



KIERA'S STORY

Reconnecting a repeatedly missing young person.

Kiera first went missing for two days when she was in Year 11, aged 16. She went missing from her own home, where she lives with her mother and younger sister. The first time she went missing it was thought by her mother and the police that she had run away because she had not been allowed to go to a party with older friends locally.

Kiera went missing on three more occasions within four months of the first incident. On the longest occasion she was missing for a week. Kiera was believed to be at risk of sexual exploitation because she was known to have older friends, and there are known to be gangs active in her local area. Kiera had also lost her grandfather to cancer shortly before the first missing incident, and had been deeply upset by this bereavement.

On each occasion that Kiera went missing, the police requested a TextSafe message be sent by Missing People to her mobile phone. The message sent said: **“Have you run away? Please get in touch for free 24/7 confidential support. Call 116000 or text 116000. www.missingpeople.org.uk”**. Missing People also circulated appeal posters in the areas Kiera was known to frequent, and her appeal was published in a local free newspaper.

On one occasion Kiera phoned Missing People to ask that the appeal posters be removed from public view. The volunteer who spoke to Kiera was able to offer her support and a chance to talk. They also explained that, in order for publicity to be removed, Kiera would need to attend a police station to show them that she was safe and well. Kiera declined to have a conversation with a police officer via a three-way call, although Missing People staff were able to give her some advice and outlined her options.

Missing People provided advice and support to Kiera's family on each occasion that she was missing.

On each occasion, Missing People were notified by police that Kiera had returned home safe and well. Because of the family support provided by the charity, Kiera's mother contacted Missing People to say that Kiera had returned, and was able to explain that Kiera and the family had been assessed by a social worker, and would be referred to a local support service for young people who had run away. Although several months have passed since the last missing incident, Missing People has not been notified of any further missing incidents involving Kiera.

YOUNG PEOPLE, RUNNING AWAY AND REPEAT MISSING INCIDENTS

This case study explores the nature of reconnection as experienced by young people who go missing repeatedly, and their families. Young people account for a disproportionate percentage of missing person reports; in 2011-12 children and young people aged under 18 accounted for 64 per cent of all missing incidents (UK Missing Persons Bureau, 2013: 15).

Although most missing people are found quickly, young people can face significant risks whilst away from home. Research by The Children's Society has found that 25 per cent of young people who had been missing reported having been hurt or harmed, slept rough or stayed with someone they didn't know, or stolen, begged or done 'other things' to survive whilst away (Rees, 2011: 16). More recently, the Office of the Children's Commissioner conducted an Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups and identified that going missing is a risk indicator for sexual exploitation (Berelowitz et al, 2013). Research also suggests that patterns of running away in early life can make a young person more vulnerable to later homelessness (Shelter, 2005: 8-9). For some young people, going missing repeatedly can also become a pattern of behaviour that lasts into adulthood:

"I was first reported missing at fifteen when I ran away. [...] It turned into this big cycle of I'd be home, then I'd be gone, then I'd be home, then I'd be gone. Then there would be phases where I was really missing and nobody knew where I was." (Rhona's story of a life of missing experience).

(Parr and Stevenson, 2013: 28)

Several studies have taken place which have emphasised the importance of return interviews for young people (Burgess et al, 2010; Evans et al 2007; Rees et al, 2005). Use of such interviews is also recommended in national statutory guidance, which states that the "when a child is found, they must be offered an independent return interview", and that the in-depth interview should be carried out within 72 hours of return, and preferably by an independent person (DfE, 2014: 14).

Recent interim guidance for police officers, implemented to reflect changes to police practice, re-emphasises the importance of return interviews to gain: "a better understanding of why the person went missing and what can be done to prevent it happening again. [...] Firm plans should be put in place while the person is still missing to decide how their return will be dealt with, especially with regard to those that repeatedly go missing or are in the highest risk category." (ACPO, 2013: 4).

The 2011 Government strategy on missing persons emphasised the importance of independence when conducting return interviews, stating that "Children and young people are often reluctant to share information with the police or social workers due to fear of statutory agencies. Voluntary sector workers are able to build trusted relationships with children to enable them to share information about where they have gone missing, what happened while they were away and what support they need." (Home Office, 2011: 11).

