



Keeping Track at All Times: Preventing Lost Children

When you care for the children of others, **you have the responsibility to assure that they are safe at all times.** There is never an acceptable excuse for losing a child. Preventing children from wandering away or from becoming separated from the rest of the group takes planning and forethought on your part.

Vulnerable Times and places

As a child care professional, you should carefully review the child care use areas in and around your home or center and your daily program to determine the problem areas and the most vulnerable times of the day. For each of these, you must consider what people should know and what physical aspects of the situation need to be addressed. Using this information you can determine what policies and practices you need to develop. It is critical that you train your staff regarding these policies and practices.

Review your program and physical set-up to determine when and where you are or may be most vulnerable to losing a child. To get your thinking started, here is a list of some of the most common times and places when you may lose a child:

- When there is a child new to the center/home
- When you have substitutes, new staff, or assistants who do not know the children or the routine.
- During pick-up and drop-off times.
- While transporting children.
- During transitions
- When children use bathrooms outside the classroom.
- During caregiver shift changes.
- During meal preparation and food service.
- During outdoor play, especially if the playground is not immediately accessible to the home or center, or includes wooded areas.
- At the end of the day.
- During field trips.
- During fire drills and tornado drills.

General Safety Measures

- Stay within your licensed capacity. Extra children makes supervision more difficult.
- Always maintain the required adult/child ratios. Ratios are a safeguard to assure a minimal level of appropriate supervision for children of varying ages and abilities.
- Keep accurate dated daily attendance records.
 - **Greet** each child and parent at arrival to provide appropriate transfer of responsibility.
 - **Sign in and out** all children when they arrive and depart including children of caregivers/assistants.
 - **Use first and last names** and the time signed in as well as the time signed out.
 - Caregivers should match the children present to the attendance sheet periodically throughout the day for accuracy.
 - **Check immediately** with the parent if a child does not arrive on a scheduled day.
- Supervision is ongoing; caregivers and assistants are never off duty, even during the children's naptime. Center office staff and kitchen staff, and day care home family members should also watch for children.
- Provide consistent staffing in centers and group homes so staff get to know each child.
- Avoid games which encourage children to leave your area of vision.
- Look for potential hiding places where children can hide behind or in objects (furniture, shrubbery, play equipment, etc.) and are out of your line of vision.
- Be aware of areas (bathrooms, exits, etc.) that may not be used regularly. Have a plan for supervision of these areas.

- Arrange furniture to make it more difficult for children to leave unsupervised. Make exit areas less obvious or attractive. Erect visual barriers at the child's eye level that still allow for adult supervision.
- At the end of the day visually check of the bathrooms, nap area, offices, classrooms, bedrooms, and outdoor play areas. Remember to check on and under all seats in vehicles if you have transported children that day.
- The other person should be make sure that all of the children make it to the new area and none are left behind.
- All adults must always know the total number and names of children. All children must be accounted for at the end of the transition time.
- If you are caring for children by yourself in your home, you must take responsibility for all of the tasks normally handled by two people in a larger facility.

Transitions

Transition times are often difficult times of the day for both caregivers and children. It helps to be clear about the role each adult is to play during the transition.

Arrival and Dismissal

- Be clear with parents/guardians that they need to communicate with you or a staff member when they arrive, leave, and when they take their child from your care.
- Parents/guardians should always escort the child into the center/home and inform the caregiver of their child's arrival.
- A designated caregiver should greet and sign in children that arrive unaccompanied by an adult via bus or come before and/or after school.
- Visually check the entire building carefully at the end of the day for children still in your care, and again at closing. A child could be playing quietly or sleeping in an area that is not visible.

Shift Changes

- In centers, plan staff schedules that include a 15 minute overlap so the leaving staff and the arriving staff have 15 minutes to communicate about the children and the events of the day and the children become accustomed to the staff change.

Routine Transitions

- Transitions occur for children throughout the day. Be alert when children move from one activity to another, or from one play area to another, especially indoor/outdoor transitions.
- If possible, give at least two people the responsibility for seeing that the transition flows smoothly.
 - One should initiate the transition by going into the area and waiting to greet the children and helping them to get involved in the activity.

Field Trips

When children are taken on a field trip, special precautions are necessary. Children can become disoriented in strange places or crowds. This is a time when you are more likely to have a child separated from the group or forgotten by the adults. Preparation of adults and children prior to taking a field trip can prevent lost children in most situations.

