents. Where this was discussed in the focus groups, the young people generally felt that the child should get some say in whether it was disclosed to the parent or not, giving them as much control as possible. Although, again, this would require skilled professional support as the child might be nervous to agree:

"I feel like a child is always going to say not to tell his parents. If you make the child feel safe, then they might feel inclined to be honest about it." **– young person**

"The root problem needs to be addressed because, you know, you could go to the child, but, you know, the child's still got to go back home or still got to deal with the split up with their parents. It's about, you know, finding a way that works for everyone, really. And that includes the child. I feel like a lot of the time it doesn't include the child. And sometimes it can be whatever the parent says or whatever the services thinks or doesn't think instead of actually including the child's opinion." **– young person**

It is really important to give the child agency in what is going to be shared with their parents, and what will then happen.

"They should ask what the child feels should do next. And if the child says like that they want to take it more slow, then maybe like take smaller steps to go ahead instead of like just jumping on and doing something like really big immediately." **– young person**

Some young people emphasised that talking to the parents does not necessarily need to just be criticising them, but should include an offer of support, for example family therapy.

Dealing with the impact this will have had for the child

Even though parental conflict is not the child's problem or responsibility to fix, they may still need support as the fact it has caused them to go missing shows it has obviously had a serious impact on their wellbeing.

RHIs can be one opportunity to show care and to identify further support needs, but the young people we spoke to were clear that professionals shouldn't expect the issues to be resolved in a one-off interaction. Therapy was suggested as one way to try and prevent any long-term impact or trauma of being exposed to conflict. This consultation did not provide an opportunity to go into great depth on what else that longer term support might look like.

Case study

Charlie*, 16, left home after witnessing an argument between his parents which had been exacerbated by the fact they had been drinking. When he got back, Charlie shared that they often drank and either argued or gave each other the silent treatment, meaning Charlie was always walking on eggshells while at home.

Initially, Charlie was opened to Children's Social Care and the parents were given advice about Non-Violent Resistance. However, Charlie continued to go missing on a frequent basis, and there started to be concerns that he was being groomed. This exacerbated the conflict that his parents were experiencing as they found it very stressful that so many professionals were suddenly involved in their lives.

Ultimately Charlie was put on a Child Protection Plan which included specific actions focused on reducing parental conflict and addressing risks of exploitation. A young person-led safety plan was created, and Charlie's social worker worked closely with his parents to reduce the impact of parental conflict. While there are still concerns around Charlie, his missing episodes have reduced and his parents are very engaged in reducing their alcohol use and linked arguments.

not real name

3.4. Support for parents

Similarly to the support available for children, those taking part in this research referenced a variety of support provision for parents experiencing conflict. Again however, it is unclear to what extent and how these are accessed by parents whose child is going missing linked to their parental conflict.

This support includes:

• Parenting courses

> "*There are courses for our parents to complete in our local area which are all very non-judgemental and have had really powerful outcomes*" **–local authority survey**

Reducing Parental Conflict programmes

• Mediation
• Relationship counselling

• The use of toolkits
• Referral to family services

> "*You've got a lot in relation from early help that support parents through to engage and access support in relation to conflict and issues, whether it be money […] could be substance misuse, could be, I don't know, childcare related issues. There's so many different things.*" **- RHI interview**

In giving their feedback about the support available for parents, a number of professionals referenced the fact that there is limited provision for parents and that much of the support is focused on the child. Some felt that this was a significant limitation of the support provision, and that there should be an increased focus on the parents..

> "*We primarily work with the young person and our service does not case hold which I feel needs to change so we can be more effective in our delivery. Our information is shared with the manager to analyse and look at support identified mostly for the young person, however I feel that the parent should be considered and supported*" **– youth worker survey**

Spotlight on Non-Violent Resistance (NVR)

NVR was mentioned by some professionals as a good practice response for families experiencing parental conflict, and two NVR practitioners who regularly work with the parents of children who have been missing were interviewed as part of the research.

