

REACHING OUT TO MISSING CHILDREN*

BY ROBERT G. LEWIS, AUGUST 2008

Youth who run away from substitute care risk the hazards of the street and the hazards they may encounter if they return to their families or communities of origin. Child welfare agencies nationwide struggle to identify risk factors and develop programs to deter youth from running away from substitute care placements and to find them when they do. - Youth Who Run Away from Substitute Care by Mark Courtney, et al 2005, Chapin Hall

BASIC CRITERION

Always, when a child is missing from your care, follow the standard criterion of “What would you do for your own child?”

⇒ Call the police and file a missing person report immediately, and follow the procedures outlines in agency policy.

From the research literature, the most consistent theme expressed by young people missing from care and those who care for them is the need for permanent family connections and other supportive connections. Running away, young people are often trying to achieve these goals outside the child welfare system, but they are putting themselves at risk in their attempts to do so. This is the challenge of working with children who go missing from care. We all subscribe to the focus on prevention, safety and permanence of programs targeting this population. Clearly, the critical work to be done is achieving permanence.

Charles ran from a very well respected residential treatment center at sixteen. As he remembers it now at 25, no one came after him. More than that, he would like to have known, while in congregate care, that someone was working on permanence for him and also working with his mother to help her understand that he needed both his connection to her and additional parenting - the Process of Parenting Personal interview, 2005)*

WHEN A CHILD RUNS AWAY

* *Keep in mind that using the internet to reach out to missing children requires special attention to, and safeguards for, the youth’s safety and confidentiality. Here are some suggestions on effective but safe ways to use “My Space” and “Facebook” to reach out to missing children.

Step 1. For workers who are just picking up a case on a child who is already missing, your first steps include:

- ⇒ Check for Missing Persons Report
- ⇒ Read the case record (find and review the whole case record). Your goal is to identify connections, not just for locating the child/youth, but to engage those who care about the young person in the process of permanence, including:
 - Family
 - Friends
 - Communities where the child has lived
 - Schools
 - All placements
 - All connections
- ⇒ Review case with supervisor and/or coworkers and especially previous workers if possible.
- ⇒ Schedule a case conference with those who have worked with the child and all connections to determine the next steps in finding the youth and planning for permanence. The process of permanence (see below) is integral to the work, not additional or peripheral.

Step 2. For the ongoing worker when a child assigned to their care goes missing:

- ⇒ File a Missing Persons Report. Email and call all those involved with the young person including:
 - Family, include all whom the young person considers family
 - Friends, use “My Space” and “Facebook”* as part of that contact
 - Community(ies) of residence
 - Schools, present & favored or recent past
 - All placements
 - All connections

If you locate the child, engage him/her in the process of permanence immediately.

- ⇒ Contact the child’s attorney or guardian ad litem. In many cases, they can be a resource. The court itself can be a resource, not only for its punitive powers, but to reinforce the permanency process.
- ⇒ If you do not locate the child begin a Field Location Process.

Step 3. Begin the Field Location Process. (Implementing this with another child welfare worker often works best).

- ⇒ Get or make copies of the latest picture of the youth and keep them on hand. (Take pictures of young people routinely.)
- ⇒ Go to last known address and inquire.

- ⇒ Contact (keep trying) and stay in touch by phone, email and/or in person with:
 - Relatives
 - School
 - Placements
 - Police
 - Ask for other connections
- ⇒ Remember your efforts should focus on the young person's need to belong, and their urgent need for permanence, not just finding a missing child. Engage those you find to help a young person plan for the future.
- ⇒ Begin a "diligent search". Contact letters can be computerized and shared with each worker and you can merge letters to the appropriate agencies and contact email and telephone numbers.

Step 4. Continue the Field Location Process by following leads offered by family and friends.

- ⇒ Drive the neighborhoods where the youth was last seen or thought to be. Try to blend-in (become a "local"). Ask folks who might know, use the picture. Start conversations, not an interrogation. Work on building trust and rapport.
- ⇒ Check with:
 - Corner store owners and store "regulars"
 - Mail carriers
 - UPS/FedEx drivers
 - A likely person on the street or in the building
 - Young people in the area
 - Maintenance people
 - Building Superintendents
 - People outside in the neighborhood

PERSIST! Step 5. When the child returns on his/her own, welcome him back and begin the re-engagement process (Step 6).

