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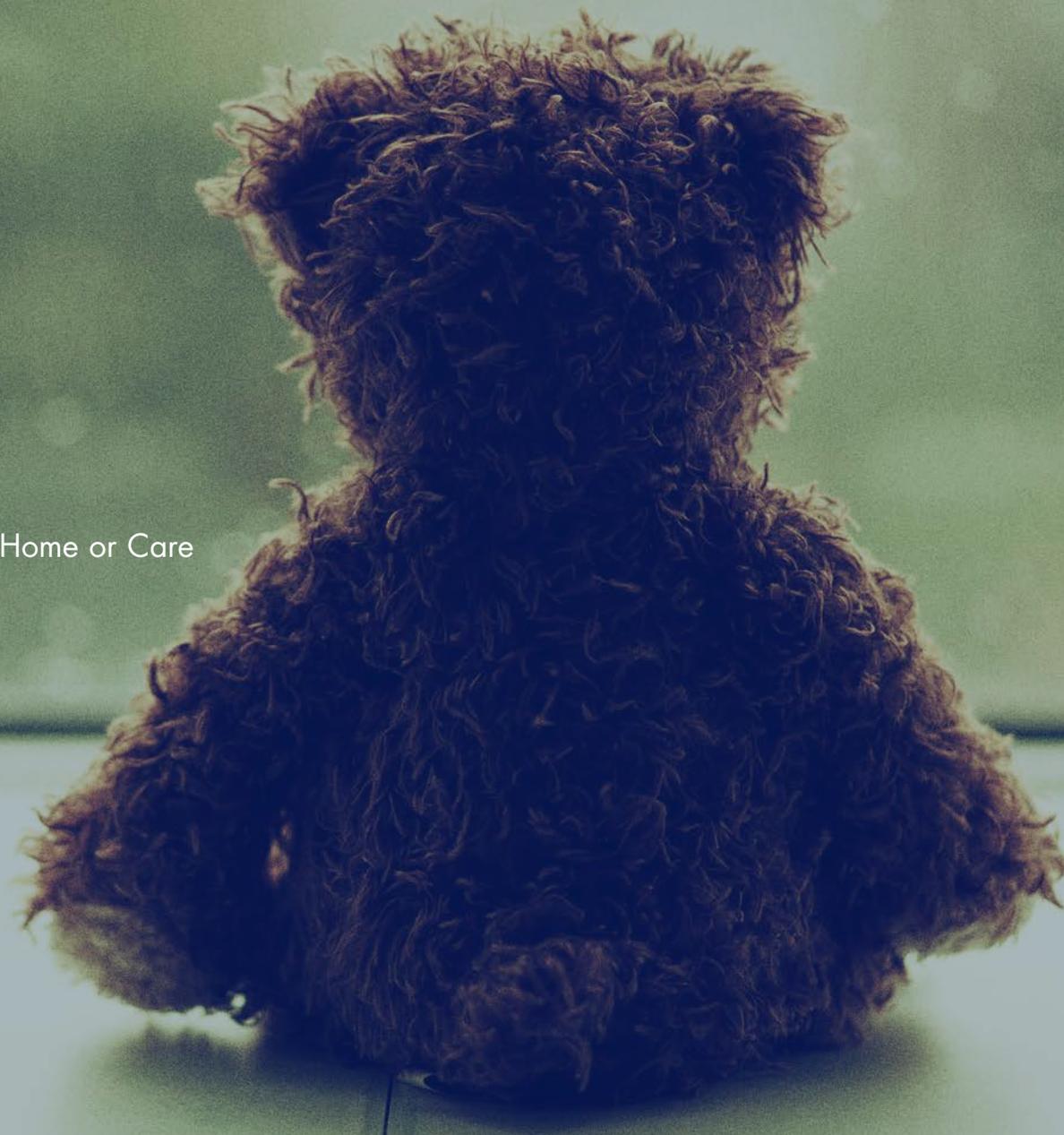
# Missing From Home

## A Cry For Help

Understanding and Supporting Children who go Missing from Home or Care

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# Understanding and Supporting Children who go Missing from Home or Care

Police forces are now beginning to send additional information about vulnerable children through to schools using the Operation Encompass Safeguarding Platform.

