

CHILDREN OR YOUTH SEPARATED FROM THEIR CAREGIVERS

Guidelines for ESS responders

In some disaster situations, children or youth may appear at reception centers or other locations unaccompanied by their parents or other caregivers. Under the Provincial Emergency Program Act, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) has the legal responsibility for unattended children (anyone under the age of 19). However, ESS volunteers will have the task of ensuring these children have appropriate supervision and care at the centre until they can be reunited with their family or until a social worker from the MCFD makes an alternative plan.

These guidelines are intended to protect both children and ESS volunteers.

In general:

- In most larger evacuations, when reception centres are activated, a Ministry social worker will be assigned to the centre and responsible for making decisions concerning the safety and welfare of unattended children. Upon their arrival, the social workers are instructed to report to the Reception Centre Manager. In situations where no worker is on site, there should be a local Ministry number to contact. If not ESS volunteers should telephone the Ministry's 24 hour Afterhours Office for assistance – 310-1234 (no area code needed)
- All unattended children and youth should be registered with name, birth date, address, and name of parents or caregivers. The ESS File should be marked "Restricted" -- only social workers should be responsible for releasing information regarding unattended children.
- Whenever an ESS volunteer has doubts about a child's legal status or who is responsible for providing care for a child, a Ministry social worker should be involved
- If children or youth appear unduly distressed or disturbed by the disaster, a Ministry worker will assist in assessing their needs
- Some children or youth may have special needs and/or may be developmentally delayed. A Ministry social worker will assist in identifying who has responsibility for the care of the child or youth.

Children under age 13 – see below....

Care provisions:

- A separate space within the Reception Centre should be set aside for child care
- This space should be sufficiently open to allow outside observation
- At all times there should be a minimum of two adults providing care

- If children arrive under the care of a teacher or day care provider, these persons should be asked to remain with the children at the reception centre

Release provisions:

- ESS volunteers must only release children to their parents, adult siblings, foster parents or legal guardians, not to neighbours, friends of the family or other relatives
- Decisions about releasing children to persons other than immediate family or guardians are the responsibility of Ministry social workers
- When an ESS volunteer believes a parent or guardian may not be appearing, the Ministry social worker should become involved
- The social worker should also be consulted if the child has not been claimed after several hours
- Children may be released to their foster parents if the foster parents show documentation confirming they are Ministry approved foster parents. If the volunteer is in doubt, the Ministry social worker should be consulted.
- Children who are 12 and under should not leave the Reception Centre on their own unless their safety can be assured. While very young children can be physically restrained from leaving, older school aged children should not be physically restrained by a volunteer, and if the child's safety is a concern Ministry social workers should be involved.

Youth aged 13 to 18

Care provisions:

- Adult support is required, but ongoing supervision is not mandatory for adolescents
- When care is provided, this should be done in an area open to observation from outside the care area and there should be a minimum of two adults present at all times
- Youth may be encouraged to become volunteers, aiding in the operation of the reception centre
- If a youth is a client of the Ministry, a Ministry social worker should be involved

Release provisions:

- Youth are encouraged to remain at the reception centre, but if they are determined to leave, volunteers should not attempt to stop them.
- If a youth leaves the centre, volunteers should attempt to learn where they are planning to go and how to reach them.

In disasters, the Ministry will make every attempt to ensure a social worker is available to assist you in your response. In addition to the worker's mandated responsibilities for making custody decisions concerning children, this worker can assist in interviewing distressed children, help find child care resources to augment the reception centre's staff, or participate in on the spot training of volunteers dealing with traumatized persons.

MCFD is here to help.