

TITLE OF REPORT: **Missing from Care Episodes and child sexual exploitation for Children and Young People Looked After by Gateshead Council**

REPORT OF: **Caroline O'Neill, Strategic Director, Care Wellbeing and Learning and Director of Children's Services**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an updated summary of missing from care episodes from December 2017 to November 2018 and an update regarding protection and monitoring of child sexual exploitation.

1. Background

Young people who go "missing" from the care of the Council whether from foster care or residential care, do so for many often complex reasons which cannot be viewed in isolation from their home circumstances and their experience within the Looked After system.

2. Policy Context

Gateshead Council has clear procedures regarding missing children and young people which incorporate a joint protocol between Northumbria Police and Children's Social Care. The procedures and data systems form part of the Local Safeguarding Children Board's (LSCB's) oversight of arrangements. A designated officer is a legal requirement for each Local Authority. This remit is delegated to Service Manager Looked After Children.

3. Definition of Missing from Care

"A Looked After young person is considered missing if he/she is absent from her place of residence without authority." Children can be reported missing within 30 minutes to 3 hours from their anticipated return time.

In July 2017 Northumbria Police adopted the new missing definition to identify the type of missing activity;

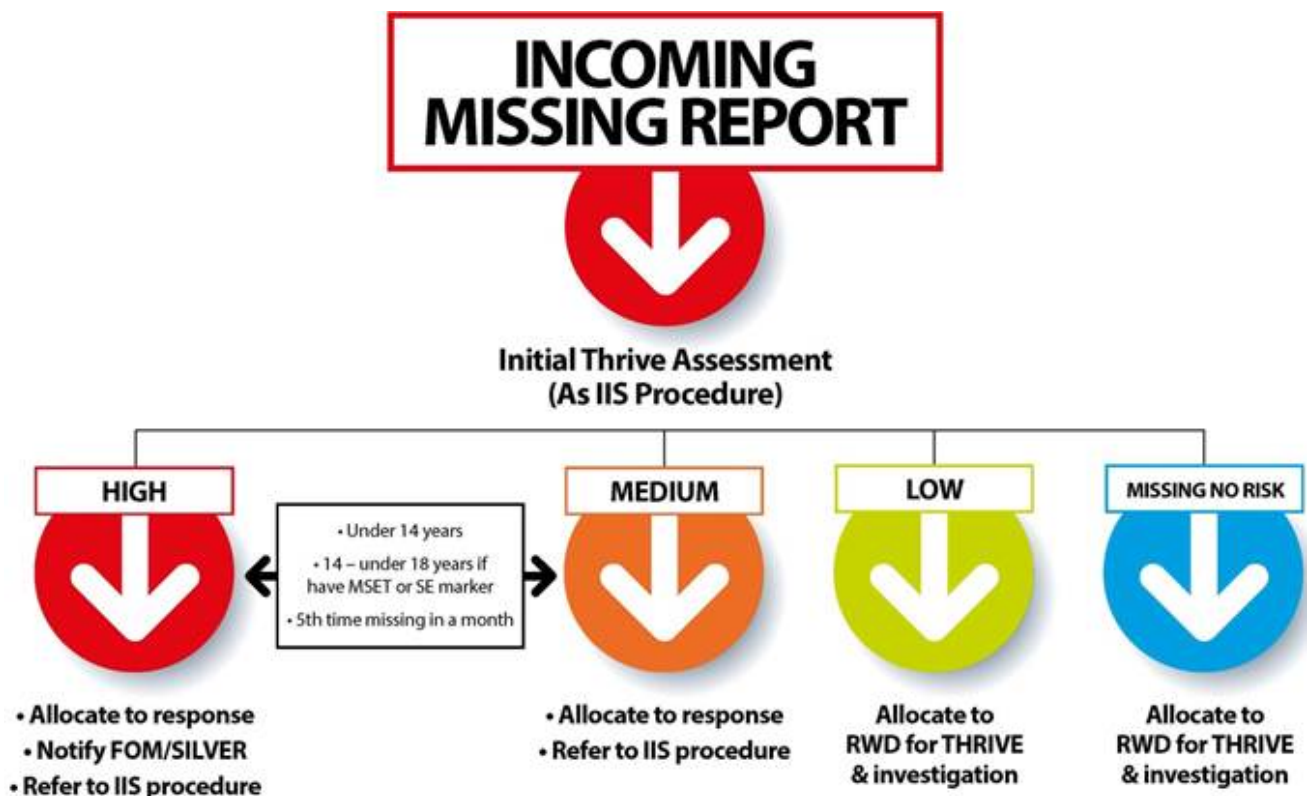
"Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their wellbeing or otherwise confirmed."

