

# PARENT INFORMATION SHEET



## Running Away - Adolescents

### REMEMBER:

- *Young people under 18 make up over half of Australia's missing person reports.*
- *Those more likely to be missing are girls aged 13-17.*
- *99.5% of people are located. In fact 85% are found in the first week.*
- *About one third of people will go missing again. You can report someone missing more than once.*
- *You don't have to wait for any period of time before reporting someone as missing. You can make a report straight away if a person's whereabouts are unknown and you are worried about their wellbeing.*
- *It is not a criminal offence to go missing.*

*(adapted from Families and Friends of Missing Persons, 22.01.10)*

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There is no one reason why adolescents run away from home. Young people from many different family backgrounds may run away, and their reasons for doing so are varied.

Adolescence presents young people with a range of new opportunities and freedoms. Young people move back and forth between striving for independence, and needing the safety and security of their family. They may seek greater independence without fully understanding or accepting their increased responsibility. This can create conflict or relationship difficulties within the family.

Sometimes it may seem to young people that the only way to deal with conflict or unhappiness is to assert their independence and leave the situation. Whilst it is true that some young people leave home to gain freedom (particularly if there have been unresolved arguments over rules and restrictions) this is not true of everyone.

It is important as parents not to jump to conclusions about why your child has left, or about what may have happened to them. Most young people who run away will return home, and most of those who are reported to the police are located within 48 hours.

### WHY CHILDREN RUN AWAY

#### Safety issues

In some cases young people run away because of safety issues in the home. They may have experienced physical, sexual or emotional harm, or witnessed violence between family members. Children who have been abused often leave home when they become teenagers and have the capacity to remove themselves from harm.

## Relationship Difficulties

When parents re-partner or re-marry, young people may feel uncomfortable with the change in situation. This can also happen if extended family members move into the home.

Having a new person issue rules and discipline can create confusion, resentment, and even feelings of isolation or rejection. Young people may blame themselves for relationship difficulties, and see no other resolution than to leave home.

Other young people leave home in the heat of the moment, perhaps following an argument with parents. By their very nature arguments are emotionally-charged experiences for both parents and teenagers.

Sometimes young people aren't able to verbalise all the feelings they are experiencing. They may regret running away, but are unsure how to negotiate their return home. They may also regret some of the things they have said, but feel uncertain how to communicate this. Or they may be fearful about getting into trouble for something they have done.

## Social and Emotional Difficulties

Other circumstances in which young people run away include difficulties at school or with friends, mental health or medical problems, and drug or alcohol problems. Young people may experience depression, anxiety or stress, and it can be very difficult for them to know how to deal with all their emotions.

## WHAT CAN I DO?

When a young person runs away it is natural to feel worried, anxious, or guilty. Many parents blame themselves for what has happened. This can make an unbearable situation even more difficult.

You may feel that you don't know what to do next, or where to turn. You may feel frustrated or anxious about not knowing whether your child is safe.

(cont)

## Some Strategies for Parents

- Take warning signs and threats seriously. Listen carefully to what your teenager is saying and talk to them about what they are feeling.
- Be careful of making threats in the heat of an argument. Comments such as "*if you don't like it you can leave*", are often made in the midst of emotion-charged encounters. Whilst you may not believe your teenager will go, many do.
- Think about ways to open up communication and problem-solving. Check our information sheets on Communicating and Negotiating with teenagers for helpful ideas.
- Discuss options with your teenager. What alternatives are there to running away? Is there somewhere else they can stay? Who else can they talk to about what they're feeling?
- If your child runs away, discuss the issue with them when they return. Don't be afraid to bring it up, but do wait until they have settled. The primary thing is to let them know you care. Talk to them about what to do should they feel like that again, and develop some safety plans.
- Establish a contact person, or develop business cards that include the contact details of everyone in the family. Make sure your child carries this with them.
- Keep up to date with who your teenager's friends are, their contact details, favourite places, and school. Remember to do this in a way that respects their privacy.
- If you feel in need of more support, call our counsellors for advice or referrals to counselling/mediation services.

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(cont) The experience of families when a child goes missing is like a roller-coaster of emotions.

To help you through this time, try to maintain a level of calmness and take time to think about the situation. Find out what you can about your child leaving. Was it impulsive or planned?

Have they run away alone or with friends? Have they taken anything with them, or left anything behind? Think about where your teenager may go, and contact people who may know something.

If you have reasonable fears about your child's safety or wellbeing, you may choose to make a report at your local police station. This does not mean they will be in trouble with the police, or will be charged with an offence – it is not a crime to go missing. It is important to enlist support in finding your child and ensuring their safety.

It is usual practice for police to notify the Department of Community Services (DoCS) when young people under 15 years of age go missing, and for decisions about their welfare to be made collaboratively. If an environment is assessed to be unsafe, police will not force young people to return home.

Think about what you will do if your teenager returns home or is located by someone else. Remember that they are likely to be feeling very scared, confused, and uncertain. It is important to show them that you care, rather than conveying anger or hurt.

Assure them that the door is always open for them to return. Think about what services may be able to support to your family at this time; you may find it useful to involve someone else as a mediator. Work together with your teenager to make changes for the better and use this as an opportunity to strengthen your relationship.

## Other points to remember

Communicating with adolescents can be challenging, but also rewarding. By modelling problem-solving strategies, you will be helping your child to learn valuable skills for dealing with difficult situations.

Our info sheets on communicating with adolescents and negotiating with adolescents will give you some ideas and strategies to help improve communication.

Don't decide on rules and consequences in a crisis – have these worked out beforehand so you can refer back to them. See our info sheet on family meetings and boundaries for more tips.

Make sure your child knows about risks and safety issues, including possible dangers associated with the internet and social media. It is important to balance this with privacy and independence.

## Important Numbers

### Parent Line

Call **1300 1300 52** to speak to one of our professional counsellors.

### Police

Emergency: 000

Police Assistance Line:

Missing Person's Unit: 1800 025 091

Family and Friends of Missing Persons (FFMP): 1800 227 772

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800