

Did Your Child Run Away?

Dear parents, did your child run away? If your child runs away, do not run after him or her. Yes, please, do call the police. That is the right thing to do. Think about this question. Did your child run from something, or to something? Do you realize that many children who run away are running away from something, rather than to something? They are running from pain, confusion, and dysfunction in the homes they live in, which should be a haven of rest.

Note this American research cited in the article “Darkness to Light” by Anna Warner. What is written here, I have also gleaned from interviews with former runaway teens in The Bahamas. “Running away can be an escape. An adolescent may be experiencing bullying, abuse, mental health difficulties, lack of understanding and acceptance, or a host of other risk factors at home. Research from National Runaway Safeline shows that youth who contacted them for assistance listed emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse among the reasons why they reached out. Similarly, according to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, sexual abuse is considered a potential risk factor when it comes to children running away from home. This reinforces the fact that children and youth often run away due to abuse, or if their home feels unsafe.”

Now you understand why I asked the question, “Did your child run away from something?” And would that something be the emotional and verbal abuse, disrespect, abrasiveness, and sometimes death threats, he or she has experienced in the home? Would it be fair to say that teens running away is evidence of dysfunctional homes? Homes where parents rule by a rod of iron and not arms of love.

Truthfully, I am saddened each time the Marco Alert goes off on my phone. Sometimes the alert occurs almost daily or several times a week. I feel the pain for the parent and the child. I do not know the reasons for each alert, but each alert does raise concerns as a mental health professional, having worked with so many parents and teens.

Sadly, sexual abuse is also one reason some run away from their homes. Here is a quote about a teen's experience from the article mentioned earlier. “I was born to a schizophrenic mother. She was not able to care for me because of her mental illness so I was placed with my aunt. I started being sexually abused by some adult cousins in the household at the age of four.” This child eventually ran away. This scenario has been shared with me far too often by teens and even adults.

Here are other reasons children run away from home, according to the “Parent Easy Guide.” Some children run away because:

- There's a disagreement on something they feel strongly about. Running away can be a 'spur of the moment' act following an argument.
- They may have intense feelings about something, and like anyone experiencing strong emotions, may have trouble communicating or negotiating what they want
- They might believe that running away will make parents realize they've made a mistake
- They're afraid they're about to get into trouble
- They think their home has too many rules and limits - they want to find somewhere else to live.
- They don't like the situation at home with a parent's new partner, step-parent, defacto or stepbrothers and sisters.
- They're trying to get away from a difficult situation, e.g., bullying at school.
- They're depressed, have a drug or mental health problem and need help.

· Home isn't safe or there's something serious going wrong in their lives, e.g. parents continually arguing, family violence, or they're being physically or sexually abused or neglected.

For whatever reason, some teens genuinely feel unwanted and unloved at home. More work needs to be done to educate parents on how to be more responsive, caring, and loving, yet maintain a balance of discipline and structure in the home. The many years of authoritarian parental style have not facilitated the growth of a responsive, caring approach to parenting. Thus, we have this chaos.

On the other hand, I do not want to ignore the reality that there are defiant children and even some with conduct disorders. However, the tips for dealing with defiant children still lean towards the impactful role of wise parenting.

For example, here are a few tips for dealing with defiant children. Notice the serious role of the parent. **Establish common ground.** One of the major reasons why you and your child are at odds is that you highlight the differences between yourselves. Make a list of things upon which you can agree; the common ground. This is a brilliant way to start. It lays the foundation to remove the defiance and establish trust and goodwill. **2. Remove the control battle.** A defiant teenager will often see their situation as being them and me. The them being his or her parents. The issue of control or who is the boss should be downplayed. Teenagers are not children, even if they behave badly. They are young adults, and working together is a far better option than a boss [the parent] ordering the child around. **3. Encourage mutual respect.** Love is at the heart of all good relationships, but respect is not far behind. Sometimes, telling your teenager you love them will not cut the ice. Aim for the time being for respect, and that's mutual respect. As a parent, show clearly that you respect your teenager. Give them respect and certain freedoms, and in no way mistreat them. From respect, love may well recover. **4. Solve problems together.** Defiance often comes when problems surface. Don't see a problem as a problem. See it as a way to build cooperation. You and your child can solve the problem together. Work as a team. **5. Forget about winners and losers.** If the parent sees the conflict as a test, a chance for them to prove that they deserve respect and have authority over the child, then disaster beckons. You may well be making a bad situation worse. Don't try to win. **6. Forget them and concentrate on you.** There is a possibility that the unacceptable behavior by the teenager is linked to the behavior of their parent. That's you. Start by asking yourself a series of questions. Are you being reasonable? What is the point of view expressed by my child? What can I change about my life that will help my teenager?

No parent wants a defiant teenager. Every parent wants a happy and responsible child who is part of a loving family. But so many teenagers fall out with their parents. Parents, take your time to understand and love your teens. Make sure your home is a safe place for your child to come home each day.

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