Orientation to Revised Missing Children and Youth Policy

Ministry of Children and Family Development
Policy and Practice
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After Hours, now Centralized Screening, indicated that at least two-thirds of the calls they received, over 20,000 in number per year, were regarding “missing” youth who were not actually “missing and unsafe.”

Most calls were about youth who were late - out past their curfew and had not yet returned home - with no reason to believe the youth were unsafe. Often a reporting Contracted Resource actually knew where the youth was, that they were indeed safe and when they would return.

This led to an over-reporting of late youth as “missing” youth to both MCFD/DAA After Hours/Centralized Screening and local Police/RCMP.

Calls identifying late returning home youth as “a missing person” places an unnecessary and unmanageable burden on both MCFD/DAA Centralized Screening staff and Police/RCMP resources.
The number of unnecessary calls being made to After Hours/Centralized Screening and Police/RCMP about youth who are late coming home must be substantially decreased.

The need to decrease unnecessary calls is made more acute given the recommendations from the Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry (Opal Report) regarding a new mandatory police response protocol to all missing person reports.

The Police Services Division of the Ministry of Justice have created new Policing Standards that will apply a check list to every missing person call, and any situation that has a high risk factor will require immediate police action.

The Ministry of Justice has released the new Policing Standards to allow implementation activities to occur prior to the new mandatory police response Standards coming into force in September 2016.
The definition, risk considerations and timing of calls regarding MCFD/DAA missing children and youth are now in all policy and guideline documents that give direction to foster caregivers/care providers and staff regarding what to do when a child or youth is considered missing and unsafe.

The key objectives are:

- Provide clear and concise criteria for identifying children or youth who are missing and unsafe.
- Reduce significantly the number of reports being made to Centralized Screening and the Police/RCMP, when there is no reason to believe that the child or youth is unsafe.
- Eliminate completely the calls being made when the whereabouts of the youth are known, the safety of the youth is not in question and the return time is also known.
- Allow resources to be more effectively targeted at the unsafe and high risk situations of missing children and youth that require immediate action to be taken by Police/RCMP.
MCFD/DAA staff need to have a comprehensive understanding of the Ministry’s Missing Children and Youth Policy, particularly the expectations of foster caregiver to act as a **prudent and responsible parent**, and the factors for deciding when a child or youth is considered missing **and** unsafe.

The revised Missing Children and Youth policy provides:

- criteria for helping staff to determine when a child or youth is missing **and** unsafe,
- guidance for when Police/RCMP should be called, and
- clarity of staff roles and responsibilities in circumstances involving a missing **and unsafe** child or youth.
Actions taken by a **prudent and responsible parent** are **actions taken in an effort to locate a child or youth.** These actions include, but are not limited to:

- **actively** trying to contact the youth directly via calling or texting their cell phone or a friend’s phone or via social media*, preferably via private messaging;
- **actively** seeking out and contacting anyone, such as friends, coaches, or teachers who may know the child/youth's current or recent whereabouts; and
- **actively** identifying and checking likely locations where the child/youth may be located.

Caregivers are expected to have taken the above steps **prior** to calling Centralized Screening or Police/RCMP to report a missing child or youth, unless a caregiver believes the child or youth to be **unsafe. If there is reason to believe the child or youth is unsafe Centralized Screening and/or the Police/RCMP should be contacted immediately.**

*Note: The foster caregiver must not post anything on social media that identifies the individual as a child or youth in care, or that they are the child or youth’s foster parent.*
When a youth’s whereabouts are unknown and there are additional concerns about the youth’s safety, the following factors are considered when determining if the youth is unsafe:

- vulnerability (e.g., due to: age or level of development, physical or cognitive disability, addictions or mental health concerns or involvement in high risk activities);
- the mental or emotional state of the missing youth (e.g., emotionally distraught, suicidal or likely to cause harm to self or others);
- extreme weather (no coat, boots, etc.) or other physical conditions (e.g., terrain);
- any suspicious or dangerous circumstances surrounding the youth’s disappearance, which suggest the youth may be the victim of a crime;
- it is out of character for the youth to be missing;
- there is reason to believe that the youth may have been involved in an accident or mishap;
- the whereabouts of the youth have been unknown to the caregiver/care provider overnight.
If the child or youth’s whereabouts are unknown and there are additional concerns about their safety, he or she is considered to be missing and the caregiver the child/youth’s social worker or Centralized Screening will immediately call the Police/RCMP to report a missing child/youth in order for the police to take action to locate the missing child or youth.