All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from 'no apparent risk (absent)' through to high risk cases that require immediate, intensive action. The police determine the level of risk (low/medium/high) based on the information shared with them.

All professionals must ensure that all known information held on a child/young person is shared with the Police to ensure that the correct level of risk is applied – including if child is LAC or if they have any other vulnerabilities

A missing strategy for each young person may be different depending upon the management of assessed risks relating to the young person.

- **Absent** – no apparent risk of harm to either subject or public
- **Low** - Risk of harm to subject/public is possible but minimal
- **Medium** – Risk of harm to subject/public likely but not serious
- **High** – risk of 'serious harm' to subject/public is assessed as very likely (serious harm is defined as – risk that is life threatening and/or traumatic, from which recovery, whether physical or psychological can be expected to be difficult or impossible)



Missing

A child is categorised as missing when their location or reason for absence is unknown **and/ or** there is cause for concern for the child because of their vulnerability or there is a potential danger to the public.

A child or young person who is absent should be classified as missing if one or more of the criteria below apply:

- There is identified or imminent risk of the child or young person being exposed to significant harm
- The child or young person poses a risk of significant harm to others
- There are suspicious circumstances
- The absence is out of character or unusual behaviour
- There are indications that the child has already come to harm
- There are indications that the episode is not a deliberate or careless act
- There are indications that the child or young person
- Is not expected to return within reasonable time limits
- Is not staying at homes of others known to them
- Will not be easily located

A child or young person in this category must be reported to the police.

Absent

Absent - "A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be and there is no apparent risk."

The 'absent' category should comprise cases in which people are not presently where they are supposed to be and there is no apparent risk. 'Absent' cases should not be ignored and must be monitored over periods of time with consideration given to escalating to 'missing' if there is a change to the circumstances that has increased the level of risk.

Some children absent themselves for a short period and then return and during their absence their whereabouts are known or they have made contact. Sometimes children stay out longer than agreed, either on purpose or accidentally, and may be testing boundaries, but do not jeopardise their wellbeing. This kind of boundary testing is within the range of normal teenage behaviour and not necessarily considered a risk.

Whether the absence is careless or deliberate, if there is no apparent risk for their immediate safety, or that of the public, it may fall within the absent category. The assessment of the carer is initially that they are safe but are away from home without permission. It is still important that staff/ carers record these incidences (as absent, not missing episodes), in case the level of risk changes and decisions are auditable. Absent episodes must be carefully monitored however as the child may subsequently go missing.

If a child's whereabouts are known then they cannot be 'missing'. For example, in some circumstances young people staying with a friend without prior agreement

may not be 'at risk' and it would be inappropriate to flag this event as a missing from care incident or report it to the police.

In situations where a child is absent without permission the first response may be that providers of their care along with any relevant staff from their responsible authority, which could include the child's social worker, should act as a responsible parent and take all practical steps to establish the child's location and to ensure that they return to their placement without delay.

A child or young person who is not where they are expected to be absent should be classified as absent if the criteria below apply:

- They have deliberately or carelessly absented themselves
- They are likely to return of their own accord or they are staying with others known to them
- They are likely to be easily located
- They are unlikely to suffer or cause significant harm whilst absent

The carer or residential staff member should record any information gained on the whereabouts of the young person whilst absent, and this should be shared as appropriate with the police. Where the person remains absent, and the carer/ staff feels the individual may be at risk of harm then a report should be made to the police.

4. Risk Assessment

In assessing the significance of any child's absence a risk assessment must be undertaken. The service has developed a screening assessment tool based which is completed by the care team and if there are persistent missing episodes this is presented to the Multi agency Sexual Exploitation Trafficking meeting.

