

## Centring the child and working with their family network as part of return interview services

Parents, other family members and carers can be a vital protective factor for children who are going missing. They will often know the child best and can be a vital partner: reporting the child missing, providing key information which can help to build the picture, and supporting the child on their return.



When a young person doesn't engage with a return interview there's still an opportunity to work with parents to understand what is happening for the young person and to explore how their parents or other family members can support them.

As professionals we need to encourage parents to keep reporting their child as missing. We know some parents can feel frustrated or lose hope if they don't see things improving for their child, so it's important to encourage them and empower them to keep working with professionals.

Where it's safe to do so, and ideally when we have consent from the child, we should work alongside the parents and other family members to support the child as they can often play a positive, key role in a child's life. If we have concerns around the family home, or if the child discloses abuse or harm, we need to ensure that they don't feel that we are complicit with their family. We always need to prioritise the young person, but parents can be part of that unless they play an unsafe role in the child's life.

When building relationships with the child and family, it is important to explain that not everything the child says is shared with the parent but that you may talk to them about what is going on and any concerns and risks if the child gives you permission to. Make it clear to the child that you won't be sharing any information without their consent, or where information does need to be shared to safeguard the child, clearly explain this to them and give the reasons why.

Having a person-centred approach is all about ensuring that professional's responses are tailored to the needs of the child they are supporting. This includes considering how those around the child can best be empowered to help them too, and providing services in a way that will meet the needs of them and their network. Children and their families should not be expected to fit into set processes, instead the response should be designed to work for them.

### What is a person-centred approach?

- Keeping the child at the heart of your interactions
- Empowering the child and their family
- Treating the child and their family as the experts
- Being compassionate and human in your approach
- Being flexible to meet the child's needs and making things work around them
- The opposite of person-centred is process-driven



If a child is being groomed or exploited, often perpetrators will try to break down the relationship between them and their parents or other family members. As professionals we need to be aware of this risk and not play into it.

Families need support too. Having a child go missing is traumatic for everyone involved. Most parents will be feeling scared and overwhelmed, and feel at a loss as to what they should be doing to help. This can be further compounded if they realise their child may be being exploited.

We know that siblings often struggle too when a young person has been reported missing and/or when there are concerns about exploitation. Every young person will react differently. Some may be at increased risk of becoming exploited themselves, and others may feel they have to 'stay strong' or 'be more perfect' if they witness their parents struggling to cope with the missing child's behaviour. As professionals we should always consider the impact on the wider family when someone is reported missing, and ensure that anyone who needs it has access to support.

Families will be in a better position to help the young person if they understand more about what is happening, if they are included in key decisions about their child, and if they have the right practical and emotional support in place to help them. Any family member can be referred to Missing People if someone in their life has been reported missing. The charity provide emotional and practical support to anyone affected and have a dedicated service, SafeCall, for children and young adults who are being criminally exploited and for their families.

### Case Study

SafeCall was asked by Charlene's parent to contact Charlene in relation to concerns around child criminal exploitation, specifically around missing episodes, drug and gang involvement risks. Charlene was initially reluctant to engage with the service, however after some time, she began to engage with her SafeCall worker.

SafeCall has been providing consistent, confidential support to Charlene, and with consent, advocating her wishes and feelings to the professionals involved in her care. Support systems have been put in place as a result of this and Charlene has had no further missing episodes since this time. Charlene continues to work with SafeCall.

By supporting both Charlene and her parent we were able to increase the protective factors around her.

You can find out more about Missing People's services, including SafeCall if you are worried about a child being criminally exploited, at [Make a referral - Missing People](#).

If you or any colleagues would benefit from training in how to provide a person-centred response to missing people, or how to better support missing children and their families, you can find upcoming dates from Missing People [For professionals - Missing People](#).

NWG is a national networking charity working together to inform, educate and prevent child exploitation and abuse throughout the UK. You can find resources, training and membership information at [NWG Network](#).



*"We had been in some very bad situations with no way out. [Missing People worker] helped de-escalate the situations. On a few occasions without her, someone would, I have no doubt, been badly physically injured.*

*[Missing People worker] also gave my daughter some strategies in dealing with difficult situations, and advice to us as a family in how to deal with problems."*

**A parent who received support from Missing People**