



Teen Runaways:

Signs, Prevention and What to Do if They Run



missing children's
network
Keeping hope alive

GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

OUR MISSION

Founded in 1985, the Missing Children's Network provides front-line services to families who are searching for their missing child. Our staff accompanies, supports, and counsels these families, and works closely with law enforcement, government and child welfare agencies, as well as the media to recover missing children.



FAMILY SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

This resource booklet is intended to help families whose child is at risk of running or has run away from home or foster care. Our Case Managers are available to provide you with all the necessary support and referrals. If your child has run away, we can provide you with the following services:

- Counseling and support by phone or in person at our Montreal offices;
- Creating and distributing flyers;
- Assistance in drafting letters or completing legal documents;
- Liaison with law enforcement, if necessary;
- Liaison with social service agencies;
- Advice on if/and how to effectively use the media and social media tools in the search for your child;
- Referrals and resources available in the community;
- Guidance to help parents deal with the emotional and psychological stress;
- Support when the child comes home and during the reunification process;
- Advice and tips on how to prevent your teen from running away.

Please visit our website at:
www.missingchildrensnetwork.ngo
or contact us at: 514 843-4333



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INTRODUCTION

As the parent of a young adolescent, you know the importance of continuing to guide and protect your child. At the same time, you need to let your child take bigger strides toward independence. It can feel like a constant push and pull with children this age – knowing when to step back and when to be involved. The following information can help you navigate this time as your child matures and becomes more independent.

Research shows that active and involved parents have children who are more likely to do well in school and less likely to use drugs and alcohol, or to engage in other risky behaviours. In the middle or junior high school years, experts agree that parents have more control than they sometimes think they do.

Parents also need to be extremely aware of the symptoms, warning signs and dangers of teenage depression. Far too many teens are suffering from this disease and going untreated. Often, runaways feel they have no other choice but to leave their home and this is, in many cases, related to their feelings of sadness, anger and frustration due to depression.

Teens who run away from home are often crying for attention. Some teens will attempt to run away just once, after an unusually heated argument or situation in the household, and return shortly after. More serious cases, however, happen with teens in extreme emotional turmoil.

Running away can be a frightening experience for both the child and their family.

There are three main reasons why teens run away:

- 1. Lack of parent-child communication**
- 2. The inability to deal with their personal problems**
- 3. The mistreatment of teens by their parents or others around them**

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It is important to remember that the teen years are a period of rapid change, often characterized by great emotional instability.

A teenager searches for his identity primarily through a process of rebellion: opposing established values, challenging authority and refusing to comply with the rules established by his parents or guardian.

Therefore, it is not surprising that when your child becomes a teenager, he sometimes seems to become a stranger. It is vital to remember that the relationship between a parent and his child should not be one of “dominator-dominated” or of “best friends”.

Finding the right balance in parenting style in order to create an open communication, respect, and stability between the parent and the child is significant to a healthy relationship.

Children certainly need authority in their lives to provide stability and security, but they also need someone to talk to, and open up to.

It is extremely important for the parent to recognize their teenager’s growing autonomy, and to respect that. By letting them earn the parent’s trust they will then gain more privileges and responsibilities. For example, if a child would like to go to the movies with friends, they must show the parent that they can be trusted to go alone by respecting a curfew, phoning their parent, as well agreeing to other stipulations the parent may put in place.

The act of running away generally indicates a breakdown in communication between a child and his parents or that the child feels the need to flee a certain situation. It does not necessarily mean that the child is bad, or that the parent is inadequate. Running away is often a way to express rebellion, suffering or rejection...it is not the source of the problem. There are triggers that lead children to run away. Parents should regard a runaway situation as a major problem having many consequences: criminal behaviour, drug and/or alcohol abuse, sexual exploitation, depression, and suicide.

In 2015, more than 6,000 cases of runaways were reported to Quebec law enforcement agencies.

WHY DO TEENS RUN AWAY?

