

# Return and Resolution

Wade and Biehal (1998) found that slightly more than half of youth in their sample (52%) returned home of their own accord, whereas slightly more than two-fifths were brought back, and these proportions are similar to a survey of runaways in general (Ress, 1993). Of the young people who were brought back to their placements by others, nearly two-thirds were returned by the police and nearly a quarter were collected by a caregiver. A small group (5%) of young people refused to return to substitute care placement and placed themselves in alternative accommodation with friends or family.

The vast majority of the young people (85%) were able to return to the same placement. For the 15% who did move to new accommodation, a third placed themselves with family or friends and a tenth went to a new foster or residential placement. Overall, in two-thirds of the cases, social workers felt that the decision to return to the same placement or to move to a new one was in keeping with the aims of the care plan. Despite this consistency, the decision was forced through lack of alternative resources or through the caregiver refusing to have the young person back for one-fifth of the young people. And whether returning to the same or new placement, not all the young people were happy with the arrangements made. More than a quarter of the young people were unhappy with the choice that was available to them (Wade & Biehal, 1998).

From the vantage of child well-being, three essential objectives must be achieved in the aftermath of a child's return: (1) gain an understanding of his or her reasons for going missing, (2) identify any placement-related or other problems that may have prompted him or her to go, and (3) plan a response to these difficulties (Biehal & Wade, 2002).

Many children run to a parent, friend, or relative. Thus rather than running away from care, they are running to someone and seeking to establish their own alternative placement. Workers need to pay close attention to the whereabouts of the child once he or she is located and recovered. If an alternate placement meets the child's needs and wishes without compromising his or her safety or treatment, workers should make accommodations for it, as it is likely to diminish, if not curtail, future runs. Increasing the participation of children and youth in decisionmaking about the initial placement selection, at the point of return, and throughout his or her life in foster care will improve the likelihood of placement stability.

Adolescents in foster care have different issues and challenges than youngsters. The child welfare agency needs to continue to reorient its resources to accommodate the needs of this group. Creating more flexible placements, specialized adolescent programs, and additional living alternatives are essential (Ross, 2001).

### **Returning the Child to the Foster Family**

*In some situations, children who have run away from a foster family will be returned when they are recovered. The decision to return the child to the foster family should be based on a sound assessment of safety and risk, and a determination that this family best addresses the child's needs for safety, permanence, and well-being. When the worker has made this determination, the child will be prepared and supported during the transition.*

*Children, birthparents, and foster families should have opportunities to meet individually with the appropriate agency workers to discuss their feelings and concerns about returning to the foster home. The team should be provided with information regarding the findings, and members should fully explore any issues. A joint meeting with the child and foster parents can help them process the prior events and address ongoing concerns of either party. The worker should provide the child with information to assure*

*them that they will be safe in the foster home. The foster parents should assure the child that they are welcomed, are accepted, and will not be blamed. (CWLA, 2003, pp. 65–66)*

Provided that the reason for the child's absence was unrelated to safety of the placement, acceptance of the child's return, concern for the child's well-being, and maintenance of the placement can have a beneficial effect on future patterns of running away (Biehal & Wade, 2002). Although such acceptance and demonstrations of care and concern will not bring about the child's immediate behavior change, it provides an essential element of a longer-term strategy in working with the child. In the Wade et al. (1998) study, reassurance that someone cared about what happened to the missing children formed an important foundation for relationship building, jointly working through difficulties, and discouraging behavior that placed the children at risk of harm. A positive, individualized approach to the care of children in foster care is likely to be a protective factor over time, even when the absences are unrelated to the quality of care they receive (Department of Health, 2002).

*In planning for the child's return, the key purposes to be achieved are:*

- *Identifying and dealing with any harm the child has incurred*
- *Understanding and dealing with the reasons the child ran away*
- *Trying to avoid it from happening again*

*—Somerset County Council—Joint Protocol for Children Missing from Care*

The needs of a child who has been recovered and his or her foster and birthfamilies are often immediate and complex. Over the years, workers have assumed that once a missing child is returned, a comprehensive plan falls into place to support the child and those affected by his or her absence. Research has shown, however, that in 80% of the recoveries of all missing children, only an average of 15

minutes is devoted to the recovery process with no psychological or social service support provided. The system needs to be improved (NCMEC, 2000).

The child welfare agency should respond much like a concerned parent, attempting to understand the reasons that a young person has run and ensuring that the child is able to access appropriate services. Workers should provide supportive assessment services to each runaway youth who is found and returned to foster care to explore the reasons for running and to identify the need for possible mental health intervention to prevent further running. In addition, workers should provide any follow-up mental health services needed by children and youth returning to care following a runaway episode or abduction.

Finally, the child welfare agency should increase its level of monitoring and support to ensure satisfactory return and adjustment to reentry. Both child and family service workers and family foster care workers should increase contact with the foster child and foster family during this transition. This increased contact should provide both support and careful monitoring of child safety and the stability of the placement. This should include more frequent phone contact, visits to the foster home, and other types of support as necessary and desired. The agency should remain vigilant for potential red flags as they pertain to the child, the child's living situation, and the larger environment in which the child exists.

Children and youth missing from care are at considerable immediate and long-term risk. Effective prevention, response, and remediation of these absences require a collective and integrated effort by child welfare and law enforcement communities as well as other social, health, and educational agencies and the community at large.

### **The Voices of Youth and Children**

The need to provide young people with opportunities to talk, to be listened to, to have their feelings taken seriously, and to provide advice and guidance about alternatives to running away have been a

consistent finding. Youth report that during times of stress, they feel relatively powerless and that their voices and needs go unheard (Mitchell et al., 2002).

A youth summed up her response to this confusion between care and order by saying, “Do you have any idea how hard it is to be always watched and never seen? To be constantly analyzed and never understood? That right there, that is loneliness” (Martin, 2003, p. 267).

Other young people have reported feeling left in limbo as a result of case management processes—either they were uninformed of decisions that workers had made or unaware of what might happen in the future because no serious consideration had been given to it:

*They decide your life. They tell you where you’re moving and where you’re not moving and you just get so confused. (Wade & Biehal, 1998, p. 149)*

This opportunity to connect is essential at all points along the missing continuum—from the time a child is at risk of running through the time that a child has run repeatedly. The importance of offering an independent interview at the initiation of running behavior has the potential to reveal the reasons for running, assess future risk, and determine an appropriate response to curtail future running. Optimally, the young person should be able to select an individual to meet his or her unique needs. Where no choice is exercised, the person who performs this function must be accessible, independent of the placement, nonjudgmental, and able to retain the confidence of the youth where safe to do so (Mitchell et al., 2002).

*When we find kids on the street, we say, “I want to help you do what you want to do...tell me, what is that?”*

*—Rick Koca, Founder and CEO, Stand Up for Kids*

Whoever undertakes the task of discussing the incident should be capable of listening carefully, evaluating the information offered, and acting effectively in the young person’s best interests (Bridge Child Care Development Service, 1996).