Where a child is missing, relevant staff from Local Authority and Police must consider the above definitions and take into consideration the child's care plan and factors listed below, when assessing risk:

- The legal status of the person in care (e.g. Emergency Protection Order, Full or Interim Care Order, remanded, curfew conditions etc.)
- Previous behaviour patterns. (Such as a history of absence and quick return)
- The child's state of mind/perceived risk. (Is child likely to self-harm or commit suicide? Does child see risks in a balanced way?)
- Group behaviour at the time of the absence
- Whether the young person is perceived as running to someone or running from a situation
- Any physical or learning disabilities the child may have which increase the risk to them
- Is the child vulnerable due to age or infirmity or any other factor?
- Is the child suspected to be the victim of a significant crime in progress, e.g. abduction?
- Are there family /relationship problems or recent history of family conflict, including domestic abuse

- Does the missing person have any physical illness, disability or mental health problems?
- Are they in the company of a person who may cause them harm?
- Do they require essential medication which is not likely to be available?
- Is there ongoing bullying or harassment, e.g. racial, sexual, homophobic or local community concerns and/or cultural issues?
- Do they pose a threat of harm to others?
- Is there drug or alcohol dependency or substance misuse?
- Any other particular circumstances at the time of the incident influencing the risk assessment?

It is important that the assessment of risk is a dynamic process and should be re-considered and challenged at every point during a child or young person's absence. As a minimum requirement when a child is missing the risk assessment should be reviewed every eight hours and the level of prevailing risk agreed by carers and other professionals responsible for that young person's health safety and wellbeing.

Categories of risk

HIGH

The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the child or young person is in danger through their own vulnerability or may have been the victim of a serious crime, or

The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public are in danger.

MEDIUM

The risk posed is likely to place the child or young person in danger or they are a threat to themselves or others.

LOW

There is no apparent threat of danger to either the child or young person or the public. The key messages from research regarding young people Missing from Care over the last five years indicated the need for a regional approach and highlighted that:

- Few young people leave their local area
- Many stay with friends known to them/relatives, less than a third or a quarter sleep rough
- Most common reasons for running away are conflict with parents/step parents and carers and wanting to spend time with friends and partners
- Young people who run away are more likely to be absent from school through refusal to attend or exclusion
- Young people are at as much risk whether they are missing for the first time or on any subsequent occasions

- Young people who go missing place are often very vulnerable and place themselves at risk and are exposed to violence, victimisation, sexual exploitation and involvement in crime

5. Overall data

There were 948 missing episodes in total between December 2017 and November 2018, of which 612 (65%) were looked after children. This represents an increase in the total number of missing episodes compared to 2016-17 (936) and also an increase in terms of the number of missing from care episodes which involved looked after children for the same period (565 (60%)).

In January 2016 Northumbria Police began to differentiate between a “missing” episode and an “absent” episode. The figures shown below include those reported as missing and absent.

There is a difference between the number of missing/absent episodes each month and the number of missing/absent individuals as some people will have more than one episode. Each month the number of individual young people in total and individual Looked After Children reported missing varies and is different from the number of missing episodes.

Over the last 12 months young people who have been recorded as missing from care have in the majority of cases returned fairly quickly to their placements. Young people who are persistent in being absent without permission often leave their placements because of conflict primarily due to boundary setting, for example around coming in times or refusal to allow them to undertake activities which are not felt to be consistent with promoting their welfare. Some young people have links with others in other placements and are absent from their placements together. Social workers and staff are familiar with these young people, their contacts, likely whereabouts and they usually return later that day, rarely are young people in the care of the Council missing overnight or more than 24 hours.

A small cohort of missing episodes of Looked After Children are for more than a 24-hour period. They are young people who are in the older age group and who have had very complex needs and backgrounds. Clear procedures are in place to manage these longer episodes.

