

**NSPCC**

**Preventing trafficked  
children going missing:  
information and advice  
for professionals**

NSPCC Child Trafficking Advice Centre (CTAC)

**EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR**

This advice sheet is intended to assist professionals when foreign national children who are at risk or have been trafficked are taken into the care of a local authority.

Many of these children go missing within the first 48 hours of being placed in care. They are also vulnerable to abuse through numerous types of exploitation.

This guidance is based on ten years of working directly on child trafficking cases, and speaking with young people who have been trafficked.

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## What is child trafficking?

Child trafficking is the movement of a child or children for the purpose of exploitation. It is a criminal offence under all relevant pieces of legislation which cover modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation in the UK. A child is a person under the age of 18, and children cannot give informed consent to being exploited. All children and young people under the age of 18 are protected by UK child protection legislation irrespective of nationality or immigration status.

Children can be trafficked into, out of, and within the UK. They can be trafficked by parents, extended family members, known adults from a child's community or strangers. Trafficking often involves organised international networks of criminal gangs.

Children can be exploited through:

- Sexual exploitation
- Criminal activity (e.g. cannabis cultivation, street crime, transporting drugs, benefit fraud, immigration fraud)
- Domestic servitude (inappropriate amounts of housework or childcare in domestic dwellings)
- Labour exploitation (e.g. in restaurants, nail bars, factories or through agricultural work)
- Illegal adoption
- Forced marriage
- Unreported private fostering arrangements (for any of the above exploitative purposes)

This is not an exhaustive list and children are often exploited in more than one way.

## Working with trafficked children

**Child trafficking and modern slavery are not terms most children will understand.** All trafficked children have different experiences and responses to what has happened to them. Some children know they are being abused but others may not realise for a long time, even once they are out of the exploitative situation.

**Building trust is crucial.** Children and young people are more likely to engage with you when you clearly explain your role and responsibilities. This will help them to feel safe and encourage them to trust you. Do not assume that another professional has explained the different roles of professionals to the child; take the time to ensure you do this yourself. Explain to the child that you have to share information with relevant professionals to make sure they are safe.

**Children can be prevented from disclosing abuse in a number of ways.** Children may be afraid of their traffickers, which could prevent them from sharing information with you. They may believe they or their family owe money to the traffickers for their journey.

**Some children and young people may be influenced by religious, spiritual and cultural beliefs used negatively by traffickers.** They may be afraid of police and social workers, and view them with suspicion rather than as professionals who can help. Even if children are in a situation where they feel safe, they still may be too afraid to give clear details of their experiences.

**Some children and young people may run away from safe situations back to the traffickers.** This can be confusing, as the child appears to be deliberately returning to an abusive environment. This behaviour should be seen in the context of grooming. Professionals should work with the child to help them feel safe.

## About the Child Trafficking Advice Centre (CTAC)

The NSPCC's Child Trafficking Advice Centre is a multi-disciplined specialist service.

It provides free guidance and support to professionals with safeguarding concerns for children being moved across international borders, either to or from the UK.

The service is staffed by experienced social workers, a member of the National Crime Agency, and immigration officers seconded from the Home Office. CTAC provides free training and awareness-raising presentations, attends network and child protection meetings, and produces child trafficking reports for courts.

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## Planning

When a foreign national child is unaccompanied, or with an adult where the relationship between them is unclear, a clear plan should be in place to reduce the risk of the child going missing when they are taken into the care of the local authority. This should include parallel planning to hasten enquiries to locate the child, and a return strategy for when the child is found.

**When a child goes missing, there must be a multi-agency child protection strategy discussion.** This should involve children's services, police, and if relevant, the child's carers and UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI).

The Plan should:

- Ensure the child / young person understands the professionals involved and their roles.
- Fully explain to the child their entitlement to free care, food, accommodation and education.
- Record sufficient information to identify the child if they go missing, e.g. biometrics and photographs - children have been discovered under different identities to which they went missing.
- Ensure police and the local authority has a clear agreement regarding who will take ownership if the child goes missing and is found in another area. This will help avoid local authority disputes and lengthy periods of uncertainty for the child.
- On a case by case basis, consider circulating the child as a medium or high risk, in relation to speed of enquiries and examination of IT devices and social media with the necessary authorities.
- Consider age assessments *only if* there is significant reason to doubt that the individual is not the age they say they are. The person should be treated as a child by all agencies until a legally compliant age assessment has been completed. If a young person goes missing from care before a legally compliant age assessment has been completed, they should be circulated and dealt with as a missing child from care.
- Ensure that the local authority, police and other agency responses to a foreign national child going missing are the same as for all other children, whether they are looked after or living in the community.
- Make appropriate use of NGO's, e.g. *Missing People*, to aid circulation and media.
- If appropriate, inform UK Visa and Immigration so the missing child is known to their systems and various border flags are placed.
- Include informing NCA Missing Person Bureau to ensure the child is on their database for monitoring.
- If there is relevant information regarding modern slavery or trafficking, a referral to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) should be made.
- Ensure there is a multi-agency response and review, in line with procedures for children missing from care.
- Include a de-briefing plan for when the child is found, stating the type of interview to take place. For example, is the child willing to engage in an ABE (Achieving Best Evidence) if appropriate, and which agency is best placed to carry out the de-brief?
- Make plans for when the child is located, including appropriate accommodation and undertaking further safety planning to minimise the risk of the child going missing again and being re-trafficked.

## General guidance

- ✓ **Use simple language and be clear, even when speaking through an interpreter.** Establishing good communication is crucial. A child or young person is likely to be suspicious of interpreters, police and other officials due to negative experiences, what they have been told by adults or stereotypes in their home country. They may come from a country that has no welfare system, or a legal system different to that of the UK.
- ✓ **Explain roles of the different people involved.** The child or young person will have limited or no understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different professionals, so it is important to explain this in a simple way.
- ✓ **Instruct all professionals involved to be empathetic and unambiguous.** Foreign national children have said that they are concerned how they will pay back the money they will owe for their care, which is a factor leading to them going missing. It had not been explained to them that their protection, care and support in the UK was free.
- ✓ **Explore the child's views of different people they have come into contact with.** Sometimes children will believe the people who arranged their travel are good and they will not understand why professionals are concerned about them. Explaining to a child or young person why professionals are worried about them is important as children are vulnerable to being groomed, putting them at high risk of going missing.
- ✓ **Seek to understand their perceived position and responsibilities.** The child or young person may be expected to work to pay off loans taken by family members and may fear that harm will come to them or their family if they do not follow instructions from adults/traffickers. Addressing these issues will help to show an understanding for their situation and will contribute towards an open discussion.
- ✓ **Encourage the child to ask questions.** A child from a different country could be from a culture where asking questions of adults is not encouraged, particularly of those in authority. Invite questions to help establish rapport and trust.
- ✓ **Ensure attempts are made to record social media addresses.** This will be helpful if missing enquiries need to be conducted at a later stage. Ask about details of family or other contacts in the UK and country of origin. Register travel cards or oyster cards online so journeys can be tracked should the child go missing.
- ✓ **If you need to confiscate a child's mobile phone for their safety, fully explain the reasons.** Make appropriate arrangements for safe contact with their family members. If any device is replaced, ensure details are obtained to trace it if necessary. Technology can be the only source of enquiry and necessary authorisations should be sought as part of the investigation plan.
- ✓ **Try to obtain the child's permission for a photograph to be taken.** This is necessary for circulation in case they go missing, and for identification if they are found.
- ✓ **If available, fingerprints can help trace a missing child.** If a child has their fingerprints taken by immigration, this can identify them if different names have been given. There have been cases where young people reported missing have been found in youth offending institutions with a different name, having been convicted of a crime they had been forced into.
- ✓ **Do not make assumptions when deciding on an appropriate placement.** When a child who has been trafficked is placed into the care of a local authority, a cultural match may be considered the best option. However, some young people have said that being placed with carers from their home country led them to feel intimidated and judged.
- ✓ **Keep in regular communication with the child during the first few weeks.** Ensure the young person is part of the safety planning. Ensure they understand why they are living where they are, what the risks are to them, and the risk of them being used for exploitation.
- ✓ **Ensure an experienced DBS-checked interpreter is used.** It is important to check the interpreter speaks the right dialect so the young person understands what they are being told. Some young people have said they prefer using interpreters over the phone so there is no physical presence of the interpreter, due to power imbalances and perceived fears they could be linked to the traffickers or could leak information back to the child's community.
- ✓ **Try to avoid using professional terms or jargon.** Terms like trafficking, debt-bondage, foster care and social services are unlikely to have any meaning for children and young people, leaving them in a confused and uncertain state. Use these terms only when the child or young person understands what they mean.