One of these vulnerabilities which is being shared relates to children who are or have been missing from home/care (MfHC).

## 'Safeguarding is everybody's responsibility'

This phrase is at the heart of HM Government's guide is '*Working Together to Safeguard Children*'. However, this language allows people to consider that:

## 'Someone else will act'

Changing this language to:

## 'Safeguarding is my responsibility'

Clearly lays the responsibility on every individual.<sup>1</sup>

Supporting children who have been missing from home or care or those who are at risk of being missing from home or care is the responsibility of us all.

*“Children and young people who go missing from home or missing from care can be among the most vulnerable in our society.* Often there are links to criminal and sexual exploitation, county lines or complex family issues that are impacting the child or young person’s safety and wellbeing. Protecting children from harm is one of the most important functions of civilised society and police and partners rightly have this at the top of their priorities. Talking to children, listening to them and creating an environment where they feel able to describe their fears, concerns and their own unique situation is vital to effective safeguarding.”<sup>2</sup>

A young girl with long brown hair is sitting on a wooden chair, hugging a large, light-colored teddy bear. She is wearing a patterned long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans. The scene is set in a room with a window to the right, and the overall lighting is soft and slightly dim, with a blueish tint.

*“Invaluable, provides us with essential information to enable us to safeguard the children in our care, provide pastoral and emotional support and is a key jigsaw piece in the life of a child.”*

- School staff member -

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2 Catherine Hankinson The First Step: How return home interviews can improve support and safeguarding for missing young people Children’s Society and NPCC

This booklet will provide some basic information so that schools can offer these children the understanding, nurture, care and support that they need.

*"Runaway children are a misunderstood group of children who too often don't receive the support that they need. Running away is often defined as a problem behaviour or as attention seeking. Looking at it this way we don't see what children are trying to communicate, which problem they are trying to solve with that behaviour. And this means that the trauma, the risks, and the needs of these runaway children are too often overlooked."*

- Aagje Ieven Secretary General Missing Children Europe

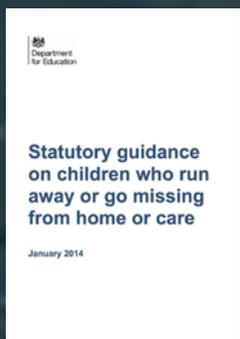


# Definition of Missing From Home or Care:

“Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed”

In terms of children who go missing that means up to the age of 18 years.

The latest DfE Guidance is:



Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care

[View on this link »](#)

Data<sup>3</sup> for 2018/2019:

**75,918**

children were recorded missing by UK police forces.

**218,707**

incidents of missing children (children who went missing more than once in the same year)



# Understanding children missing from home or care (MfHC)

Children are either running away from something or running towards something.

Around 4 out of 5 children who go missing, do so from their family home.

The most common reasons for **running away** relate to difficulties within the family including the existence of a child's own emotional wellbeing (the number of these cases increased during the pandemic and show no signs of decreasing), **domestic abuse**, abuse or neglect, being a victim of child criminal exploitation, forced marriage, FGM or problems in their Care Home or problems at school.<sup>4</sup>

Reasons for **running towards** include to be with an older 'boyfriend'/'girlfriend' (this may indicate a coercive and controlling relationship), the promise of a better life, striving for independence or, if the child are already engaging in substance abuse or criminal activity, to be with others who find this an acceptable way of behaving.