NVR promotes a relational approach for families who are experiencing conflict. NVR support services or training aim to help parents re-establish their presence and connection with their child through de-escalation, self control, non-violent resistance methods and reconciliation, without resorting to punishment or withdrawal[15].

Practitioners from WalkWithMeUK, a CIC delivering NVR support to parents and carers, were interviewed for this research. Referrals to their service are often triggered by a child going missing repeatedly, where the parents are struggling to cope. They observed that the parents they support are often experiencing parental conflict, which can both be a driver for why the child is going missing, and a consequence of disagreement or stress as a result of the missing incidents.

They shared the benefits of taking an NVR approach with parents in this situation: encouraging parents to be calmer in how they engage with each other; to understand what is driving the conflict; to focus on reconnection; and to prioritise de-escalation.

The particular importance of self-reflection and leading parents to themselves identify the impact of conflict was acknowledged, as this reduces the sense of judgement or blame, and instead empowers parents to make a change in their own behaviour.

> "*It's very much about everybody understanding each other, as well as understanding the reasons for why the child is presenting in the way they are. So what we often find is once they are able to calm the situation down, they themselves are able to think about, you know, what is literally going on for them as parents, because more often than not, they would have been carrying stuff from many years ago as well, which their child's, the way the child is presenting, would have triggered them, from where they're coming from, from their childhood, from how they were brought up, you know. So once they are able to, it's almost like thrash that out in their mind and understand themselves, because it is around self-development, the parenting styles, then they are able to then start seeing how the other one is feeling and, you know, the other person's needs. So the mother will see how the father's feeling and his needs and vice versa. Yeah, and so something magical happens when they start understanding themselves.*" **– WalkWithMeUK Practitioner**

> "*In extreme circumstances, there's some, I say extreme, but in within a with a specific context, the local authority, you know, there's a team that offers NVR training for parents.*" **– RHI worker interview**

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15 Non-Violent Resistance (NVR): A Structured Approach for Educational Psychologists | Association of Educational Psychologists

3.4.1. What should happen if parental conflict is identified as a driver for a child going missing?

Parent's views

> "*I think what would be really a positive thing to see in society is to sort of really do some more work around the family in a positive light and sort of support families where their needs arise, and especially with children going missing, as I shared on a number of occasions, at some point, the conversation, the narrative, you know, changes and the parent is no longer a parent, but you then become the villain and it sort of completely cuts out the ability to sort of continue to parent your child where possible and build a positive relationship moving forward. So it's making sure that families get the support they need, but also the children, they get the support they need to sort of grow back into their families and maintain that family unit. Because families are important. They really are. And life is not easy or it's challenging for us all. It doesn't matter your background, it doesn't matter how much money or how educated you are. Life can be challenging for everyone. And so if we all stop to think about, you know, meeting the families in their places of need, then that will make the child, the family, everyone sort of come out on the other side, I think.*" – **parent interview**

While only a small number of parents took part in interviews for this research, all of them felt that they would have benefitted from support, and that this support could have benefitted their child.

> "*At no point in time did the social services look at me as a parent and say, how can we support you to be a better version so that you can be a better parent to your child? Yes, social services is there to do and be the voice of the child, but the solution shouldn't be, you know, separating the two, where possible, because obviously there are hard, hard scenarios where that is the solution. I'm not disputing the work they do. But all I'm saying is that, you know, in my case, it would have been good to have, you know, I was open to learning, I was open to have that discussion and I was open to have that mirror and say, okay, What am I doing wrong? What can I do better? How can I become better for her sake? How can I do better for her sake?*" – **parent interview**

Two of the parents did seek help, but weren't offered anything, which left them feeling even more frustrated.

> "*I asked for family therapy, family mediation. I asked for us all to be in the room together. And I explained what an impact it had on my whole family, which was obviously a risk because these people take things and sort of put it together and make 10 or whatever.*" – **parent interview**

One realised that this would have been beneficial retrospectively "*I should have swallowed my scepticism and sought help.*"

It was clear in the few conversations we had with parents that they were desperate for more support. They felt this could have helped them when they were struggling to cope, but also could have helped them to better support their child to deal with and hopefully reduce the missing episodes.

