



North Ayrshire Child Protection Committee

Multi-Agency Guidance

Unseen Child

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The following multi-agency guidance has been produced by North Ayrshire Child Protection Committee to support staff across all agencies who have direct contact with families.

This guidance applies to all children and young people in North Ayrshire, not only to those in the child protection system.

This guidance can be used as an independent document or to support any single agency guidance you may have on the same topic.

This guidance note sits alongside:

- Children Missing from Education Guidance (NAC Education & Skills)
- Missing Families Alert (NHS Ayrshire & Arran)
- Missing Children for whom there are child protection concerns (NACPC)

1. Definition

The unseen child is a child who may fall into the following categories:

- Address unknown
- Access is not possible because the parents fail to keep appointments
- Access is specifically denied by the parents
- The parent has repeated explanations for the child's absence, e.g. asleep, with a relative, unwell, outside playing
- There is no reply when calls are made at home

2. Identification/awareness

Staff may become aware of an "unseen" child in a number of ways. While not exhaustive, the following are provided for guidance:

- Responding to a reported concern about a child or providing an agreed service to a child, but staff have been unable to see the child, possibly due to reasons/explanations given as per definition above
- During ongoing contact with a family, staff become aware that a particular child has not been seen in the course of contact with the family for a period of time
- Concern is shared by another professional that they have been unable to see a child

3. Evaluating Concern

When staff become aware of an "unseen" child, an evaluation of the level of concern must be undertaken. An "unseen" child is not necessarily in itself a concern. Each case is unique and it is the significance of being "unseen" that needs to be assessed. This will particularly focus on the vulnerability of the child in terms of age and stage of development.

Determining the level of concern in relation to an "unseen" child requires multi agency information sharing and assessment. This will need to take into account any known or suspected risks to the child, the length of time since the child has been seen and the nature of involvement of all agencies.

The response to such initial assessment should be proportionate to the identified needs and risks for the individual child.

Where there are no existing concerns about a child but those involved with a family become aware that an existing child has not been seen for a period of time during their contact with a family, the staff member must in the first instance discuss these circumstances with their line manager.

It is not possible to be prescriptive about what length of time is significant for “unseen” children in these circumstances. Managers should support staff to reflect on their practice and, as part of this process, to consider whether an “unseen” child may raise a concern.

Questions to consider include:

- Are there factors’ impacting on this individual’s parenting capacity?
- Is there a way for me to see this child as part of my contact with the family that would help me identify whether I have concerns?
- How long is it since I have seen this child and would I have expected to have seen them more recently?
- Do I know who else is involved with this family and whether they have seen this child?
- Has any other person shared concerns with me about the child?
- Do I need to share any information in order to ensure any needs/risks for this child are identified and addressed?

If there are no factors impacting on parenting capacity, no concerns expressed about the child and the service provided does not typically involve seeing the child, then such an “unseen” child would not typically warrant any further action other than an initial telephone contact with the child’s school or early years centre.

However, if during discussion with the line manager, it is agreed that there may be a concern associated with this child being “unseen”, the following action should be taken:

- Contact other agencies who may be involved with the family – typically health and education.
- Explain your involvement and the background to your concern, ie an “unseen” child.
- Seek information on the nature of involvement of other agencies, including whether and when they have seen the child, and whether there are concerns either about the child or about factors that may impact on parenting.
- If anyone has seen the child, information about the child’s presentation must be discussed and taken into account in assessing current circumstances.

Following such information gathering and initial assessment, if concern about the child remains or is established, then an integrated assessment of the child’s needs and risks should be initiated.

The professional who first became aware of the concern about the “unseen” child should make a referral to social services and initiate an integrated assessment, the referral should not wait until the assessment is completed.

There are some circumstances where any period of a child being “unseen” is potentially significant.

Specifically, this would be the case where there are existing concerns about a child, including child protection concerns.

Many contacts with families are planned – either at home or in an office/clinic environment. The frequency of such contact should be specified in the child protection plan or child’s plan. This then provides some guidance in respect of individual children when determining at which point an absence of contact becomes “significant”.

For children on the child protection register, whenever there is a failed contact (eg. failed to attend appointment, unable to gain access to the home, not able to see the child) responsive action must be taken immediately.

In these cases, if the child has not been seen within one day of attempted contact, then this must be brought to the attention of the Lead Professional and consideration given to convening a multi agency meeting. For children on the child protection register, this would typically be a core group meeting. For all other children, this would be a planning meeting or a professional discussion.

The person who is raising the concern is responsible for **speaking directly** to the Lead Professional / Social Worker and ensuring action is agreed. This may involve following up the initial sharing of concern with further phone calls.

Multi agency meetings can then consider all known information and agree actions to secure the assessment of the child’s risks and needs. This can include legal measures such as a Child Protection Order.

If there is a concern about the immediate safety of an “unseen” child, legal measures can be considered immediately, prior to any multi agency meeting.

Summary of responsive action:

1. In the case of home visits, arrange to return later in the day if possible.
2. In the case of office/clinic appointments, attempt to contact the family to obtain an explanation for failure to attend.
3. Contact all other relevant agencies contributing to the child’s plan or child’s protection plan to share information about the failed contact and identify if any other professional has seen the child. Seek information about any current concerns.
4. Where possible, explain clearly to parents the need to see the child.
5. If applicable, return to the house as arranged.
6. If, at this stage, the child remains unseen by any professional, this must be discussed with the Lead Professional/Social Worker and a plan of action agreed. (If the worker is unavailable, speak to the Team Manager)
7. The discussion and action agreed with the Lead Professional / Social Worker must be confirmed in writing within 24 hours and shared with all agencies involved with the family.

Where concern about a potential “unseen” child has been raised by another professional all staff involved with a family must give consideration to how they can share information in order to contribute to any assessment of risk and need for that child.

Services must share information about their involvement with a family; whom they have had contact with and when; any family issues that may impact on children; when any child in the family was seen and how they presented; and current and planned contact/involvement with the family. This allows for the most effective assessment of a child's needs and helps to ensure a proportionate response is provided.

In some circumstances, concern about an "unseen" child may escalate to the point that a child is reported missing to the police or a national search is initiated. In these cases, all information must be shared with Social Services who will take the lead role in such decisions.

STAFF

Where a concern is raised about a child, professionals:

See them

*Establish their immediate well-being; **and***

Take any necessary protective action"

Framework for Standards 2:3 (Scottish Executive 2004)