



Children from families in all walks of life run away from home for all kinds of reasons. Most runaways reported to the police are found within 48 hours. Usually they come back within this time but this can be a very scary time for parents and family.

Teenagers are often torn especially between wanting to be independent and wanting to be cared for. It is a time for testing values and trying new things. The influence of friends can be very strong.

Teenagers often believe that 'nothing can happen to me' which allows them to take risks that other people would not take. For all these reasons there can be arguments and disagreements between parents and teenagers and some of these may lead to running away.

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

## Why children run away

Some run away:

- on what seems like the 'spur of the moment' after an argument. Often this is because they have very strong feelings but don't know how to express them. They might believe that it will make their parents realise they have made a mistake.
- because they are afraid they are about to get into trouble
- because they *think* their home has too many rules and limits - they seek the freedom to live their own lives
- because there *are* too many restrictions at home
- because home isn't safe or there is something serious going wrong in their lives. This can include being physically or sexually abused or neglected or parents continually fighting. Some children genuinely feel unwanted and unloved at home
- because they are depressed, have a drug or mental health problem and need help
- because they don't like the situation at home with a parent's new partner, stepparent, defacto or stepbrothers and sisters.

## What parents can do

Parents can feel that they have lost their influence and control and so they feel helpless when their child runs away. Whatever children say, you are still very important to them and you do still have influence in many ways. It is very scary for children if they feel you have given up on them.

### Prevention

- If things are starting to go wrong between you and your child, try to rebuild your relationship before there is a crisis. Through all the 'ups and downs' make sure that your child knows that 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 children feeling totally powerless often leads to problems where they react strongly.
- If your child threatens to run away, take it seriously. It does not help to dare a child to run, eg "*Alright, go then, you'll be back soon enough*" or to forbid it, eg "*No! You're not going*". Listen to how she is feeling, what her problems are and what things could change.

- You both 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 she trusts. Young people often do better in someone else's home for a while. This will give you a chance to rethink what is happening and try to do some things differently.
- Try to look at the situation differently, eg *"What can we do to make everyone in the family feel better?"* rather than *"Why is she always making trouble?"*
- Know who your child's friends are, whom she mostly talks to and where she gets support (when children run away friends will often know where they are likely to go).

### If your child runs away

- Try to stay calm. Remember most runaways return by themselves.
- Find out what you can about your child's leaving. 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?
- Work out whether you think your child is likely to be safe. Think about where he could run to and what you know about why he left.
- Contact parents of your child's friends to find out what they know. Most families know from their own experience that all families have ups and downs.
- If you find out your child is with friends, let them know that you are worried and that you want to talk with him about what is upsetting him. Don't leave messages that are threats.
- The fact that you are looking for your teenager will help him to know you care, provided you are not angry and critical. This may be hard to show.
- You may need a third person to mediate any conversation in the beginning. Be prepared to make some changes. If things are not sorted out he will be likely to run again.
- In early discussions with your child it doesn't mean that you have to give in on everything but it does mean that you want to discuss ways to make things better for you all.
- Have an open door attitude to his return.
- If you can't find your child, can't work out why he has gone and don't know if he is safe, don't waste time, phone the Police.

### When your child returns

- Don't launch into major discussions or lecture her as soon as she walks in the door. Give her time to settle and to know that you care first. Let your child know you have been worried and you need to talk about what has 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 your child's point of view. Make sure she knows that you understand her point of view even if it is tempting to convince her of your view.
- 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. You also have the responsibility to try to keep your child safe.
- Fight fair. Talk about the problem, not the person. For example you could say *"Wagging school is . . ."* rather than *"You're hopeless and irresponsible"*.
- If your child won't talk to you, or you both talk but can't get anywhere, get someone else to help you sort it out.
- When a child runs away it is often a serious cry for help about a situation that is too distressing for her to continue living in. Parents need to take this seriously and ask for help.

### Reminders

- **Keep working on building a positive relationship with your child.**
- **Try to work out rules with your child so he has some choices.**
- **Respect your child's personal privacy, but remember you are responsible for his safety.**
- **Try to work out if your child is 'running 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. Teenagers especially need to know that you are there for them and believe in them.**

### Want more information?

Kids Helpline - 1800 55 1800

- [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

Police - telephone 131 444 or Emergency 000

Crisis Care 13 16 11

Youth Healthline 1300 13 17 19

### Written in Partnership

Parenting SA  
Centre for Parenting

### Produced by

Parenting SA - telephone (08) 8303 1660

© Copyright  
Revised 0407

**Parent Helpline**  
**1300 364 100**



**Government of South Australia**

Children, Youth and Women's  
Health Service