"If parents are supported, then they naturally will support their child and they will do better with their child because they're in a good place themselves." **– parent interview**

When asked what support should look like, one spoke about faster referrals to specialist charities who are able to offer support to parents as well as children:

"So I think there is a massive gap there in terms of, if you're not lucky enough to find a charity like Safe Call or Missing People by Googling it yourself, like what I did, then I think the authorities should give some sort of card or something." **– parent interview**

Another mentioned something as simple as a leaflet explaining to parents about the links between conflict and separation, and children going missing, so they knew they weren't alone and could understand what was happening.

"But what would have helped me as a parent is knowing that there was help available for these kind of things… even if it's a leaflet, even if it was a leaflet saying, you know, 'separating families, your child might work like this, your child might, you know, go missing like that to act out, your child might draw attention in this way'. I think that that on its own would have helped me a little bit more, but I kind of just felt there was no one." **– parent interview**
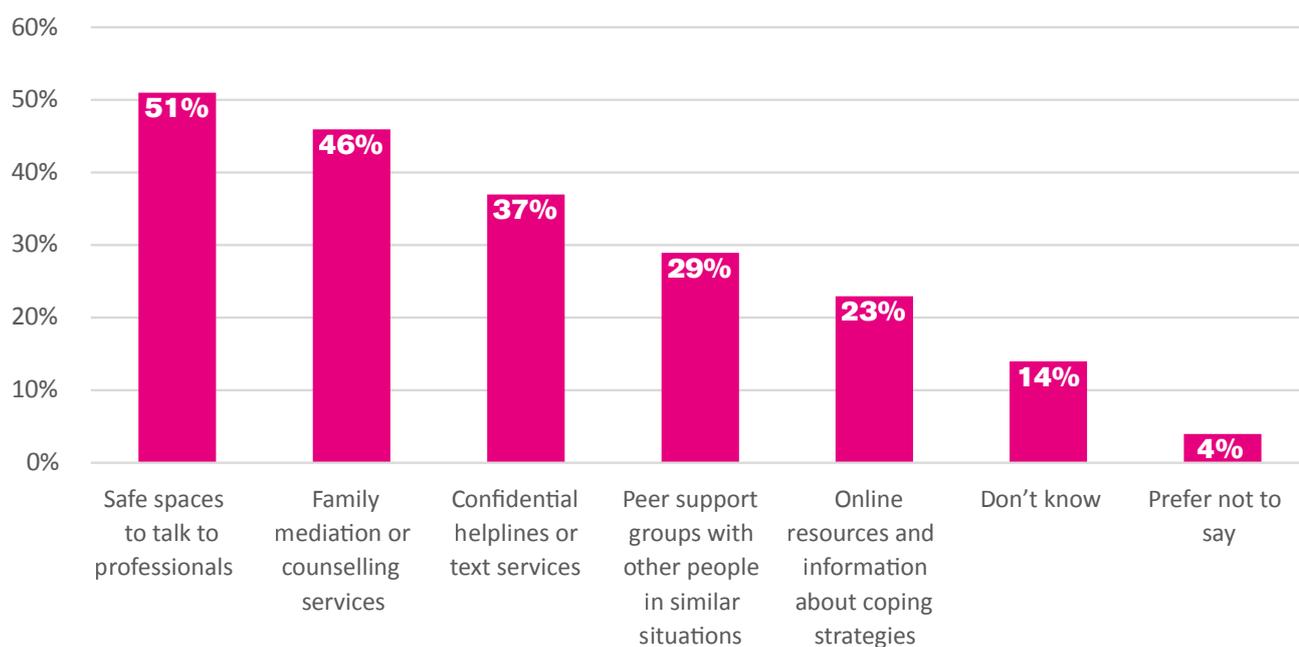
The importance of rebuilding relationships fractured by a child going missing was also emphasised:

"I'd say rebuilding, rebuilding because it is 100%, so I would say for every year of damage that we've had because of this, like, I'm a strong believer that for the four years, or say for the three years that my son was being exploited, it's going to take three years to get him back to where he should be now, and that's in terms of education, employment, everything, and I believe it's the same with family relationship as well. Those 3 years of damage, we're still rebuilding now. So it's definitely not, you know, kind of, yeah, it's just, because there's also, other types of fallout as well. And we're still, we've still got completely different points of view about how to help our son even now. So we're always negotiating that and talking, you know, the rest of it." **- parent interview**

Finally, one of the parents spoke about the importance of trying to maintain or rebuild positive relationships between parent and child after there has been conflict in the home and missing episodes as a result.
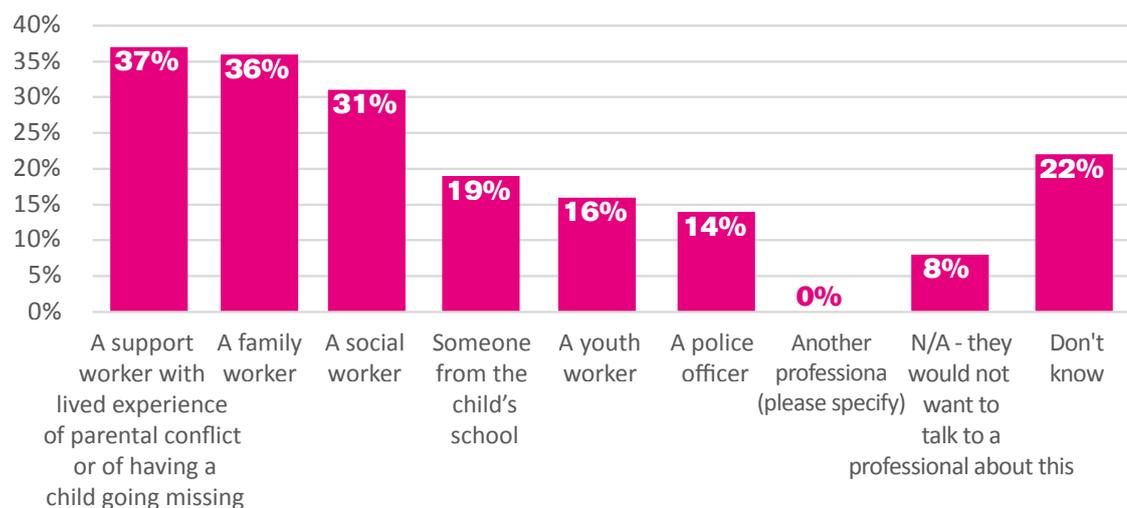
Those taking part in the public insights survey were asked, using a pre-defined list, which support services they thought were most important for parents experiencing parental conflict. The two most popular were 'safe spaces to talk to professionals,' and 'family mediation or counselling services.'

Which, if any, of the following support services for parents who are experiencing regular, unresolved conflict between themselves do you believe are the most important? (n. 512)

Category	Percentage
Safe spaces to talk to professionals	51%
Family mediation or counselling services	46%
Confidential helplines or text services	37%
Peer support groups with other people in similar situations	29%
Online resources and information about coping strategies	23%
Don't know	14%
Prefer not to say	4%

Parents were also asked to imagine a scenario in which a young person has disclosed to a professional that they have gone missing because of parental conflict, and to imagine which of a list of professionals the parents would be most comfortable discussing this with. None of the professionals on the list scored very highlight, with the most popular choice being 'a support worker with lived experience of parental conflict or of having a child going missing' only being selected by 37% of respondents.

Which, if any, of the following professionals do you believe the parents would feel most comfortable discussing this with?Please select all that apply. (n. 512)

| Category	Percentage
A support worker with lived experience of parental conflict or of having a child going missing	37%
A family worker	36%
A social worker	31%
Someone from the child's school	19%
A youth worker	16%
A police officer	14%
Another professiona (please specify)	0%
N/A - they would not want to talk to a professional about this	8%
Don't know	22%

To better understand what support families need many more parents who have been through this would need to be consulted with. However, it is already clear that parents who are experiencing conflict, whether that is then causing their child to go missing, or is as a result of having a child going missing, need support for their own benefit, but also to ensure they can be a better protective factor for their child.