The message sent by running away is different depending on whether it was spontaneous or planned. A spontaneous runaway act occurs after an accident, a failure or an intense emotional experience. For the young person, running away may appear to be the only possible solution or as a way out in order to avoid facing a difficult situation. They may be trying to avoid some consequence, humiliation or embarrassment.

A planned run away occurs when a young person seeks a life style that they think will lead to self-reliance and self-exploration. This act can represent a way of responding to unmet needs, like independence, freedom and experimentation. It could also be a way to express revolt or opposition to adult authority, a cry for help or a means of coping with a situation which, for them, seems impossible to resolve.

Teens who consistently use running away to gain power in the family have a chronic problem. Keep in mind that chronic running away is just another form of power struggle, manipulation, or acting out - most definitely the very highest risk. They may threaten their parents by saying, "If you make me do that, I'll run away" knowing that this is their worst nightmare. Parents may feel as though they are constantly walking on egg shells in fear that their child may run again and may engage in bargaining and over-negotiating with their children. By succumbing to these threats the parent is actually enabling their child to not problem-solve and be responsible for his actions.

It is important to communicate with your child, and hold him accountable if he threatens or does run away. Do not be scared or ashamed to seek help from professionals.

POSSIBLE SIGNS YOUR CHILD IS ABOUT TO RUN AWAY

Young people may spontaneously decide to run away after experiencing an incident, a failure, a conflict or an intense emotion, such as fear of facing the consequences of their actions, anger or grief. In these circumstances, running away seems to be the only possible solution; it may even feel like an escape allowing them to avoid facing their problems.

Most of the time, children who run away have usually planned to do so in advance and are well prepared. Therefore it is important to recognize the signs.

POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS

- Accumulating money and personal possessions (money and clothing hidden in his room);
- Talking about running away (some try to anticipate their parents' reaction on this subject);
- Problems at school (academic or behaviour problems);
- Family problems;
- Alcohol or substance abuse;
- A sudden change of friends or companions;
- Isolation;
- Extreme change of habits (sleeping or eating);
- Anger outbursts (unusual or repeated anger);
- Breaking family rules;
- Depression.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY TO PREVENTING RUNAWAYS

Teens who become runaways will have shown symptoms and warning signs prior to running away. Knowing these signs is the first step to prevention; the second is learning how to prevent symptoms altogether. Communication is KEY!

Following are several suggestions that may help prevent your child from running away:

- Always tell your child that you love him and that he is important to you;
- Establish healthy communication with your child: remain open and honest;

- Change your work schedule, if possible, to be home when he returns from school;
- Invite your child's new friends to the house to get to know his social network;
- If suspicious, ask your child whether he has intentions of running away;
- Talk to him about the dangers of running away from home;
- Look into enrolling your child in an extra-curricular activity of his choice – this helps build self-confidence;
- Keep Internet-connected computers in an open area where you can easily monitor your children;
- Reinforce the message that family is important. You can do this in several ways ... attend events in your child's life and bring siblings and other relatives along;
- Try not to overreact when your teen makes a mistake. Making mistakes is part of being a young adolescent. When your child makes a mistake, use it as an opportunity to sit down and talk about the options that he did not take and why. If you over-react, he'll soon learn not to come to you with problems. Help your child understand what went wrong and how not to repeat the situation.
- It is important to identify your child's needs. The better a parent understands his child's needs, the better he can help him meet them and help prevent his child from running away or engaging in risk-taking behaviour.

If you have difficulties communicating with your child, we strongly recommend that you seek help from appropriate resources rather than letting the situation deteriorate.

You can contact our office at 514 843-4333 and our Case Managers can provide you with pre-crisis counseling.

WHILE YOUR CHILD IS ON THE RUN

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOUR CHILD RUNS AWAY?

Contact the police as quickly as possible. Contrary to what you might have heard or seen on TV, there is no law stating that you have to wait 24 hours before informing the police that your child is missing.

It is important that you have all the necessary information regarding your child and be ready to give it to the police, including an updated photo. This will facilitate their job and accelerate the search for your missing child.