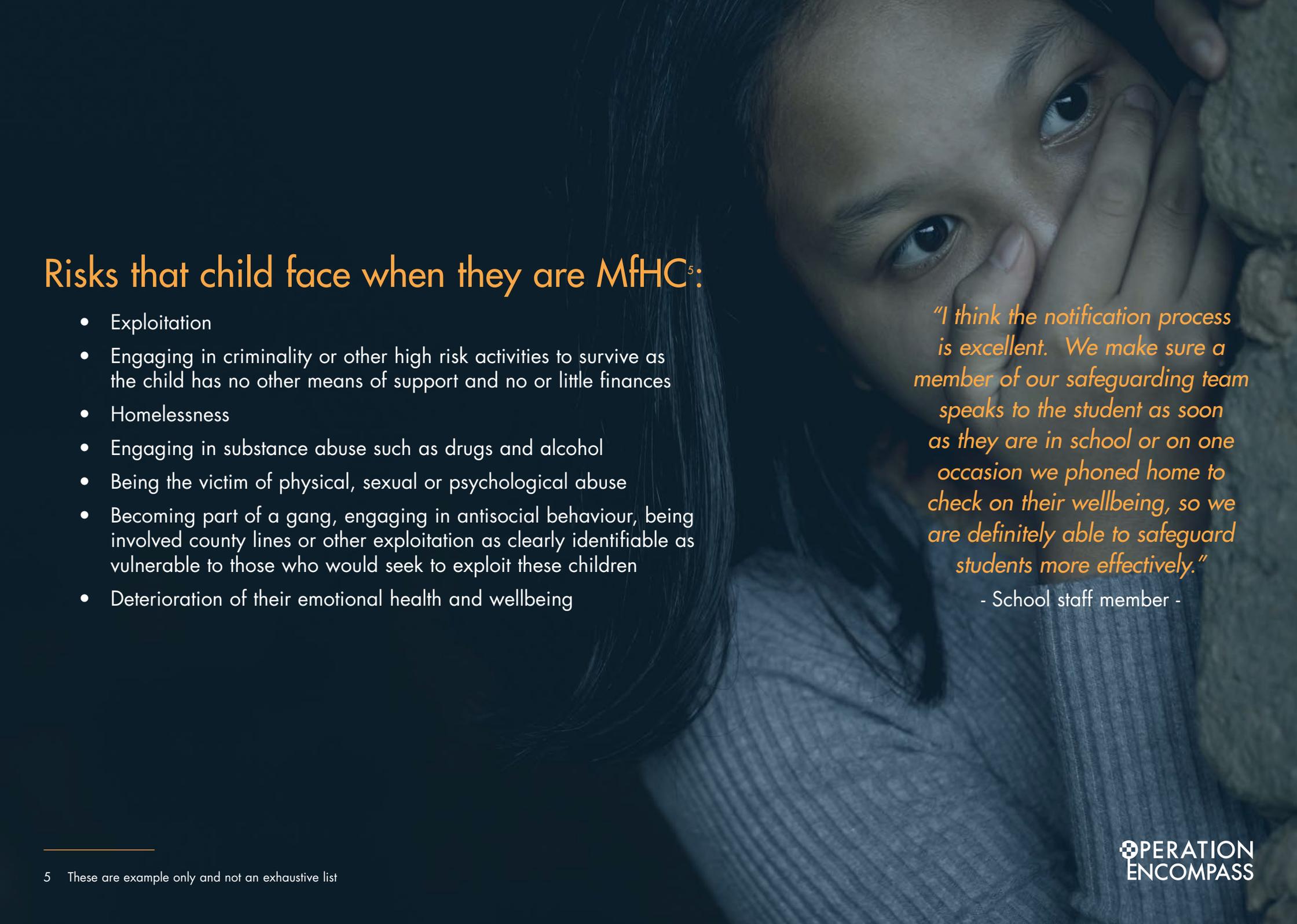
Children may go missing as they are travelling to a conflict zone.

## Children may go missing just once, or may go missing on many occasions

**Children who go missing on numerous occasions:** we must understand that, if a child returns or is returned to their situation but nothing changes for them in terms of the concerns that instigated the incident in the first place, then this can be the reason for going missing again and again, becoming more and more vulnerable and at risk.

*"it is important to have a holistic understanding of students to best support them and contextualise their attitude to learning. Information supports safeguarding and helps to signpost internal and external support"*

- School staff member -



## Risks that child face when they are MfHC<sup>5</sup>:

- Exploitation
- Engaging in criminality or other high risk activities to survive as the child has no other means of support and no or little finances
- Homelessness
- Engaging in substance abuse such as drugs and alcohol
- Being the victim of physical, sexual or psychological abuse
- Becoming part of a gang, engaging in antisocial behaviour, being involved county lines or other exploitation as clearly identifiable as vulnerable to those who would seek to exploit these children
- Deterioration of their emotional health and wellbeing

*"I think the notification process is excellent. We make sure a member of our safeguarding team speaks to the student as soon as they are in school or on one occasion we phoned home to check on their wellbeing, so we are definitely able to safeguard students more effectively."*

- School staff member -

# What can schools do to support?

*“Now that I’m thinking about my story again, the person that could have helped me most (if I had spoken to her) was my teacher”<sup>6</sup> - Helen*

Just as with the domestic abuse arm of Operation Encompass, schools are well placed to support children who go or may go missing.