3.5. How effective is the support available?

The majority of those completing the survey thought that the support available in response to the identification of parental conflict was 'somewhat effective' (65%, 39 of 60). 10% thought it was very or extremely effective; and 12% thought it was not so or not at all effective.

In your view, how effective is the support that is currently available? (n. 60)

- Extremely effective
- Very effective
- Somewhat effective
- Not so effective
- Not at all effective
- I'm not sure
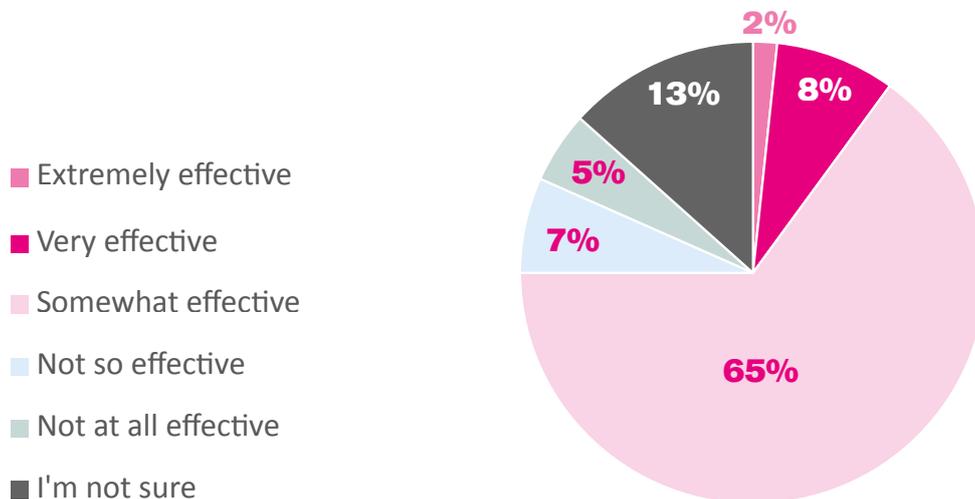
"We are seeing positive outcomes from targeted work we do around conflict enabling families to move on in a more positive way and minimising conflict in the future" **– professional survey**

However, many areas of improvement were identified by professionals.

- As with many programmes, there were some comments about resourcing, including waiting lists and funding

"There is lots of great work going on, however it's impacted by resourcing, funding and staffing" **– local authority survey**

"Waiting lists impact on services" **– RHI worker survey**

"Needs to be a quicker response" **– local authority survey**

"There are not enough services addressing parental conflict and the quality of the input is dependent on the individuals" **– professional survey**

"More services" **– local authority survey**

"There is a lack of parenting workers in our local authority so all work has to be completed by other professionals, however having specific parenting workers can work really well for families" **– local authority survey**

- Some referenced the fact that more training on RPC would be beneficial

"I feel more training could be provided for all staff, not just some of the team" – **survey** – **local authority survey**

"Training and better understanding" – **police survey**

"More training" – **local authority survey**

- A key area for improvement identified by a number of professionals is the fact that there needs to be more support for parents, including therapeutic, long-term, and face-to-face support

"The model answer will always be for the parents to receive some form of therapeutic support, however not all parents are in a stage where they are ready to accept they may be the problem or even think about therapy as a means of support" – **RHI worker survey**

"More engagement with the parents, looking at parental contracts, face to face support for parents, rather than online" – **local authority survey**

"A better understanding for parents as to what impact their conflict has on the children" – **professional survey**

"Statutory family mediation to resolve conflict and this should be triggered at an early stage usually identified at primary level" – **local authority survey**

"We need more specialist workers who can work directly with parents and help them to understand how their behaviours impact on their child whilst understanding that people can have relationship patterns that are not helpful for them, more support for parents to understand their patterns of interacting with their parents" – **local authority survey**

