

Know what to look for if your child is or might someday be a runaway

Children who run away are inherently vulnerable. They may be at risk to substance abuse, crime, sexual exploitation and prostitution. In the face of these dangers many families may feel guilty, depressed or even paralyzed by fear. It is important to be candid and direct with law enforcement about the circumstances that may have led to your child running away. Family members might not share all the details of the child's life if they are concerned doing so could call into question any possible neglect or mistreatment of the child or reveal information potentially damaging to the child's or their credibility. Family members may also think if they are forthcoming about the child's lifestyle, law enforcement will not work as hard to find the child. It is important family members inform law enforcement of the child's recent behavior such as a change in personality, demeanor or friends; drug use; or gang activity.

Remember law enforcement is asking questions for the primary purpose of ensuring your child's prompt and safe return. It is also important for families to remain calm and rational when they discover their child has run away. Don't panic or lose sight of the immediate task at hand — to locate and safely return your child.

First steps

The first hours after a child runs away are the most important in locating him or her. While many runaway children return home on their own, it is critical to take every action available to help quickly locate and safeguard your child once he or she has run away. To help locate your runaway child, **immediately** follow the steps noted below.

- **Think clearly and logically about where your child might be and why he or she might have run away.** Check all methods by which your child communicates with others for sources of leads or other information concerning groups or people with whom your child may have been communicating and clues about planned trips or interests.
- **Check with your child's friends, school, neighbors, relatives, after-school activity leaders or any others who may know of or have clues about your child's whereabouts.** Ask them what they may know and to assist you in the search.
- **Report the runaway to local law enforcement.** Inform the reporting officer of all information you have obtained and about any previous runaway episodes, whether reported or not. Ask the officer how you may assist law enforcement in the search for your child. When receiving a report of a missing child, law enforcement assesses the risk a child faces based on the information provided. Thus provide key information in the report to help law enforcement immediately assess that risk. Model law enforcement policies¹ recommend an expedited law enforcement response if a child
 - Is 13 years of age or younger
 - Is out of what is believed to be the zone of safety for his or her age and developmental stage
 - Has mental, developmental or behavioral disabilities
 - Is drug dependent, including prescribed medication and/or illegal substances, and the dependency is potentially life-threatening
 - Has been absent from home for more than 24 hours before being reported to law enforcement
 - Is determined to be in a life-threatening situation as based on available information
 - Is believed to be in the company of an individual who could endanger his or her welfare as based on available information
 - Is absent in a way inconsistent with his or her established patterns of behavior and the deviation cannot be readily explained
 - Is determined to be at risk based on other circumstances involved causing a reasonable person to conclude the child should be considered as such
- **Provide law enforcement with key resources about your child.** These resources should include a recent photo, digital if possible, of your child, accurately depicting his or her current appearance, and, if available, fingerprints, DNA samples, medical records and dental X-rays or radiographs. If key personal items are missing, provide a list of those items.
- **Call or visit locations your child may frequent,** and check with area hospitals and treatment centers. If your child was employed, call his or her employer or coworkers.
- **Report your missing child to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children[®],** known as NCMEC, **at 1-800-THE-LOST[®] (1-800-843-5678).** NCMEC provides free services

to families as the nation's clearinghouse for missing and sexually exploited children. Many of NCMEC's authorized services are listed in 42 U.S.C. § 5773. After you have reported your child as missing to your local law enforcement agency, call NCMEC. NCMEC case management teams work directly with families and law enforcement offering technical assistance and information dissemination tailored to the specific circumstances to help ensure all available search and recovery methods are being used. Teams also coordinate an array of services including