You can fill out a registration form for your child, which can be downloaded www.missingchildrensnetwork.ngo

The act of reporting a runaway to the police doesn't necessarily mean that your child's situation will be overseen by Youth Protection. They will only become involved when a child is in a situation that compromises his safety or development.

WHAT CAN YOU DO BEFORE CALLING THE POLICE?

- Check all rooms in the house as well as the exterior of the house;
- Press the “ redial ” button on your phone to see if you can identify a last call your child may have made before he left the house;
- Check your voicemail and/or phone display screen to identify recent incoming calls;
- Check your child's e-mail and social network accounts (if any);
- Check the search history on your child's computer;
- Review cell phone statements for phone numbers you do not recognize;
- Communicate with his friends, extended family and a representative at his school;
- Scan their room to see if they took any of their belongings (phone, computer, money, clothes, passport, credit cards);
- Check garbage cans for any indicators;
- It is important to be candid and direct with the police concerning the circumstances that might have led to your child running away (eg. family conflict, substance or alcohol abuse; any medical conditions; suicide attempts or talk of suicide; etc.).

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO AFTER CALLING THE POLICE?

- Contact the Missing Children's Network and seek help from one of our experienced Case Managers;
- If your child calls, note the telephone number displayed on the screen so that the call can possibly be traced;
- Use your judgment regarding the information you share with your child's school, friends or the media.



HOW TO RESPOND TO A PHONE CALL FROM YOUR CHILD WHILE HE IS ON THE RUN.

When receiving the much awaited phone call from your child, would you know how to react or what to say? The majority of parents are so relieved to hear from their child, but don't always feel adequately prepared for that initial conversation.

Following are some questions that will help keep the conversation flowing:

- Are you safe?
- Are you able to talk?
- Do you want to talk?
- Is there anyone else you'd like to talk to?
- Are you sleeping well?
- Are you eating well?
- Do you have a safe place to stay?
- Is there anything I can do for you?
- Do you want me to come pick you up?
- Can we talk again?
- Can we make a date to talk again?

WHAT YOU CAN DO WITH YOUR CHILD OVER THE PHONE:

- Take a deep breath and try to stay calm!
- Express relief that he contacted you!
- Practice active listening skills such as paraphrasing. It is important to rephrase the content of his message. (example: If I understand correctly, you believe that I have been too strict with you....).

- Practice reflecting techniques. It is important to recognize how your child is feeling (example: You're sad that we had that argument...).
- Ask your child if you can see him at a certain place and time. If he doesn't want to see you, don't insist – let him know that you appreciated speaking with him and look forward to the next conversation.

WHAT YOU SHOULD NEVER DO:

- Blame or criticize him, or give him advice;
- Use blackmail to make him come home or for other purposes;
- Threaten to call the police or Youth Protection or any other scare tactics;
- Make any promises you won't or can't keep;
- Ask him where he is living because he may hang up on you (let him tell you);
- Blame yourself.

Try to stay calm and avoid any negative comments. Listen to what your child has to say. Remember it's not the moment for the conversation to be about you – it's about your child. If you get into an argument with your child, take a moment to breathe and come to an agreement with your child to continue the conversation the next day. It is better to delay the conversation than lose control of your emotions. Try to avoid comments like *"Please come home, I can't eat, I can't sleep!"* Instead, say something more along the lines of *"I've been so worried about you. Thank you for calling."* Keep them up to date on things happening within the family (eg. *"Your sister won the soccer championship"*).

Once you hang up, try to feel confident that you've done your best. You may probably not negotiate your child's return during the initial conversation, but it's definitely a good start. Establishing communication is key at this point. Try to end every subsequent conversation by reminding your child that you love him, want the best for him and will always be available to speak with him no matter how difficult the situation. Reassure your child that you are committed to working things out together.

