

# What to do when a child goes missing



The  
Children's  
Society



A guide for  
those working  
in education  
and youth work

A better childhood. For every child.

[www.childrenssociety.org.uk](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk)

100,000 children and young people run away from home or care in the UK each year – that's one every five minutes. We have been working with these young people for over 25 years and our research and services continue to find that, overall, professionals who work with children feel ill equipped to respond to young people who run away and are unsure of how to manage the risks involved. This guide gives some simple advice on what steps to take, based on our experience and the views of the young people involved.

'When children run away it must be recognised as an early indication that a child is at risk. Running away should be seen explicitly as a child protection issue with protocols and procedures in place backed up by clear systems of accountability and performance management.'<sup>1</sup>



## Why do children run away from home?

*'People think runaways are just being immature or childish, but it's not that, there's something deep going on there.'*

Susan, young person

**Running away is a cry for help and a sign that something is wrong in a young person's life.**

Young people can run away for a number of reasons:

- **Problems at home** – these can range from arguments with parents, to conflict between parents, to long-term abuse or

neglect. Some young people in care run away to be closer to friends or family.

- **Problems at school** – children who are being severely bullied are more likely to run away as are those who feel negatively about school in general.
- **Problems elsewhere** – young people may run away after being groomed by adults who want to exploit them for criminal or sexual activity or simply encouraged to run by older friends.

In many cases running away will be a combination of these factors.

## Which children are more likely to run away?

### Children who run away come from all sections of society.

We know that girls (10%) are more likely to run away than boys (8%) and that almost a third of those who run will go missing before they are 13. Some specific groups are also more likely to run away than others:

- **Children not living with their families** are three times more likely to run away than those who do
- **Children who are absent from school** – a third of young people who said that they had problems with school attendance had run away

- **Children who have problems with drugs or alcohol or have been in trouble with the police** – more than a third of children with issues in one of these areas had run away<sup>2</sup>
- **Children who consider themselves as disabled or having difficulties with learning** are twice as likely to run away as other children
- **Children whose parents' relationships have broken down** – young people living in step-families are almost three times as likely to have run away as those living with both parents.

## What happens when a child runs away, and why you must act immediately

### When a child runs away they are at risk of serious harm.

Running away or going missing is also a key early indicator of child sexual exploitation. Recent research<sup>3</sup> has found that many as 70% of children who are sexually exploited go missing from home, while our research shows that:

- One in five children had at least one harmful or risky experience such as begging, stealing or sexual exploitation while away from home

- One in six children said that they had slept rough, or stayed with someone they just met, for at least some of the time they were away
- One in nine had been hurt or harmed while away from home
- Eight out of 10 do not seek help from anybody because they do not know where to turn, they do not feel there is anyone they can trust or they fear the consequences.

2. Rees G & Lee J (2005) *Still Running II: Findings from the second national survey of young runaways*. London: The Children's Society.

3. 'I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world' The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, Interim report, November 2012

## What are some of the warning signs?

'I went from being a hard-working well-behaved pupil who never got told off to one who was a mess and always being pulled up for something. I mean, did they [school staff] never wonder why I was so different?'

Shelly, young person

There are a range of factors associated with running away which include a child:

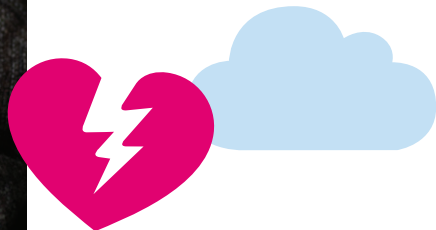
- Skipping school regularly for either part of the day or more
- Being unhappy about recent changes in the adults who live in their home, in particular if a parent or parent's partner moves in or out
- Beginning to behave in a more challenging way
- Suddenly spending time with older friends or receiving a lot of text messages
- With any other unusual attributes such as tiredness, lateness, dirty clothes or being hungry.

**All of these factors, including running away, indicate that there are more serious underlying issues that need to be addressed.**



'It's not about running away; it's about all the problems young people face. Missing from home and missing from education is a symptom, not a problem in isolation.'

**Project worker,  
The Children's Society**



## What to do if you suspect a child is running away

### The normal child protection processes always apply.

Discuss your concerns with your manager or safeguarding lead. Together you may decide on a range of actions including:

1. You or a member of your pastoral support staff speaking to the child or young person involved, always making sure that you inform them that you will have to share your concerns.
2. Sharing your concerns with their parents – unless they are running away because of issues such as forced marriage or sexual abuse.
3. Informing the police if the child is missing from school and hasn't been reported by their parents. Do check if they intend to inform social care.
4. Making a referral to children's services, according to policies in your organisation if the child is at risk of harm or in need. Always check your local area policies and apply these in working with the child and family. If you feel that a child should be receiving help from social services and is not, you should keep making referrals until your concerns are addressed.
5. Initiating an assessment of needs eg CAF,<sup>4</sup> to help support the child and family if you feel they need additional services. This must be done with the express consent of the parent. If a parent refuses and you remain concerned, they should be referred to children's services as above.
6. Going to a specialist local service where they can ask for advice or refer a child or family, such as an education welfare officer, missing from home service, multi agency subgroup of local safeguarding children boards, police missing person co-ordinator, etc.

## How you can support a young person who has run away

Our Make Runaways Safe charter was developed by young people who have run away in the past. They've asked that professionals:

- **Be understanding, calm and relaxed with us.** Don't automatically think we have done something wrong. Young people are more likely to open up and

allow you to help if you treat us with respect and understanding.

- **Help us trust you and don't judge us.** We need a person that we can trust, that listens and doesn't judge - body language is important. Keep our confidences where possible. It's hard to explain things unless we trust someone.

Young people have asked that professionals (contd.):

- **Be straightforward and honest with us.** Where you cannot legally keep information we have disclosed to you confidential, explain this to us and involve us in the process of disclosure.
- **Listen to us and take us seriously.** Don't judge us and don't assume you know the facts about a situation until you do. Support a young person who comes to you with problems by listening to them and to the facts of a situation.
- **Explain things to us. Give us choices and don't force us into making decisions that we don't understand.** We need to understand the benefits of doing something rather than simply being threatened with the consequences of not doing it.

## Where to go for more information or help

### The Children's Society

[www.childrensociety.org.uk/runaways-work](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/runaways-work)

Many of our programmes run sessions on the risks and alternatives to running away in their local schools, youth projects and care homes.

### Missing People

[www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk)

24 hour confidential helpline:

**116 000** or email:

**116000@missingpeople.org.uk**

### NSPCC

Helpline: **0808 800 5000**

Email: [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)

### My Life 4 Schools - Young runaways

Sign up for our free Key Stage 2 resource, [mylife4schools.org.uk](http://mylife4schools.org.uk). Here you will find lessons to help children to understand what it means to run away, why they might run, and how to manage the risks involved. It also provides activities to let children know where to go for help when they need it.

## The Children's Society's work with missing children

The Children's Society has been a leading provider of specialist services working with children who run away in England for over 25 years and we currently run nine dedicated projects supporting hundreds of children in England.

If you'd like to find out more about our campaign to help these young people, please visit [www.makerunawaysafe.org.uk](http://www.makerunawaysafe.org.uk)

*Unless otherwise noted, all the evidence in this guide comes from our report, Still Running 3 by Gwyther Rees © The Children's Society, 2011.*

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