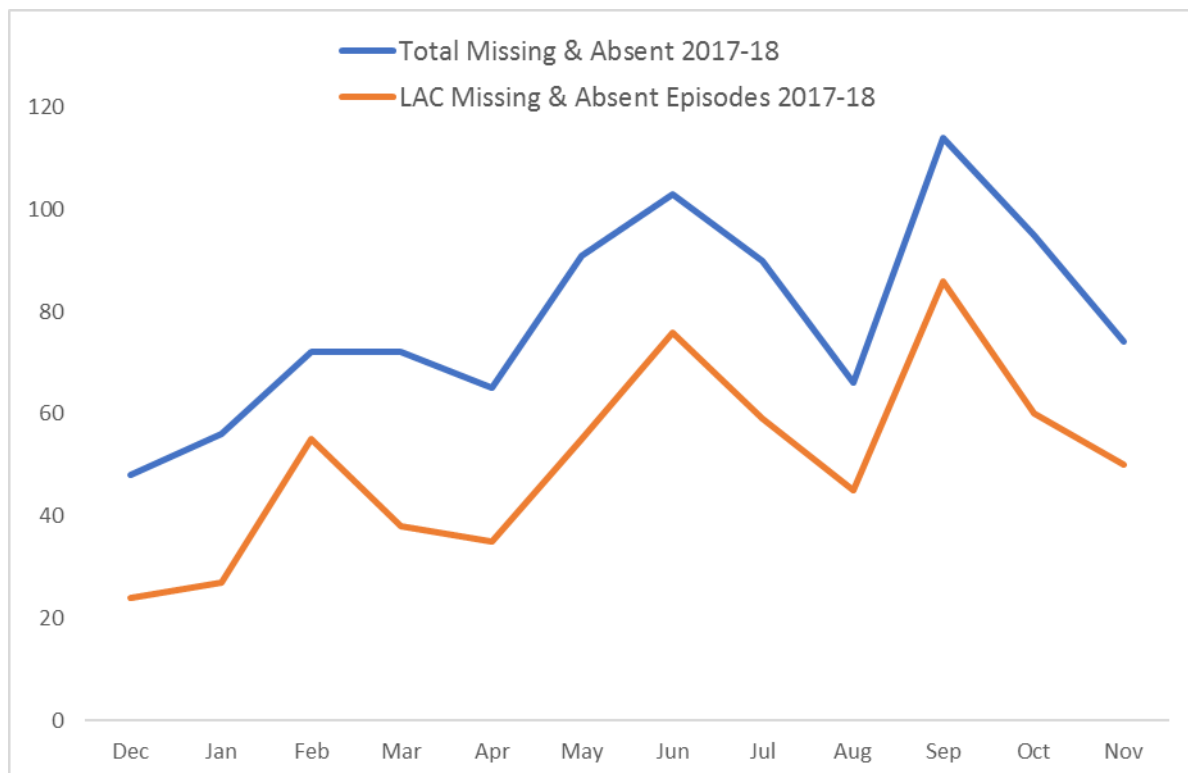
Between December 2017 and November 2018 there were 145 episodes where a young person was missing or absent for over 24 hours. The majority of those young people were missing from care (57%), which is a reduction on last year.



It is always a concern when young people are missing for over 24 hours which is why it is monitored to see if there are any patterns for individual or groups of young people. Targeted interventions are implemented and disruption plans looked at by MSET to ensure everyone is doing all they can to keep young people safe

Dec 2017 – Nov 2018 data

Month	Total missing and absent episodes	Number of individuals	Episodes over 24 hours	LAC missing and absent episodes	Number of individual LAC
December	48	24	6	24 (50%)	14
January	56	34	7	27 (48%)	15
February	72	28	10	55 (76%)	17
March	72	38	14	38 (53%)	13
April	65	40	19	35 (54%)	19
May	91	45	19	55 (60%)	21
June	103	37	10	76 (74%)	19
July	90	38	8	59 (66%)	21
August	66	38	6	45 (68%)	23
September	114	48	30	86 (75%)	25
October	95	53	13	60 (63%)	25
November	74	38	3	50 (68%)	22
TOTAL	946		145	610 (65%)	



To try and understand the missing episodes of Looked after children the following data looks at where young people are placed and the number of missing episodes linked to both residential placements and foster placements

Month	Placement Young Person reported missing from (number of episodes)				Total
	Residential		Foster Care		
	in-house	Other residential (out of borough, private, independent living)	Gateshead (in-house)	IFA placements	
December	1	15	8	0	24
January	4	7	16	0	27
February	9	16	23	7	55
March	4	8	17	9	38
April	6	5	22	2	35
May	14	14	26	1	55
June	17	32	26	1	76
July	16	12	25	6	59
August	12	14	19	0	45
September	20	33	31	2	86
October	12	17	29	2	60
November	5	11	34	0	50
Total	120	184	276	30	610

The data demonstrates that from May 2018 to October 2018 there was a significant amount of missing episodes from our in house residential provision. However, these missing episodes relate to a relatively small number of young people with one young person having 42 missing episodes, and another having 33 missing

episodes. Following intensive work and support from the staff this has reduced significantly.