YOUNG PEOPLE AND RECONNECTION

Emotional responses

"You still need the answers"

For the families and carers of young people who are reconnected after a missing incident, communication with them can prove challenging. It can be difficult for the family to know what to say, and for the young person to open up about their experiences. Concern about the young person's welfare, and what happened to them whilst away, is well-founded, given the risks that young people can face while missing. Some young people, on returning home, appear to have had negative experiences, but do not disclose the details to their family members.

"My daughter was not the same after she had gone missing."

(Parent of a formerly missing young person, Family Feedback Survey 2014 participant)

“One thing that was always noticeable when she came back was that she was dishevelled or, not really very well looked after, like she was just, not really taking very much care of herself, and that was always the case when she came back.”

(Guardian of a formerly missing young person, project interviewee)

Worry about what to say, and whether to ask questions, can be linked to concerns about the young person going missing again.

“When my daughter came home I was scared to ask questions to her and I was made to feel guilty and I was worried she would run off again.”

(Parent of a formerly missing young person, Family Feedback Survey 2014 participant)

“Once someone’s done that, at the back of your mind you’re always wondering whether they’re likely to do it again.”

(Parent of a formerly missing young person, Family Feedback Survey 2012 respondent)

For young people, the fear of them going missing again can be disruptive and a cause of conflict with families, as well as a worry for relatives.

“When [the young person] was there, there was tension, there was eggshell treading, there was watching what you say, how you speak, in case she would run off again.”

(Guardian of a formerly missing young person, project interviewee)

“Returning home even after a short amount of time can be tremendously stressful for families with the young person coming back. [...] One young person went missing on numerous occasions. You know, I always think if you go missing once, then there is a problem. If you go missing twice, then there really is something that needs to be looked at. If it is more than twice or three times or whatever, then there are some serious issues.”

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

Families and carers face the challenge of setting appropriate boundaries for reconnected young people whilst also demonstrating care and support in such a way as to help prevent them leaving again. Where other young people are living at the same home, it can be difficult for families or carers to balance the need to support the young person who has returned whilst also treating all the young people in the household in a consistent and fair way.

“It’s really difficult because you want her to feel at home, well this is how I felt. I wanted her to feel at home, she didn’t have to keep doing this, but at the same time I had another [child] who is the same age, who needed to know that it’s not OK, what she was doing.”

(Guardian of a formerly missing young person, project interviewee)

Seeking support

Research with reconnected young people who had been missing from care³ found that, on return, young people felt they needed “firm boundaries, reinforced not with actions of power, but rather, empathy, understanding, support, respect and a listening ear” (Taylor et al, 2012: 15). The research found that young people do not always receive a positive response, and some even reported “punitive measures such as being grounded, having shoes removed or ketchup put in shoes (to prevent further running away)” (Taylor et al, 2012: 15).

For families of reconnected young people, providing sufficient support to a young person after a missing incident can be difficult and isolating. This study found that appropriate support from professional agencies is not always forthcoming, but is often wanted.

³ In this context ‘missing from care’ includes children who are looked after by the state, including those in children’s homes and foster care, but excluding adopted children. This reflects the definition of a Looked After Child in the Children Act (1989): “a child who is looked after by a local authority is [...] a child who is – (a) in their care; or (b) provided with accommodation by the authority” (Children Act, 1989, s. 22(1)).

“Initially it was just a case of ‘Oh, he’s just another runaway.”

(Parent of a formerly missing young person, 2011 Family Feedback Survey respondent)

“It took 5 months for a social worker to visit us, which was a bit late for us.”

(Parent of a formerly missing young person, Family Feedback Survey 2014 participant)

“I’m still worried that he could go again, so I would like ongoing support.”

(Parent of a formerly missing young person, Family Feedback Survey 2014 participant)

ONE FAMILY’S EXPERIENCE OF SUPPORT SERVICES

“As soon as I got wind that she’d been found I would notify the police, and they would come over and do what they called a debriefing, and basically that was to ask her where she’d been and stuff like that, and she just wouldn’t answer. She wasn’t engaged at all. [...] Her social worker would come round, and would sit and chat for hours, me and the social worker, and she sat. She didn’t say anything really. She never really engaged with anybody.