"Direct work with the parents. Often too much focus is put on the child when really if parents changed, behaviours would change" – **local authority survey**

- There were some comments about the need for better multi-agency working in response to parental conflict, including taking responsibility for the situation, and better signposting for children and parents

"Better signposting, more information about agencies that can support, information where a child can get support independent of parents" – **police survey**

"Close working with social care if they are involved" – **police survey**

"But the frustration reported back has been, you know, we create a plan with a family, a child and their family following a missing episode, but the plan isn't necessarily seen through by the other professionals in the network." – **RHI worker interview**

- A number of professionals reflected that, no matter how good the support available is, parents have to want to engage in it in the first instance. This was stated to be one of the biggest barriers to parents accessing support.

> *"It is an effective programme but parents have to want to engage and that is to me the biggest barrier"* – **professional survey**

> *"It ultimately depends on the family and whether they want to change. Sadly many don't recognise the conflict or the impact it has on their children and place blame on the child or the partner"* – **professional survey**

> *"Only works if parties want to do it which they frequently don't / won't or can't change"* – **professional survey**

Specific improvements in relation to missing children

While professionals gave feedback more broadly about the support available when parental conflict is identified, there was more limited feedback about the support when it is identified specifically as a factor in a child going missing.

In fact, professionals were not always clear about how responses to missing children and access to support for parental conflict were linked.

> *"Each offer for support for missing children and addressing parental conflict are strong, but we are unsure of the connection between the two"* – **professional survey**

- Professionals thought that there needed to be more awareness of parental conflict for those working with missing children. This was the case both in terms of awareness of parental conflict more broadly and in terms of the support available if it is identified

> *"Maybe this should be more central to family assessments and return home interviews. Practitioners should be more aware of how to approach this, and what help is available in the community"* – **local authority survey**

> *"For it to be highlighted as an issue"* – **local authority survey**

> *"If it's the driver for missing episodes then it often gets overlooked in social care planning"* – **local authority survey**

- Better identification in RHIs was highlighted as something that could be improved

> *"Set questions with return home conversation so practitioner does ask"* – **local authority survey**

> *"More consistent RHI and to be carried out face to face at least"* – **third sector survey**

- Long term support for children and parents was identified

> *"Weekly support for children going missing, more coordinated approaches [...] missing team of specialist workers who can work with missing and children being exploited in the community"* – **local authority survey**

"The use of family therapy for longer term solution is beneficial to opening up communication to avoid further conflict." **– police survey**

However, some felt that improving the response to parental conflict when it is a factor influencing missing was a complex matter to tackle.

"It is very difficult. In the short term there is a lot of potential for further missing incidents and/or criminal activity if the child remains in the same environment as the parent, however separation, using family/friends is not always an option." **– police survey**

"To improve the response to parental conflict when it influences a child going missing, we need more consistency and clarity across services. A dedicated team or trained practitioners who specialise in parental conflict would make a huge difference, as they could step in early and support families before tensions escalate. More training for frontline staff—schools, early help, police and youth services—would also help professionals recognise the signs sooner and feel confident exploring what's happening at home. Clearer multi-agency coordination and better support for parents to manage communication and conflict would ensure that young people aren't left carrying the emotional burden when relationships break down." **– local authority survey**

"Developing practitioner confidence to start an early conversation with both children and their parents; often service input is aimed at the work with the child, in isolation of or without understanding where parents are in their own relationship ie how united are they in addressing the concerns presented by a child who goes missing from home. By understanding the link between whole family outcomes, healthy parental relationships, impact on children living in high conflict households, then we can aim to embed and further develop our local approach." **– professional survey**

4. CONCLUSION

It is clear that there are links between parental conflict and children going missing: this research demonstrates that parental conflict can be a factor in influencing children to go missing; it can mean children are missing for longer; it can increase children's vulnerability to risks associated with missing, such as exploitation and grooming. A child going missing can also result in parents starting to experience parental conflict, or exacerbating existing conflict.