Sometimes we ascribe negative characteristics to the youth who runs away. In fact, some agencies turn away youth who attempt to return to their placements by themselves. Instead, we need to reflect that children go "AWOL" as an expression of need – for family, safety, attention, treatment and more.

Assess the policies of your agency when an missing child returns on her own. If changes are needed to assure re-engagement of the youth in a positive way that will contribute to permanency, discuss these within your agency.

Step 6. When the child is located begin the re-engagement process:

- ⇒ Perform an initial safety assessment. If there is a clear and present danger, call 911.
- ⇒ If there isn't a clear and present danger, attempt to engage the youth in the process of permanence. **SAFETY IS ALWAYS A CONSIDERATION.** Consider this process as a permanence process not rescue and recovery. Prevention of the next "run" begins with this contact.
- ⇒ On-going Safety Assessment: (work in pairs):

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| <u>If the youth is approachable</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ See the place ○ Check crime stats ○ Visit again & again ○ Look for gang activities ○ Get photos | <u>If adults are approachable</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Same | <u>If no one is approachable</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Same ○ Check crime stats ○ Visit again & again ○ Look for gang activities ○ Get photos |
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⇒ When contact is made:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Set time to talk ○ Youth & adult or ○ Youth alone ○ Apologize ○ Describe process of permanence ○ Make NO empty promises | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Engage adults in the "process of permanence" ○ Go back ○ Ask for information about who else care for this youth ○ Leave cards ○ Persist | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Leave cards ○ Leave information on the "process of permanence" ○ Talk to neighbors ○ Repeat calls to the house ○ Go at different times ○ Make visual contact ○ Take photos ○ Engage <i>reliable</i> witnesses, e.g. letter carriers, |
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Step 7. Once the child is located, contact all appropriate responsible adults.

- ⇒ Engage the youth with these rules of relationship: Love, Listen, Learn and Teach. In brief, show that you care; listen without interruption; learn the young person's point of view before you start telling him/her what to do.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Listen to what the youth wants either directly or through the adult(s) with whom she/he is living. ○ Ask them about all and more connections ○ Inform them: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Warrant exists, process to vacate ○ Explain possible referrals to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Wraparound services ◆ Youth development services ◆ Educational/vocational services ◆ Medical and mental health services and coverage | <p>Continue attempts to engage</p> |
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⇒ Engage the youth and work towards permanence:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Listen to what the youth wants/needs. If they don't know their real options, they can't make good choices. ○ Explore possibilities and more connections ○ Bring together those who care about the youth to help them plan for the future – the <u>process of permanence</u>. ○ Use these four pillars for success as the outline for the youth's <u>process of permanence</u> and to plan for the future with the youth, his/her sense of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Belonging ◆ Power ◆ Competence ◆ Usefulness | <p>Continue attempts to engage</p> |
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Step 8. Terminate outreach services only when:

- There is a successful trial discharge
- There is a successful referral to other responsible adults
- The youth ages out

IN ALL YOUR WORK, KEEP IN MIND THESE PROCESS OF PERMANENCE PRINCIPLES:

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| <p><i>The Process of Permanence</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Permanence is a relationship, not a place, and it needs to be and can be developed. ◆ All parenting is shared. |
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- ◆ Prepare the youth within the context of his/her development.
- ◆ Issues include: Loyalty, Loss, Self Esteem, Behavior Management, and Self Determination.
- ◆ Review the record for relatives, friend and all adults concerned about this young person in the past and the present.
- ◆ Explore all the young person's connections
- ◆ Use all the latest practices in locating family & friends
- ◆ Invite those connected to the youth to help her/him/them plan for the future and bring them together.
- ◆ Work on a youth's sense of his/her own: Belonging, Power, Competence and Usefulness.
- ◆ Engage those identified in this process while continuing to ask who else needs to be involved.
- ◆ Empower this group to become the family network for the youth.
- ◆ Set up systems of shared parenting and family support.
- ◆ Ongoing support