

# Runaways

## Guidelines for Parents



**How can you prevent your child from running away?  
How should you react if your child runs away?  
How can you prepare for your child's return?**

## ***Introduction***

*Running away can be a frightening experience for both the child and their family. According to the Enfant-Retour Québec (formerly The Missing Children's Network), there are three main reasons why young people run away:*

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

It is important to remember that the teen years are a period of rapid change, often characterized by great emotional instability. The youngster searches for his identity primarily through a process of rebellion by opposing established values, challenging authority and refusing to comply with the rules established by his parents.

Therefore, it is not surprising that when our child becomes a teenager, he sometimes seems to become a stranger. It is important to remember that the relationship between the parent and the child should not be one of "dominator-dominated." It is also important for the parent to recognize their teenager's growing autonomy.

The act of running away generally indicates a breakdown in communication between a child and his parents. Running away is often a way to express rebellion, suffering or rejection and contributes to the growth of homeless youth. Parents should regard a runaway situation as a major problem having many consequences: criminal behaviour, drug and/or alcohol abuse, prostitution, depression, and suicide. In 2003, according to the "Missing Children's Registry" Annual Report, runaways accounted for nearly 77% of all reported cases of missing children in Quebec - a total of 6,034 of the 7,822 cases reported.

## POSSIBLE SIGNS YOUR CHILD IS ABOUT TO RUN AWAY

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What does the word "Runaway " mean? It is the act or an instance of escaping, taking flight, or a person who runs away.

Children often run away from something that is troubling them. For example, they may be fleeing from an unhealthy family environment, defying parental authority, struggling with peer pressure, meeting a personal challenge, asserting themselves, or yearning to experience a taste of freedom. In other words, children who run away believe that the advantages of doing so outweigh the disadvantages.

Everyone is familiar with the old saying, " With children, we don't do what we want, we do what we can! " There is no such thing as a good or a bad parent; there are only parents who do what they can with what they are given.

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 those needs and refrain from risk-taking behaviour.

Children who run away have usually planned to do so in advance and are well prepared. Therefore it is important to recognize the warning signs of a child planning to run away. A youngster may show several warning signs without necessarily planning to run away. It is important to always listen to what your child has to say. We recommend that you seek help from appropriate resources rather than letting the situation deteriorate.

### ***Possible warning signs that your child is thinking of running away:***

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

### ***Here are several suggestions that may prevent your child from running away:***

- ❖ Always tell your child that you love him and that he is important to you
- ❖ Talk with him about the dangers of running away from home
- ❖ Ask your child whether he has intentions of running away
- ❖ Invite your child's new friends to the house to get to know his social network
- ❖ Change your work schedule, if possible, to be home when he returns from school

Parental authority encompasses a number of rights and obligations that parents have towards their children. Parents are responsible for the care, supervision and education of their children. They must feed them and support them. Remember, an under-aged child must live in the family home and cannot leave without your permission.

## WHILE YOUR CHILD IS ON THE RUN

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### *What should you do if your child runs away?*

You need to first inform the police as quickly as possible. Contrary to what you might have heard, there is no law stating that you have to wait a certain amount of time before informing the police that your child is missing. It is important that you have all the necessary information regarding your child ready to give to the police. This will facilitate their job and accelerate the search for your missing child.

### *What can you do before calling the police?*

- ❖ Check all rooms in the house, including secluded areas and corners (wardrobes, under the bed) and 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 voice mail and/or phone display screen to identify recent incoming calls
- ❖ Check your child's e-mail (all folders) and look carefully through mail discarded in the garbage
- ❖ Communicate with his friends and the personal contacts listed in the Identification Booklet of your child
- ❖ Check garbage cans for any indicators

### *What should you do after calling the police?*

- ❖ Contact *Enfant-Retour Québec* and seek help from the Family Services and Programs Department at 514.843.4333
- ❖ If your child calls, note the telephone number displayed on the screen so that the call can be traced if possible
- ❖ It is important to be candid and direct with the police concerning the circumstances that might have led to your child running away

### *How to respond to a phone call from your child while he is on the run.*

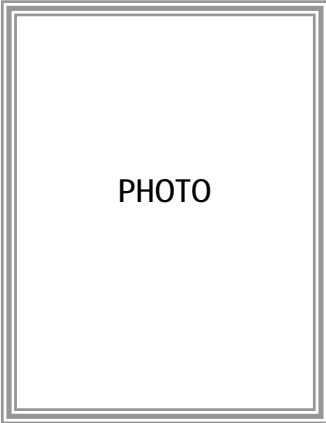
#### **What to do:**

- ❖ Practice active listening skills using "paraphrasing" techniques. It is important to rephrase the content of his message (ex: 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. (ex: You're sad that we had that argument...)
- ❖ Invite your child to open up more by expressing your fears. Ask him if you can see him: Where? When? If he doesn't want to see you, don't insist – thank him for calling you
- ❖ Ask your child if he thinks he might call again and if he is thinking of returning home
- ❖ Tell your child that you love him and that you hope he returns home soon