And while some children appear to be receiving a good response on return, there are various challenges with the identification of parental conflict within the two main interventions that take place on return, meaning that professionals are not always able to recognise or identify that parental conflict was a factor in the child going missing. This has an impact on the support that is offered to the child, and the parents.

Professionals spoke of myriad support services that are available for children and parents when parental conflict is identified. However there were clear areas for improvement even within this range of support. It is also unclear how that support links with the processes that are in place when a child returns from missing: support linked to missing and support linked to parental conflict appear to primarily be disconnected at the moment, with limited clear referral pathways or processes in place. This risks some children and parents falling through the gap, risking that the root cause of a child's missing episodes remain unaddressed, leaving them vulnerable to all of the risks we know are associated with going missing.

> *"The root problem needs to be addressed because, you know, you could go to the child, but, you know, the child's still got to go back home or still got to deal with the split up with their parents. It's about, you know, finding a way that works for everyone, really. And that includes the child. I feel like a lot of the time it doesn't include the child. And sometimes it can be whatever the parent says or whatever the services thinks or doesn't think instead of actually including the child's opinion."* **– young person**

RECOMMENDATIONS

All professionals working with children who have been reported missing, including police, social workers and RHI workers, should have some understanding of parental conflict. Any training for those conducting safe and well checks and return home interviews should include reference to parental conflict.

This will enable them to effectively explore the issue with the child, take action to engage with parents if appropriate to do so, or signpost or refer into more specialist services if a disclosure is made.

The level of understanding required will vary depending on the professional's role. Professionals who will only have fleeting contact with a returned missing child (for example a response officer conducting a safe and well check) will only need a basic understanding; RHI workers will need greater depth of training, including guidance on how to sensitively investigate parental relationships; and professionals providing long-term missing support would benefit from in-depth training on how to intervene in situations of parental conflict.

Having some level of understanding across all professionals is important to ensure that no one minimises what is happening for a child if they do disclose parental conflict, which is possible if that knowledge is absent and they assume conflict will not necessarily have a significant impact on the child's wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Professionals working with families who are experiencing parental conflict should be aware of the risks associated with missing, and how the conflict might contribute to the child going missing.

They should talk to parents about this in a supportive, non-blaming way, and be ready to identify warning signs of associated risk factors like worsening mental health or exploitation and what support is available if the child does go missing.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Where children are going missing repeatedly, they should be offered specialist, intensive support.

Safe and well checks and return interviews will not provide effective opportunities for a lot of children to disclose parental conflict, or for children to access the ongoing support they need to deal with the impact of conflict.

Specialist, intensive support would allow for trusted relationships to be built, and would enable greater identification of harm and more in-depth support. This is not specific to only children who are going missing as a result of parental conflict, but should be made available for all repeat missing children, and would result in a better response for the former. Evidence suggests that this kind of service can help young people respond to the causes of missing and can reduce incidents of repeat missing. [16]

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16 Missing People, Intensive Support Services, https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/121-intensive-support.

RECOMMENDATION 4

To inform good practice in support services, further research should be conducted on this topic, in particular with parents of missing children who have experienced parental conflict.

This should focus on what support would have helped them, both to deal with the parental conflict, and to help safeguard their child from going missing.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Parents of missing children must be offered specialist support, including support focused on parental conflict, particularly where their child is going missing repeatedly.

While this would be beneficial for parents of all missing children, this could be targeted specifically at parents of repeat missing children, as they are particularly likely to experience ongoing issues with parenting and better supporting their child.

This support should aim to help the parents themselves, improving their wellbeing and resilience to cope with the situation, but vitally would also increase protective factors for the child: ensuring the parents are better able to safeguard their child from further harm.

It is clear that where parental conflict is driving a child's missing episodes, this needs to be addressed with the parents: without doing this we are failing to deal with the root causes and it is likely that the child will continue to go missing. However, there is currently a significant gap in services, with no consistency in what professional would be expected, or well placed, to hold this intervention. Most services responsible for responding to a missing incident will only engage with the child, and many families in this situation will not meet threshold for more formal safeguarding procedures. Having services specifically for parents of missing children would fill this gap.