Many of the ways of supporting are the same as those discussed previously in the Operation Encompass guidance “Supporting Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse” - [view on this link](#).

We know that schools, alongside the development of positive family relationships, can act as a protective factor.<sup>7</sup>

For schools to be a protective factor we must ensure that all school staff understand the issues, concerns and research around children missing from home or care, the vulnerability of these children, the need to consider and understand each child’s living experience (including ACEs), the issues that child has identified as the prompts for their actions, what were they running from or running to?

School staff should show curiosity about the ACEs in the lives of children who goes missing.

School staff need to be curious about the experiences of the children in their care and what is happening in their lives both inside and outside school.

There is also a need to ensure that children understand that they will be supported non judgementally.

The child should be able to identify at least one trusted adult in school that they can talk to; safe, secure, trusted and nurturing relationships are key.

Children need to feel a relational connection in order to disclose their concerns and accept support.

*“I think building relationships between children and professionals such as teachers, social services, and police, is very important, because then children will understand that they can talk about their problems with professionals. This would help reduce the number of runaways episodes because children would be more informed about other choices and would be able to find better solutions than running away from home or the place they live.”<sup>8</sup>*

# Educating our children: Preventing children becoming a missing from home child

*"I could have also gotten help from a child hotline or another support service, but I didn't know about their existence."*<sup>9</sup>

The schools PSHE/RSE curriculum should include discussion about children who go missing from home or care.

It should incorporate:

- why children go missing from home, exploring issues that create a desire to run from a situation and those that create a desire to run to a situation
- clear discussion about the dangers that children face when they do go missing
- the role of the police in finding children who go missing
- the role of the Return Home Interview and who in the local police force area conduct these interviews
- why the police are sharing information about children missing from home with school staff, including the confidential and supportive nature of this information sharing
- the role that the school staff play in supporting children may be thinking about leaving home
- the role that the school staff play in supporting children returning from having left home

- the local and national support mechanisms that are in place for children to access (e.g. helplines such as Childline and resources from the Children's Society)
- the other options that are available that mean a child should never need to leave their home and become even more vulnerable

*"Losing the opportunity to help a child that has run away, increases the likelihood of multiple episodes of running away and of other at-risk behaviours."*<sup>10</sup>

*"Losing the opportunity to help a child that has run away or to try to prevent a child running away means that we have failed in our responsibility to protect and support vulnerable children."*<sup>11</sup>



## Contacts & Resources:

Catch 22: [www.catch-22.org.uk](http://www.catch-22.org.uk)

Childline: [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

Children's Society: [www.childrenssociety.org.uk](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk)

Barnados: [www.barnados.org.uk](http://www.barnados.org.uk)

Missing Children Europe: [www.missingchildreneurope.eu](http://www.missingchildreneurope.eu)

Missing People UK (including TextSafe) TextSafe®

is a way for us to reach out to a vulnerable missing child or adult and let them know that our confidential helpline services are available to them. By requesting a TextSafe®, you are triggering a text message which will be sent to their mobile phone explaining how they can get in touch with us for free and in confidence.

The text is sent from Missing People rather than from the police. Therefore, those who might be hesitant to contact the police still have access to assistance from a 'neutral' confidential charity. It may be that as a result of getting in contact with Missing People, the missing person then decides to initiate contact with the police, their family or social services. Therefore, as well as providing a crucial safeguarding role, TextSafe® is also likely to reduce the number and duration of missing episodes.

*"Hugely beneficial. Unfortunately, the parents of our students do not always share this information with the school, either as they don't want to raise concerns or they don't understand the impact this may have in school or that the YP is reacting due to trauma or an unmet need."*

- School staff member -



# OPERATION ENCOMPASS

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[www.operationencompass.org](http://www.operationencompass.org)