

YOUNG PEOPLE

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

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 are reacting to something emotionally in the heat of the moment, or when they are testing the limits. Most young people who run away and are reported to the police are found within 48 hours. Whilst runaways usually return home within this time, it can be a very scary time 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 are 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 are 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.

Why children and young people run away

- There is 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 are 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 is something serious going wrong in their lives. This can include having parents who are continually arguing, where there is domestic violence, or where they are 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 are trying to get away from a difficult situation (for example, bullying at school).
- They are responding to pressure from peers.
- They are depressed, have a drug or mental health problem and need help.

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What parents can do

Parents can feel that they have lost their influence and control and so they 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 have given up on them.

Prevention

If things are starting to go wrong between you and your young person, 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 someone feeling totally powerless often leads strong reaction.
- If your child threatens to run away, take it seriously. It does not help to dare them to run, for example, 'Alright, go then, you'll be back soon enough' or to forbid it, for example, '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 you both trust. This will give both a chance to rethink what is happening and try to do some things differently.
- Try to look at the situation differently, for example, 'What can we do to make everyone in the family feel better?' rather than 'Why is she always making trouble?'
- Know your child's friends, who she mostly talks to and where she gets support. When young people run away friends will often know where they are likely to go.

If your child or young person runs away

- Try to stay calm. Remember most runaways return by themselves.
- Find out about the way he left home and where he is 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?
- Work out whether he is likely to be safe. Contact parents of their friends to find out what they know. Don't feel worried about doing this as 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 home 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 help you both talk things through 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 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 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 missing.

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When they return

- 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 her 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 their point of view. Make sure she knows that you understand her point of view even if it is 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 your young person won't talk to you, or you both talk but can't get anywhere, get someone else to help you sort it out.

Reminders

- Keep working on building a positive relationship.
- Try to work out rules with your child so he has some choices.
- Respect your young person's personal privacy, but remember you are responsible for his safety.
- Find out if they are '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. Children and young people need to know that you are there for them and won't give up on them.

When a child runs away it is often a serious cry for help. Parents need to take this seriously.

Contacts

Kids Help Line	24-hour	1800 55 1800
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833
Police	24-hour	131 444

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.kidshelp.com.au	Kids helpline
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides

This guide's content has been produced by Parenting SA and adapted by the ACT Government to reflect the application to laws of the Australian Capital Territory.

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Published by ParentLink
Department of Housing, Disability & Community Services | ACT
GPO Box 158
Canberra ACT 2601

T 13 34 27
F 6205 0968
E parentlink@act.gov.au