In the meantime local authorities must consider which professional or external service they can assign to hold these conversations with parents. Otherwise we risk leaving children to continue to go missing as a result of their parents' behaviour.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Further work should be undertaken to consider how best to explore and record parental conflict in safe and well checks and return home interviews.

There should be consideration of introducing 'parental conflict' as a specific factor recorded in return home interview forms so that local areas can better understand its prevalence amongst their cohort of missing children and how they are being supported following any disclosures of parental conflict.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Local policies, in particular multi-agency missing children protocols, should set out clear pathways between services responding to missing children, and services responding to parental conflict.

Local policies can aid in improving multi-agency working and create clarity on services and professionals working together. The inclusion of parental conflict and the pathways between services in local missing children policies can ensure that professionals working in different teams are clear about what to do if parental conflict is identified when a child has gone missing.

APPENDIX A: FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST

1. Police

Please provide the following information for the period **1 January 2025 – 31 December 2025.**

1. Do you record 'parental conflict' as a risk factor / vulnerability marker or equivalent in your missing children reports?

2. If the answer to question 1 is yes, please tell us:

    a. How many missing incidents were reported in relation to missing children (those aged 0-17)?

    b. In how many of those incidents was 'parental conflict' identified?

3. If the answer to 1 is no, please tell us:

    a. Do you routinely record another type of risk factor / vulnerability marker that is similar or equivalent to parental conflict?[1] If so, please list those here

    b. How many missing incidents were reported in relation to missing children (those aged 0-17)?

    c. In how many of those incidents was / were the answer(s) to 3a identified?

2. Local authorities

Please provide the following information for the period **1 January 2025 – 31 December 2025.**

1. Do you record 'parental conflict' as a risk factor / vulnerability marker / push / pull factor or equivalent in your Return Home Interviews?

2. If the answer to question 1 is yes, please tell us:

    a. How many Return Home Interviews were completed in the period 1 January 2025 – 31 December 2025?

    b. In how many of those Return Home Interviews was 'parental conflict' identified?

3. If the answer to 1 is no, please tell us:

    a. Do you routinely record another type of risk factor / vulnerability marker / push / pull factor that is similar or equivalent to parental conflict?[1] If so, please list those here

    b. How many Return Home Interviews were completed in the period 1 January 2025 – 31 December 2025?

    c. In how many of those Return Home Interviews was / were the answer(s) to 3a identified?

APPENDIX B: PROFILE OF PROFESSIONALS COMPLETING THE SURVEY

Total number of responses	82
Local authority staff	32
Police	21
Reducing Parental Conflict team	14
Return Home Interview worker	5
Residential care staff	2
Health sector	2
Youth worker	2

APPENDIX C: PROFILE OF PROFESSIONALS TAKING PART IN INTERVIEWS OR FOCUS GROUP

Total number of participants	31
RHI provider or local authority staff	19
Reducing Parental Conflict practitioner	5
Police	2
Parent support professional	2
Missing expert	1
Residential care home staff	1
Multi-agency response team	1

missing people

A lifeline when someone disappears

Research by Jane Hunter, Josie Allan and Holly Pitt

Thanks to Susannah Drury, Rachel Ellis, Henrietta Imoreh, Ray Lee, Sam Roberts, Richard Rickford and Ross Paterson

About Missing People

Missing People is the only charity in the UK which is dedicated to supporting those affected by missing. The charity provides specialist support to people who are at risk of going missing, those who are missing, and the families and friends left behind. For more information about the support services the charity provides, please visit our website: **www.missingpeople.org.uk**.

Understanding missing and the impact on those left behind enables Missing People and our partners to provide better services. Missing People's research team conducts research and evaluation projects on a range of topics. Recent reports can be found on our website: **www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/information-and-policy/information-and-research**.

Thank you

Thank you to all of those who took part in this research, particularly to participants with lived experience.

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