Before you leave for the field trip site:

- 1) **Choose the location carefully** to be sure it is appropriate for the age level and interests of all of the children.
- 2) Determine if the location you have selected and the conditions it presents would require an **increased number of adults** to provide adequate supervision.
- 3) When on outings with older children, consider how you will handle supervision when children are using **different gender restrooms**.
- 4) Consider leaving very young children at the center or at the day care home with their caregivers when going to beaches or other places **where toddlers and infants are very vulnerable**. If you choose to take young children to a beach or water activity, be sure that you have adequate supervision for the children playing in the water and on land. Adult to child ratios can be increased above state minimums for safer supervision.
- 5) Find out where **emergency help** is available near the area and where the telephone is located. If there is no phone, take a mobile phone with you, if possible.

- 6) Devise some type of **identification system** that helps to identify each child. Make sure all children are easily identifiable as belonging to your program, especially when there are other groups of children at the site. Some homes/centers use brightly colored T-shirts and tags with the name and phone number of the child care home/center. *It may not be wise to use the child's name on the tag as this can be used to lure the child away.*
- 7) Assign each caregiver/assistant to a specific small group of children. All adults, even those assigned to specific children, must be aware of their assigned children **and** the total group **at all times**.
- 8) Prepare the children before leaving on the trip:
 - * Talk about **where you are going**, what you will be doing, and the behavior you will expect.
 - * Tell them who will be their assigned caregiver on the trip. Show them this person.
 - * Discuss an identified **meeting place** at the site in case they get separated from the group.
 - * **Problem solve** with the children on what they should do if they do not see you or other caregiving adults. Help them think of who they would contact and what they would say.
 - * Make sure very young children can at least say the name of their child care center or day care home.
 - * Let the children know that they must tell a caregiver if they want to leave the group to get a drink or go to the bathroom.
- 9) Prepare all adults going on the trip. All caregivers and volunteers should be aware of their responsibilities and any emergency procedures. Tell them where emergency help is available, where the phone is located, and the specific steps to be followed in the event a child gets separated from the group and is not accounted for.
- 10) Be sure to have an accurate attendance checklist and copies of the children's child information cards with you.
- 11) Do a visual and name count of the children before you leave the center/home. Double check your count by matching names with the children.

At the field trip site:

1. Make sure that each caregiver counts and identifies, by name and face, each child assigned to them several times. It is easy to miscount or to have a correct number of children but not the right children. So, always **double check** your counts by matching names with the children.
2. **Increase the level of supervision.** Always keep all children in an adult assistant/caregiver's line of vision. Assume that a child might get separated. Be constantly alert to that possibility.
3. Show the children the identified **meeting place** in case a child does get separated from the group. This should be a place that children know or that is clearly visible from most of the area that you are visiting. It might be the vehicle, a specific building, or an unusual landmark.
4. Establish a **buddy system** where an older child is a buddy to a younger child. This does not transfer the responsibility to the older child, but it does give you an extra pair of eyes.
5. Consider using something to **keep** all of the children **together** when walking. A rope with knots for places to hold helps children stay with the group.
6. **Never leave** the children unattended in a vehicle.

When leaving the site:

- 1) When **loading and unloading** the vehicle:
 - Instruct the children on what to do.
 - Tell them where to stand or sit while waiting for others to get in and out.
 - Have a second adult monitor the children outside the vehicle while you are loading or unloading.
- 2) Before you leave the field trip site, **count the children**. Double check your count by utilizing your attendance checklist to verify that all are present.

Routine Transportation

Children can easily become separated from the group or left behind during routine transportation to and from the building.

- Be cautious during loading and unloading periods when children can become confused and leave the group unnoticed.
- It is especially important when transporting children to check attendance by matching the children's names on a record with their faces. This makes it less likely to miscount or include a child that is not in your group into your count.
- If you transport more than one group of children to or from your home/center, you may want to have children wear special tags to indicate in which group they belong. Include the name of the facility and the telephone number on the tag.
- Visually check each seat of the vehicle to assure that all seats have been vacated and that a child is not hiding or sleeping in the vehicle.
- Create a plan for the driver and adult rider to follow that will make checking for children a routine procedure. After children have left the vehicle, the driver should always check on and under each seat of the vehicle to assure that there are no longer any children in the vehicle.
- Place a large sign labeled "empty" in the back window of the vehicle **after** it has been thoroughly checked for remaining children so that others will know the vehicle is empty.

A Written Policy

Consider writing a policy that details what you would do in the event that a child has been separated from the group, wanders away from the home/center, or cannot be located.

This process will allow you to think through the emergency steps before a situation occurs. This will help you to react in a more appropriate manner in the event of an emergency situation.

Include:

- Who is responsible for checking the list of children against the children present to be sure you have accounted for all of them?
- Who is going to take care of the remaining children?
- Who is responsible for locating the lost child?
- When will the parents and authorities be notified and by whom?
- Any other actions you feel are important.

If you are a family home provider, you will need to think through how you will handle all of these responsibilities by yourself.



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