

November is Runaway Prevention Month

Montreal, November 1, 2019. For the 9th consecutive year, the Missing Children's Network is dedicating the entire month of November to raising awareness about the plight of runaway youth in our province and what families can do to protect their children.

Throughout the month, the Missing Children's Network will post a number of safety tips on social media and will encourage followers to like and share the information. As well, the organization will conduct safety workshops in dozens of schools in the province and will sensitize students about the dangers of running away, and provide them with alternatives.

In 2017, the Missing Children's Network launched SHINE (*Self-esteem, Healthy relationships, Independence, No means No, Empowerment*), a province-wide and bilingual prevention program tailored for students ages 10-13 years-old. In our sessions, we address issues that include sexual exploitation, setting boundaries, healthy relationships, recognizing adults that groom youth for exploitation, navigating safely in today's wireless world and being a good digital citizen. At the end of every presentation, students receive a resource card with the coordinates of community organizations that they can turn to for support in times of need.

"Every year in Quebec, on average, 5,000 cases of runaway youth are reported to law enforcement. In the last 7 years, we have intervened in over 600 cases involving runaway youth and our experience has shown that **one in every three runaways** fall victim to sexual exploitation." declared Pina Arcamone, Director General of the Missing Children's Network. "Victims can be of any age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic background or religion. Exploiters target and prey on the vulnerability of young people and groom them by gaining their trust, showering them with affection and attention and promising a better and more glamorous life."

One of the most important things parents can do to protect their child is to make their home a place of trust and support that fulfills the teen's needs. Encourage teens to share any secrets that may leave them feeling uncomfortable or scared. Find daily opportunities to talk with your child and listen attentively to what he has to say. It is crucial that children feel that the significant adults in their lives accept them, care about them and would go out of their way to ensure that they are safe and well. Children with a healthy sense of self-esteem are less vulnerable to becoming victims of abduction, aggression or exploitation.

Open communication is key! Help make your children more aware by explaining the dangers of sex trafficking and by challenging myths and misconceptions that glamorize commercial sex. This includes having conversations with them about online safety and how traffickers use social networking sites and apps to mask, not only their appearance, but also their true intentions while recruiting new victims.

The Missing Children's Network is a valuable resource to families and has published an array of safety documentation to help parents and guardians gain deeper insight on issues facing teens today and assist them in initiating difficult conversations with their children, particularly around sexual abuse and exploitation. Publications available for download include: *Coming Back to Stay; Teen Runaways: Signs, Prevention and What to Do if They Run*", and *"Sexual Exploitation of Teens - A Guidebook for Parents"*.

About the Missing Children's Network

Founded in 1985, the Missing Children's Network is the only non-profit organization in Quebec that is dedicated to the search for missing children and to the prevention of their disappearance. Regardless of the motive for the disappearance, from running away to a parental abduction or criminal abduction, the Missing Children's Network's team supports, accompanies and counsels these families.

The Missing Children's Network works closely with law enforcement, government and child welfare agencies and the media to recover missing children and bring them home safely. Since its creation, the Missing Children's Network has assisted law enforcement in recovering 1,560 children and has educated over 200,000 students on how to stay safe in their day-to-day lives, both on and offline.

In May 2018, the organization modernized its **Child Identification Program** by creating **Sign4I**, an application that parents can download free of charge and allows them to electronically record and store their child's profile directly on their mobile phones. As well, the Missing Children's Network published ***Juliette and Jacob Stay Safe***, an interactive activity e-book designed to help parents foster their preschoolers' safety competence.

As well, in order to connect and support victims of sexual exploitation, a comprehensive and up-to-date **on-line directory of resources and services for victims** is now available for download on the organization's website.

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