In relation to out of borough residential, the high numbers of missing episodes relate again to a relatively small group of young people. One young person went missing 33 times, another went missing 24 times and a further 6 young people went missing between 17 and 22 times each, which accounts for 174 of the 184 missing episodes

In relation to children placed with in-house foster carers, the majority of these missing episodes relate to 10 young people who each had over 10 missing episodes. The largest number of missing episodes related to one young male who was missing a total of 34 times. The remaining 9 young people accounted for 163 missing episodes out of the remaining 242 episodes.

6. Other relevant information

Return interviews

When a child is reported missing from home or care for the second or subsequent time in a six month period or for a single episode lasting longer than 24 hours they are offered an Independent Return Interview. This differs from a police Safe and Well Check (which all missing people receive on return) and is carried out by skilled and experienced workers to determine underlying reasons for the missing episode and wider risks and vulnerability factors. The interviews are also used to identify broader trends, including “CSE hotspots” and there are clear links into MSET meetings and intelligence sharing with police.

These interviews are undertaken by workers in early help and the outcome of the return interview is shared with the young person’s social worker, the police and any other relevant professionals. In cases where a Gateshead child is looked after and placed out of borough the return interview is commissioned and undertaken by someone within the area the young person lives. This information is shared with the social worker and the hosting local authority.

Participation levels for Return Interviews is an area of work that needs to be improved as often young people refuse to engage at all and of the ones carried out young people are often quite reluctant to share the reasons why they have gone missing or absent.

Summary of reasons given by young people for going missing or absent

	Care	Home
Alcohol	37	18
Bullying	11	0
CSE	20	3
Domestic Violence	2	1
Drugs	30	12

Emotional	41	12
Neglect	5	0
Physical	16	2
Planned	45	11
Sexual	17	4

Even though the overall uptake is approximately 58% it is essential that this work continues as the information provided feeds into the MSET. This completion rate is significantly higher than in other LSCB areas where external services are commissioned to provide the service and reflects the specialist skills and local knowledge that the youth workers have whilst also retaining independence from the case. The early help workers also have links in to other services which means that appropriate support can then be put in place for young people when required.

7. Case Scenario

The following outlines a typical response to a young person missing from children's home:

- Child A, a male aged 14 years is placed in Residential Care under a Care Order.
- The young person leaves goes out to meet friends at 5:30 and it is agreed he can return at 9:00pm. He does not return at this time and the staff try to contact him via mobile phone but get no answer.
- He has a history of coming home late (usually within 30 minutes) and he has occasionally stayed out overnight
- The residential staff allows him half an hour before reporting him missing to the police. This had been agreed by the care team and formed part of his risk assessment. The police wanted to class him as absent rather than missing, however as he was vulnerable and at risk of CSE the staff ensured that the police classed her as missing. They informed EDT of the missing episode, shared the Missing from Care details and gave them the police log number.
- He returned to the placement at 11.30pm under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Staff informed the police and EDT that he had returned to placement..
- Police visit the residential home to ensure the young man was safe and to try and find out who he had been with. He is unwilling to say where he has been, other than to say he was safe and was with friends.
- An Independent Return Interview in line with LSCB Missing from Care Procedures takes place, however no further information is shared about who he had been with.
- The care team meeting reviewed the risk assessment and agree incentives and rewards to try and break the cycle of missing's
- The young person has two further similar episodes in a 3 week period and the residential staff share all relevant information with professionals
- He is discussed at the MSET meeting, scrutinising the plan and considering the risk assessment and disruption plan to ensure a co-ordinated approach is taken to try and minimise risk and to get the young man to work with relevant professionals.
- An MSET referral is made and he is discussed at MSET and a new disruption plan is implemented
- He is subsequently re scored for the MSET pre meet 2 months later and professionals were happy that there had been no further missing episodes

8. MSET and Child Sexual exploitation

In addition to being reviewed and monitored by their own social workers and care team, children who go missing regular from care are also monitored by the LSCB **Missing, Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Group** (MSET). MSET is a multi-agency sub group of the Strategic Sexual Exploitation Group which monitors and coordinates multi-agency activity for children who are reported missing from home or care and also has oversight of cases where there are concerns about sexual exploitation.