REMEMBER TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY

If your child has run away, it is essential to take care of yourself because you will need all of your energy to welcome him when he comes back. Your child's running away may result in your feeling many emotions like sadness, anger, guilt or anguish. These emotions are completely understandable. Don't blame

yourself and don't try to ignore your feelings because they risk becoming more intense. Don't think you are alone living this situation and, above all, don't isolate yourself. The more that you mobilize the people around you, the more you increase your chances of finding your child. If you do not feel well, never hesitate to seek medical attention. There is no shame in asking for help.

Many parents may also feel overwhelmed with the amount of assistance that is offered by friends and family members. Often, family and friends want to help during this time but are not quite sure how to get involved. If you want, you can suggest some specific tasks that will help lighten your burden, such as preparing meals for the family, taking a sibling to the movies, picking up some groceries, mowing the lawn or shoveling your driveway.

AFTER YOUR CHILD RETURNS HOME

This can be a time of mixed emotions – joy that your child has come home safely and anger that he left in the first place. But now, both of you have to deal with the problems that made him run away and how to make sure that it does not happen again. This will require listening, compromise, communication, and building trust and respect again.

Here are some helpful tips:

- Remain courteous and respectful;
- Give your teen an opportunity to talk about his runaway experience, express his emotions, explain his actions;
- Make an effort to really openly listen to him;
- Make “I” statements – Don't blame your child but reveal your emotions;
- Be firm and consistent in what you say (don't go back on a decision);
- Resist blackmail threats and tell your teen how you feel when he behaves this way;
- Take deep breaths or leave the room temporarily if you think you are losing control;
- Continue the discussion once you have calmed down;
- Look for assistance and find support for your family - asking for help is a sign of strength and shows your child that you are taking the issues seriously;
- Contact your Case Manager at the Missing Children's Network for additional support – we can provide you with tools and also put you in touch with available community resources. **Remember you are not alone!**

Our experience shows that a child who has run away once may do so again. This type of behaviour is easily repeated if your child does not get what he wants, or feels he hasn't found a solution to his problem. Parents must learn to manage their emotions and to exercise a great deal of patience. Dealing with this type of situation is not an easy task. The willingness to listen and understand your child's needs will allow you to get closer to him and find out why he ran away.

Moreover, if the parents themselves are experiencing personal difficulties (alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, etc.), they may have to agree to temporarily place their child in foster care, in order to provide the child with a stable home environment. The parents should take this time to regain control of their lives.



CONCLUSION

It is evident that teenagers, despite the adolescent crisis and the conflicts they experience, still try to form significant bonds of trust with their parents. Although teens often systematically reject their parents' authority and rules, the fact remains that each individual is different in the way they express their love for their parents. The relationship between teens and their parents is of paramount importance. Parents represent stability to their children despite the numerous complaints their children may have about them.

Even during times of conflict, there still needs to be flexible and consistent family rules. Whether we like it or not, our child's teen years affect all other family members.

Children are often in a hurry to leave their childhood behind and to enter the adult world. They are entering an unknown phase and they sometimes have trouble recognizing themselves. Nothing is as it was before. Parents find that they have difficulty communicating with their teens. Some say that they no longer recognize their child. "My son is different, he has changed so much; it seems as though a stranger is living with us." This phase doesn't last. Sooner or later, our children go back to being themselves, with all their strengths and weaknesses.



RESOURCES

Missing Children's Network

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Montreal (QC) H3N 1V57
Tel: 1 888 692-4673 or 514 843-4333
Fax: 514 843-8211
www.missingchildrensnetwork.ngo

Batshaw Youth and Family Centres

514 935-6196
batshaw.qc.ca

Health and Social Service Centres

514 286-6500
santemontreal.qc.ca/population

Kids Help Phone

1 800 668-6868
kidshelpphone.ca

Montreal Youth Centers

centrejeunessedemontreal.qc.ca

LignesParents

1 800 361-5085
ligneparents.com

Le Refuge des Jeunes

514 849-4221
refugedesjeunes.org

Youth Runaway

youthrunaway.ca

En Marge 12-17

514 849-7117
enmarge1217.ca

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1 800 263-2266
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