The child or youth’s social worker is now responsible for making a Reportable Circumstance Report. Once the child or youth is located, if they have sustained injuries that meet the criteria in the Reportable Circumstance Policy, the child or youth’s social worker makes a further Reportable Circumstance Report.
Youth Specific Considerations

- **Youth on Probation:** A youth on probation who could harm or put others at risk must be governed by the rules of their probation with regards to time away from a resource or required check-in. If a youth breaches their probation, the youth’s social worker/Centralized Screening or Police/RCMP must be contacted for immediate action. Subsequent follow-up with the youth’s Probation Officer would also occur.

- **Youth on Independent Living:** A youth living independently is governed by the revised Youth Services Standard in regard to when he or she would be considered missing and unsafe.

- **Youth who is Habitually Missing:** For a youth who is habitually missing, the youth’s worker works with the youth, foster caregivers and others to develop a plan with the youth and relevant service providers, including those providing residential care to address identified issues and offer resources and services to help prevent the youth from going missing again.
Centralized Screening Staff will often be the first point of contact for a foster caregiver handling a situation regarding a youth who is missing and unsafe.

Workers with Guardianship Responsibilities for children in care (CICs) will often be the first point of contact for a foster caregiver handling a situation regarding a missing and unsafe child or youth occurring during the day.

Resource Workers will help guide and educate foster caregivers/residential resources in understanding the increased focus on acting as a prudent and responsible parent would in cases where a youth is late returning home.

Foster Caregivers are central to meeting the primary goal of reducing the number of calls to Centralized Screening through actively embracing the need for them to respond as a prudent and responsible parent would.

Contracted Staff Resources are central to meeting the primary goal of reducing and/or eliminating unnecessary calls to Centralized Screening.
The Ministry provides direction on how the handling of a missing child or youth is to be addressed by foster caregivers, care providers and staff in the following five documents:

1) Standards for Foster Homes
2) Standards for Staffed Children’s Residential Services
3) Children in Care (CIC) Standards (New Standard 5.11)
4) Standards for Youth Support Services and Youth Agreements
5) Foster Family Handbook

The revised Missing Children and Youth Policy replaced the existing missing child or youth language in the aforementioned five documents. Sections addressing missing children or youth, including Appendices, are updated with the new policy appropriate language in the on-line documents on the intranet and/or internet.

The Q & A document is on the intranet below each of the revised Standards documents.

The revised Missing Children and Youth policy is in effect upon release: February 11, 2016.
The BC Federation of Foster Parent Associations (BCFFPA), the Federation of Aboriginal Foster Parents (FAFP) and the local foster parent support agencies play an important role in helping ensure foster caregivers know about and understand the revised policy and the expectation that foster caregivers will act in the manner of a prudent and responsible parent prior to calling Centralized Screening or Police/RCMP about a youth, unless they consider the youth to be missing and unsafe.

The Contracted Resources are also critical in ensuring the revised Policy is communicated to and implemented by Managers and Staff in the same way, and with the same expectations as those of a prudent and responsible parent prior to calling Centralized Screening or Police/RCMP about a youth.

The Missing Children and Youth Policy, the Orientation PowerPoint and the Questions & Answers document will be available on the BCFFPA website, the FAFP website and the local foster parent organization websites once their Orientation sessions have occurred.

The relevant sections of the Foster Family Handbook (FFH) have been updated and the complete Missing Children and Youth Policy is included in the Reference Section at the back of the FFH. Access to this document is available to foster caregivers on the MCFD internet.
Future Activities Related to Missing Children and Youth

- Child Welfare Policy staff will be working with RCMP E Division to ensure missing person investigation protocol development with MCFD SDAs and DAAs to support the implementation of key Policing Standards by September 2016. The three policing standards that are of specific interest to DAA and MCFD SDAs and LSAs are:

  - 5.1.7 (2) "The police force has protocols in place with Ministry of Children and Family Development authorities and Delegated Aboriginal Agencies (where relevant), to facilitate missing person investigations involving youth in local group homes and foster care."

  - 5.1.7 (3) "The police force has protocols in place to refer found missing persons under the age of 19 to child protection authorities for assessment of their needs, where appropriate."

  - 5.1.7 (6) "If frequent reports involving the same individual are identified, the police force identifies mitigating strategies, in conjunction with relevant local agencies or resources."
Any Questions?