The LSCB Missing, Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Sub Group (MSET) There were **79 cases** discussed at MSET due to concerns about them in 2017-2018, 20 of

which were discussed on more than one occasion. This is a **68% increase** from 2016-2017 when there were 47 cases discussed (27 of those were discussed more than once).

It is not possible to separate how many of those cases were discussed due to missing episodes and how many due to CSE due to the overlap between the two, but a CSE risk assessment was carried out for each case that was discussed and disruption plans put in place. It is thought that this increase represents improved awareness rather than increased incidence of sexual exploitation. More detail on the work of the MSET is set out in Appendix 4. It is not possible to provide case studies on how the work of the group improved outcomes as they may lead to young people being identified.

During 2017-2018 a refresh of the CSE framework/MSET assessment was carried out to ensure that all agencies are focused on CSE and understand local processes. The revised risk assessment allows for a more thorough, corporate risk assessment to ensure that the right children are being discussed at MSET. The framework will be used by all LSCBs in region to ensure a more corporate and consistent approach and improve referrals into Team Sanctuary South.

Team Sanctuary South was formally established in April 2016 and the Detective Inspector from the team took over the chairing of MSET to ensure that there were clear links between Gateshead MSET and Team Sanctuary. The Gateshead embedded social worker also attends MSET to ensure that there is early effective sharing of information and an efficient referral and allocation into the team and partners.

There has been a significant amount of work conducted to improve the sharing of intelligence between agencies with the Team Sanctuary South Intelligence Cell being the central point of collection. This has allowed hot spot areas to be identified and disrupted. A number of disruption packages were produced from MSET intelligence in relation to vehicles, potential perpetrators and potential victims.

It is not possible to share specific case studies to demonstrate how the work of the MSET has helped reduce risks to young people and improve outcomes as this may lead to young people being identified in this report. Disruption plans have included specific actions to reduce missing episodes, disrupt relationships with inappropriate adults and work to promote self-esteem and improve individual young people's awareness of risk.

A series of "MSET road shows" took place in 2017-2018 to refresh professional with regard to processes for CSE, trafficking and missing children and young people. The multi-agency workshops were for professionals to highlight and discuss the new MSET referral process and risk assessment framework.

The LSCB Business Manager and Social Worker for Sanctuary South have also visited schools and attended team meetings to provide training and support use of the screening tool. This offer has been extended across all agencies and a number of workshops are planned for 2018-2019.

Work will also continue with regard to continued intelligence sharing between agencies to ensure that as many preventative and disruption tactics can be

introduced and considered. This will ensure that all agencies are working together (coordinated by Team Sanctuary Intelligence) to keep children and young people safe from CSE and human trafficking. Through robust challenge by MSET panel members appropriate and effective individual safeguarding plans will be devised to reduce the risk presented in relation to CSE and missing and trafficked children. Gateshead Council will also continue to support Team Sanctuary South by funding the embedded social worker and there is a strong commitment from Northumbria Police to maintain the model.

8. Practice developments

Northumbria police continue to have 3 dedicated Missing from Home Coordinators with a remit to improve the police response when someone is reported missing, and to work strategically with partners to reduce the numbers of children and young people reported missing from care. This continues to work well and will continue for the next 12 months

There has also been the development of a strategic MSET group which the operational MSET group also reports. This group is developing further awareness and strategic plans linking resources to the CSE focus developing multi agency information and training.

The LSCB continues to receive written reports three times a year on children who go missing from home and care and are at risk of sexual exploitation.

The local authority continues to work to develop a system to capture and share accurate and meaningful information on missing from care episodes with the LSCB.

The local authority will continue to work with the LSCB to strengthen work to protect those young people vulnerable to sexual exploitation

Return interviews will continue and services will work together to try and improve the uptake and quality of these.

9. Recommendation

It is requested that the Looked After Children Overview and Scrutiny Committee continue to receive an annual report on missing from care issues within Learning and Children.

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