“[The social worker] would come and try and get her to talk, and she wouldn’t talk, and we’d formulate a plan and ask her if she agreed with it, which would be ‘Yes’, obviously, but whether she really did or not, I would say ‘No’, because she’d be gone again. And so he would go away thinking he’d done his bit, he’d talked to her and this is what she’d agreed, which is fine, fair enough. Then it happens again and you have to start all over again. You know that that is not really working, that really doesn’t solve the issue, hasn’t made any difference, and you can’t just dot the i’s and cross the t’s and put that away and say it’s finished. It doesn’t work. But, I don’t know how social services work, I don’t know what resources they’ve got, or what pressures they’re under. I don’t know any of that. I just know that [she] needs help, and that’s all I’m interested in, as a parent. Caseloads and numbers don’t mean anything to me.”

“The authorities need to get away from case number this that and the other, they need to. Any organisation that is going to try to help somebody, has to get to know that person. You know, it’s not an easy task and I don’t really understand how you guys are going to do it, because it is time consuming. Time is the one thing that needs investing in these people. Without time, it’s nothing. [...] This is what the young people need to feel, that they’re not just a time slot, that they really care, they really matter, and people are willing to spend the time that it needs.”

(Guardian of a formerly missing young person, project interviewee)

“She needed something to make her stop and think”

Something which some families of returned missing young people felt would be useful is work to help the young person empathise with the experience of the family while they were away, and to help the family understand why the young person went, and what they experienced.

“Would be nice if there was something there, not a mediator, but somebody to bridge the gap. When somebody’s been missing, even if for a short time, there’s a gap there, and they don’t understand what each other has been through.”

(Grandparent of a formerly missing young person, 2012 Family Feedback Survey respondent)

PRACTICE EXAMPLE: RAILWAY CHILDREN'S REACH MODEL

International charity Railway Children has created a model of best practice for responding to young people to reduce risky behaviours and improve their wellbeing, as well as to reduce incidents of running away. The Reach model encompasses seven services: street work; one-to-one support; return home interviews; family support; a local helpline; preventative education; and emergency accommodation/safe places. These services, when delivered in conjunction, are designed to “reduce risk-taking and improve wellbeing by addressing the causes of running away” and to “reduce incidents of running away”. More information on the Reach model can be found on the Railway Children website at <http://www.railwaychildren.org.uk/our-solution/where-we-work/uk/reach-model/#.U7-2fPugYqM>

The model has been evaluated, and found to provide a reduction in risk and missing episodes for the individuals studied (Berelowitz et al, 2013: 50).

“She has begun to realise that she’s not an island, she does need other people, and nobody is trying to have a go or upset her, but there are certain things that have to be. And she’s realising that, although she’s still pushing a little bit.”

(Guardian of a formerly missing young person, project interviewee)

RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Families are not always sure how best to support a young person who has been missing: what to say, whether to ask questions, how to address their experiences. In light of this research, support services for young people who have run away should consider extending their service provision to include family support once the young person is found, which would ensure that the support given to young people is contextualised and that families are included in a holistic approach to dealing with the young person’s running away. Where this is not possible, referrals for family support work or mediation should be considered.
5. Not all young people have access to support services in their area when they return. Missing People must effectively trial and evaluate support for families when a young person returns from going missing and explore opportunities to roll out suitable services further. This service should, where possible, provide a consistent support service to families and young people who are repeatedly going missing.
6. In order to develop more effective rapport with returned young people, providers of return interviews for young people who go missing repeatedly should ensure that the interviews are conducted by the same person each time. Where this is not possible or appropriate, information from return interviews should be analysed together, to ensure that a full picture is gained.
7. Where return interviews are conducted for children or adults, and where these indicate a need for subsequent support, local agencies must work together to ensure that this is provided. It would be appropriate for statutory guidance to state agencies’ responsibilities for working jointly to deliver a co-ordinated support package after return.