

Running away

Parent easy guide 16



Children and young people from families in all walks of life run away from home for all kinds of reasons. It can happen because they're reacting to something emotionally in the heat of the moment, or when they're testing the limits. Most young people who run away and are reported to the police are found within 48 hours. Whilst they usually return home within this time, it can be very scary for parents and family.

Adolescence is a time for testing values and boundaries and trying out new things. During this period of development, the influence of friends can be very strong as young people start to form their own ideas and values. As part of testing new things out, young people can often believe that 'nothing will happen to me' and take risks that other people wouldn't take. They're often torn between wanting complete freedom very quickly, and wanting to be cared for as they have been in childhood. As a parent you are torn between trying to make sure they're safe as well as supporting them to gradually become more independent.

For all these reasons there can be arguments and disagreements between parents and young people and some of these may lead to running away.

*This PEG uses 'he' and 'she' in turn.
Change to suit your young person's sex.*

Why children and young people run away

Some run away because:

- > There's a disagreement on something they feel strongly about. Running away can often be a 'spur of the moment' act following an argument. They may have very intense feelings about something, and like all people experiencing strong emotion, may have trouble communicating or negotiating what they want
 - > They might believe that running away will make parents realise they've made a mistake
 - > They're afraid they're about to get into trouble
 - > They think their home has too many rules and limits - they seek the freedom to live their own lives
 - > There are too many restrictions at home and their parents don't know how to support their emerging independence
- > Home isn't safe or there's something serious going wrong in their lives. This can include having parents who are continually arguing, where there's domestic violence, or where they're being physically or sexually abused or neglected. Some young people genuinely feel unwanted and unloved at home
 - > They don't like the situation at home with a parent's new partner, stepparent, defacto or stepbrothers and sisters
 - > They're trying to get away from a difficult situation (e.g. bullying at school)
 - > They're responding to pressure from peers.
 - > They're depressed, have a drug or mental health problem and need help.



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What you can do

Parents can feel they've lost their influence and control and can feel helpless when their child or young person runs away. Whatever they say in the heat of an argument, you are still very important to them and you do still have influence in many ways. It's very scary for them if they feel you've given up on them.

Prevention

- > If things are starting to go wrong between you, try to rebuild the relationship before there's a crisis. Through all the 'ups and downs' make sure she knows you love her. Try to listen to her point of view before giving yours. Talk with her about things other than focusing on problems
- > Try to find some middle ground where you can each 'win' something. Leaving someone feeling totally powerless often leads to a strong reaction
- > If your child threatens to run away, take it seriously. It doesn't help to dare them to run, e.g. 'Okay, go then, you'll be back soon enough' or to forbid it, e.g. 'No! You're not going'. Listen to how she's feeling, what her problems are and what things could change
- > You may need some time apart for a while to let things settle down. Arrange for her to stay with a close relative or friend whom you both trust. This will give you both a chance to rethink what's happening and try to do some things differently
- > Try to look at the situation differently, e.g. 'What can we do to make everyone in the family feel better?' rather than 'Why is she always making trouble?'
- > Know her friends, who she mostly talks to and where she gets support. When young people run away, friends will often know where they're likely to go.

If he runs away

- > Try to stay calm. Remember most runaways return by themselves
- > Find out about the way he left home and where he's likely to have gone. Was it planned or impulsive? Did he go off with friends? Did he take money, clothes or other possessions? Did he leave a note or say anything to anyone? Is he 'running away' from something or 'running towards' something?
- > Work out whether he's likely to be safe
- > Contact parents of their friends to find out what they know. Don't feel worried about doing this as most people know from their own experience that all families have ups and downs
- > If you find out your child is with friends, let him know that you are worried and that you want to talk about what's upsetting him. Don't leave messages that are threats
- > The fact you're looking for him will help him to know you care, provided you're not angry and critical. This may be hard to show
- > You may need a third person to help you both talk things through in the beginning. Be prepared to make some changes. If things aren't sorted out he'll be likely to run away again

- > In early discussions, it doesn't mean that you have to give in on everything but it's important to discuss ways to make things better for you all
- > Have an open door attitude to his return
- > If you can't find him, can't work out why he has gone and don't know if he is safe, don't waste time, phone the Police to report him as missing.

When she returns

- > Don't launch into major discussions or lecture her as soon as she walks in the door. Give her time to settle in first and know you care. Let her know you've been worried and you need to talk about what's been happening
- > Allow her to 'save face'. Don't say things like 'I knew you'd have to come crawling back!'
- > Try to see the problem from her point of view. Make sure she knows you understand her point of view even if it's tempting to convince her of yours
- > Try to work together on ways to make things different. Use her ideas if possible as well as your own. Ask her what rules she thinks she could live with
- > Fight fair. Talk about the problem, not the person. For example you could say 'Wagging school is not going to help you get the things you want' rather than 'You're hopeless and irresponsible'
- > If she won't talk to you, or you can't seem to get anywhere, get someone else to help you sort it out
- > When a child or young person runs away it's often a serious cry for help. You need to take this seriously.

Reminders

- > Keep building a positive relationship
- > Try to work out rules together so he feels he has some choices
- > Respect his personal privacy, but remember you're responsible for his safety
- > Find out if he's 'running away from' something or 'running to' something
- > Running away can be a sign that something serious is going wrong and you may need to get professional help
- > Hang in there. Children and young people need to know you're there for them and won't give up on them.

Contacts

Youth Healthline: Tel 1300 131 719
Monday to Friday 9 am to 5 pm
Youth health and parenting information

Parent Helpline: Tel 1300 364 100
24 hours a day, 7 days a week for advice on child
health and parenting

Kids Helpline: Tel 1800 55 1800

Crisis Care: Tel 13 16 11

Police: Tel 131 444 or Emergency 000

Websites

www.cyh.com
For parenting and child health information

www.parenting.sa.gov.au
For other Parent Easy Guides

www.kidshelp.com.au
Kids Helpline

For more information

Parent Helpline 1300 364 100

Parenting SA
Children, Youth and Women's Health Service
Telephone (08) 8303 1660
Internet: www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Revised 05/10

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia

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