#### **What not to do:**

- ❖ Blame your child, criticize him, or give him advice (nobody likes being told what to do)
- ❖ Make any promises that you won't keep
- ❖ Use blackmail to make him come home
- ❖ Ask him where he's living because he may hang up on you – instead, wait until he tells you himself

## YOUR CHILD'S IDENTIFICATION RECORD



CHILD'S NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

BORN: \_\_\_\_\_

HEIGHT: \_\_\_\_\_

WEIGHT: \_\_\_\_\_

EYES: \_\_\_\_\_

HAIR (length and colour): \_\_\_\_\_

LANGUAGES SPOKEN: \_\_\_\_\_

GLASSES:  YES  NO DESCRIPTION: \_\_\_\_\_ CONTACT LENSES:  YES  NO

TATTOO(S):  YES  NO DESCRIPTION: \_\_\_\_\_

BIRTHMARK(S):  YES  NO DESCRIPTION: \_\_\_\_\_

SCAR(S): \_\_\_\_\_

PIERCED EAR(S):  YES  NO OTHER PIERCING(S) :  YES  NO DESCRIPTION : \_\_\_\_\_

BLOOD TYPE: \_\_\_\_\_

ALLERGY(IES): \_\_\_\_\_

CHRONIC ILLNESS(ES): \_\_\_\_\_

CONDITION OF TEETH (Attach dental records and x-rays): \_\_\_\_\_

ORTHODONTIC APPLIANCE: \_\_\_\_\_ HEARING AID: \_\_\_\_\_

SPEECH IMPEDIMENT: \_\_\_\_\_ LEARNING DISABILITY: \_\_\_\_\_

MEDICARE NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_ SOCIAL INSURANCE NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

DRIVER'S LICENSE : \_\_\_\_\_ PROVINCE / STATE \_\_\_\_\_ EXPIRY DATE: \_\_\_\_\_  
Number Day Month Year

VEHICLE:  YES \_\_\_\_\_  NO  
Make Model Year Colour

LICENSE PLATE NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_ PROVINCE / STATE: \_\_\_\_\_

DOES YOUR CHILD HAVE AN INTERAC CARD?  YES  NO

DOES YOUR CHILD OWN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING CREDIT CARDS?  VISA  MASTERCARD  AMEX  OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

## PREPARATION FOR YOUR CHILD'S RETURN HOME

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### ***Pitfalls to avoid should your runaway call home:***

- ❖ Reproaching, reprimanding or blaming him for the situation
- ❖ Threatening to call the police or Youth Protection, or scaring him with the prospect of a strict group home
- ❖ Making promises you can't or won't be able to keep
- ❖ Blaming oneself

### ***Some suggestions to adopt if you want to negotiate your child's return:***

- ❖ Stay calm while talking on the phone
- ❖ Tell your child that he can come home with no fear of reprisal from the family
- ❖ Accept compromises as long as the teen also makes some effort to restore family harmony
- ❖ Listen carefully to your child's expectations and needs
- ❖ If there is a conflict, suggest taking a breather and have your child promise to call you back the next day. It is better to delay the discussion with your child than lose control of your emotions

## AFTER YOUR CHILD RETURNS HOME

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Many parents aren't sure how they should welcome their child when he returns home. They feel deeply moved at the prospect of their child's return, an event they have dreamed about for so long. When reunited, both parties are often very emotional. It is best for parents to remain calm and to be communicative, especially during initial conversations.

It is essential for parents to express to their child just how important he is to them. You should show empathy rather than sympathy for your teen's runaway behaviour. The more a parent shows empathy, the more he is able to welcome his child back and assume his role as the parent, thus making the child take responsibility for his own actions. If the parent shows sympathy, he becomes paralyzed by his actions and thereby enables the child to feel sorry for himself and to regress (revert to childhood).

### ***Here are several ways to develop empathy towards your child:***

- ❖ Remain courteous and respectful
- ❖ Give your teen an opportunity to talk about his runaway experience, express his emotions, explain his actions and really 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 self-control
- ❖ Continue the discussion once you have calmed down and keep making "I" statements (express your emotions rather than criticize your child)

Our experience shows that a child who has run away once may do so again and that this type of behaviour is easily repeated if your child does not get what he wants. Parents must learn to temper their emotions and to exercise a great deal of patience. Dealing with a teen with behavioural problems is no easy task. Being willing to listen to the young person's needs allows the parents to get closer to the child and to find out why he ran away.

It may not be easy, but to keep control of the situation, do NOT give in to blackmail.

Refuse to be manipulated but remain open for discussion.

Parents should not hesitate to ask for help from the people around them, especially if they are having difficulty communicating with their teen.

Moreover, if the parents themselves are experiencing personal difficulties (alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, etc.), they may have to agree to 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

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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 they express a lot of love for their parents. The relationship between teens and their parents is of paramount importance. Parents represent a certain stability despite the numerous complaints that the youngsters 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. (ex: they feel they are too fat or too tall while others complain of being too short). Nothing is as it was before. Parents find that they have difficulty communicating with their youngsters. 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.



**For more information:**  
**[www.enfant-retourquebec.ca](http://www.enfant-retourquebec.ca) 514.843.4333 or Toll free 1 888 692.4673**