

Preventing Your Teen from Running Away

Objective

To identify ways to improve communication with your teen to prevent your child from running away.

You Should Know

Many teens have thought about running away, but most do not follow through. Teens who run away are not bad kids; although they have made poor choices, gotten themselves involved in trouble, or they are feeling pressure they want to escape from. Instead of facing their problems and solving them, they might want to run from them. Or, they think leaving home is a way to free themselves from a difficult home situation. They might not realize the risks involved.

As a parent, there are some specific things you can do to prevent your teen from running away. Here are some tips.

1. Help your teen learn problem-solving skills.
2. Empathize with him/her rather than overreacting, correcting, and directing.
3. Give you teen opportunities to express his/her thoughts and frustrations.
4. Offer solutions and empower him/her to work through problems.
5. Communication and active listening are very important; hear your child out before judging or offering your advice and opinions.
6. Tell your teen you will listen and discuss *any* topic, worry, or concern.
7. Validate your teen's point of view. Sometimes kids just want to know you hear what they say – even if you disagree.
8. Collaborate and negotiate when making household rules.
9. Remember teens are going to make mistakes – it is part of growing up. Let them know you will always be there, no matter what.
10. If your teen tells you or shows signs of being bullied, contact your child's school.
11. Tell your child it is okay to be angry and help him/her find ways to express anger in healthy ways.
12. Treat your teen as you would like to be treated.
13. Let your children know there is nothing they can do that would make you ever stop loving them.
14. Spend time talking to your teen everyday. Socializing with teens is one of the best ways to acknowledge you are there and their opinions matter.

While every parent wants to prevent their teen from running away, it is important to recognize you cannot lock your teen in your house and control every move. Running away is not typically done impulsively. In many cases, thoughts about running away occurs over several days when the teen is progressively less and less inclined to go home. Teens who are thinking about running away often exhibit certain behaviors. You might notice the following:

- Changes in behavior, including eating or sleeping significantly more than normal.
- Being less sociable with family members.
- Staying out later than usual.
- Frequently staying at friends' homes.
- Using alcohol and/or drugs.
- Poor grades.
- Increased truancy.
- Breaking school or family rules.
- Engaging in destructive behavior, angry outbursts, or getting into fights.
- Accumulating money or possessions.
- Verbalizing a desire to run away, making statements like, "I have to get out of here!" or actually making threats to leave.

Is your teen exhibiting any of the above behaviors? Describe them here.

Have you discussed your concerns with your teen? What happened?

Even if you do all the right things, your teen might choose to run away. If this happens, you can do the following:

- Immediately call the police. Ask them to enter your child into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC).
- Call everyone your child knows and enlist their help.
- Search your teen's bedroom and cell phone records. Track the phone location, if possible.
- If your teen has a credit card, review it for recent withdrawals or purchases.
- Call the National Runaway Switchboard: 1-800-786-2929 or 1-800-RUNAWAY.

What to Do

If your teen has threatened to leave, or if you suspect he or she is planning to run away, ask the following questions: Why do you want to leave? What is going on? Listen to what your teen has to say. Try not to get defensive or blow up in anger. Describe the conversation.

Your goal is to understand where your teen is coming from. If he/she says your rules are unfair, respond you will think about the conversation and let them know what you decide. Avoid making promises you cannot keep, or invalidating rules to please your teen. At this point, just try to understand why he or she is so upset and considering running away.

Tell your teen how you feel about him/her leaving. You might remind your teen you love him or her and there is no issue you cannot solve together. Think about what you will say and write it below.

If your teen ever feels that running away might solve a problem, urge him/her to talk to you first. Together, you can come up with choices for better decision making.

Also consider your home environment. What are some ways you can make your home a better place for your teen? Ask your child what exactly they want to change in the home. What do they want? You probably can't change everything that your teen wants, but you can try to work out compromises. Always try to do whatever you can to make your teen feel safe in your home. Have a conversation about changes in the home environment with your teen, and describe what happened.

You might need to ask for help. This could be a person your child respects, such as a coach, teacher, grandparent, or other relative. Or, you might want to seek professional help. Who can you ask? List two or three people.

You can also connect with the National Runaway Switchboard, a national communication system (hotline and website) for runaway and homeless youth. Teens and family members can call 24 hours a day to work through problems and find local help. The organization helps teens identify options to prevent them from leaving their homes. Website: www.nrscrisisline.org or call 1-800-RUNAWAY.

Now, review the list of tips to prevent your teen from considering running away. Over the next month, commit to implementing at least one of these tips every day. Fill in the chart on the following page. Note the date, the tip you tried, and what happened, including your teen's response.

Reflections on This Exercise

Did this worksheet help improve communication with your teen? Why or why not?

What was the main obstacle you encountered?

Are you are still worried your teen will run away? Explain your thoughts below.

What else can you do to prevent your teen from running away?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