- Rapid creation and dissemination of posters to help generate leads
 - Rapid review, analysis of and dissemination of leads received on 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) to the investigating law enforcement agency
 - Constant communication with federal agencies providing services to assist in the location and recovery of missing children
 - Rapid provision of peer support, resources and empowerment from trained volunteers who have experienced a missing child incident in their own family
 - Constant access to referrals families may use to help with the emotions experienced when a child is missing
- **Call your local runaway hotline, if there is one, as well as the National Runaway Switchboard at 1-800-786-2929.** Ask if your child has left a message, and leave a message for your child. Also contact youth housing options in any area in which you believe your child may be located.
 - **Contact your missing child clearinghouse and any recognized nonprofit organization in your area assisting families of missing children.** These organizations may offer additional services to assist in your search. Call NCMEC at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) or visit www.missingkids.com for contact information about clearinghouses and the Association of Missing and Exploited Children's Organizations, known as AMECO, at 1-877-263-2620 or visit www.amecoinc.org for contact information about nonprofit organizations.
 - **Keep a notebook and record all information about the investigation.** This is a good way to keep track of everyone you talked to about your child and the circumstances and issues you discussed.

¹*Law-Enforcement Policy and Procedures for Reports of Missing and Abducted Children*, Alexandria, Virginia: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, October 2011, www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PageServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=3289#model_policies, accessed August 1, 2012.

Another resource is *When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide* (NCJ 228735). This book, written by searching parents and published by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, explains the role various agencies play in the search for a missing child and features helpful checklists. Copies are available by calling 1-800-851-3420 or visiting www.ncjrs.gov.

Federal missing child laws

If your child is missing, federal law requires a specific, timely response from law enforcement agencies. Federal law

- Prohibits law enforcement agencies from establishing or observing a waiting period before accepting a missing child report. When a child is reported missing, law enforcement may not require the reporter to wait a certain amount of time for the child to return home before taking the report (42 U.S.C. §§ 5779 and 5780).
- Requires law enforcement agencies to enter the child's information into the FBI's National Crime Information Center database, known as NCIC, and the state² law enforcement system database within 2 hours of receiving the missing child report (42 U.S.C. §5780). You may contact NCMEC at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) to verify information about your child has been entered into NCIC.
- Extends, to missing young adults 18, 19 and 20, some of the same reporting and investigative procedures already provided to children younger than 18 through a provision known as Suzanne's Law³ in recognition of Congress' concern for the safety of missing young adults in this age range. NCMEC immediately takes reports of all missing children younger than 18 and will take a report about children aged 18 to 20 when notified by law enforcement and when law enforcement expresses a concern of suspicious circumstances or foul play.

- Authorizes NCMEC to provide free services to families as the nation’s clearinghouse for missing and sexually exploited children. Many of NCMEC’s authorized services are listed in 42 U.S.C. § 5773. After you have reported your child as missing to your local law enforcement agency, call NCMEC’s toll free telephone number at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) to also report your missing child.

²The term “state” includes American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

³Suzanne’s Law was a portion of the Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today Act of 2003, known as the PROTECT Act, (Pub. L. No. 108-21), and it amended 42 U.S.C. §5779(a).

If your child contacts you but is not yet ready to return home

- **Show love and concern toward your child, not anger, blame or fear.** Remember the goal is to work through problems together as a family with everyone’s involvement and have your child return home.
- **Avoid conversations about punishment or discipline.**
- **Encourage your child to contact a local runaway shelter or the National Runaway Switchboard at 1-800-786-2929 for assistance.**
- **Ask if you may stay in touch.** If so, set specific plans for contact such as through phone, postal mail, email, fax number or third party.

When your child is ready to return home

When your child is recovered or returns home, remember to show love and concern for his or her safety and well-being — **not** anger or fear. If you react angrily, your child may feel unwanted, misunderstood and unloved.

Ask law enforcement to assist you in picking up your child from a particular location, or have law enforcement pick up your child and bring him or her to you if you think a confrontation may occur during the pickup.

Seek a complete medical examination for your returned child and try to resolve the problems prompting your child to have left home in the first place, especially if those unresolved issues could lead to another runaway incident. If you are unable to effectively address family problems, seek the assistance of a trained counselor or professional. If finding this resource on your own becomes difficult, contact NCMEC for possible referrals.

Promptly notify law enforcement, NCMEC and all others assisting in the search once your child returns home.

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