

Parental guidelines in case your child might someday be a runaway

Running away can be a frightening experience—for both the child and parents. Your child becomes vulnerable as soon as he or she leaves home—potentially falling victim to drugs, alcohol, crime, sexual exploitation, child pornography, and/or child prostitution. In the face of this, many parents may feel guilty or depressed...or even paralyzed by fear. It is important to be candid and direct with law enforcement concerning the circumstances that may have led to your child running away.

It is also important for parents to remain calm and rational when they discover that their child has run away. Don't panic or lose sight of the immediate task at hand—to locate the runaway and return him or her safely home.

Immediate Action

The first 48 hours following the runaway episode are the most important in locating a child. While many runaway children return home during this 48-hour period, it is critical to take every action available to you to help locate and safeguard your child if he or she should run away. To help locate your runaway child, **immediately** follow these steps.

- **Think clearly and logically about where your child might be and the reasons why he or she might have run away. Try to remain calm.**
- **Check with your child's friends, school, neighbors, relatives, or anyone else who may know of or have clues about your child's whereabouts.** Ask them to notify you if they hear from your child. If your child has a computer, it should be checked as a source of leads or other information concerning people your child may have been communicating with online. It may shed light

on a planned meeting between your child and someone he or she "met" online.

- **Report the runaway to the local police or sheriff's department.** Have an officer respond to your home to take the report. Write down the officer's name, badge number, telephone number, and the report number. Find out who will follow up the initial investigation.
 - **Remember: Keep a notebook and record all information on 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.
 - **Make sure your law-enforcement agency enters your child's name and description into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) computer.** Law-enforcement agencies across the country have access to NCIC. This information will **not** give your child a record with law enforcement, but it may aid in his or her safe return.
 - **Provide law enforcement with a recent photograph of your child.** Also, make fingerprints, DNA samples (if you have them), and dental records available to the law-enforcement agency. This information may need to be added to the existing NCIC entry.
 - If local law enforcement won't enter information about your child into the NCIC computer, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) will. The Missing Children Act of 1982 mandates this. Contact your nearest FBI field office for help.
- Remember: No matter what you have been told, there is no**

law requiring a waiting period for reporting a child missing to law enforcement or for entry into NCIC. But, because some law-enforcement agency procedures may still involve a waiting period, you may have to go to the FBI yourself to get your child entered in NCIC.

- **Make sure that law enforcement passes on the necessary information about your child to the missing children's clearing-house within your state.**
- **Call or visit several local spots that your child may frequent,** and check with area hospitals and treatment centers. If your child was employed, call the employer or coworkers.
- If you have not done so, **report your missing child to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678).**
- **Call your local runaway hotline (if there is one) as well as the National Runaway Switchboard at 1-800-621-4000.** Ask if your child has left a message, and leave a message for him or her. Also contact local runaway shelters and those in adjoining states. There are approximately 750 runaway shelters throughout the country, and they will be able to give you assistance and advice.¹
- Using the poster format in this brochure, **have posters or fliers made.** Place them in store windows, and distribute them to truck stops, youth-oriented businesses, hospitals, treatment centers, law-enforcement agencies, and local spots your child may frequent.

NOTE: If you have reason to believe that your child may have been abducted or lured away by a nonfamily member or noncustodial family member, do not disturb or remove any of your child's items before law enforcement arrives. Doing so could destroy key clues about the disappearance and/or evidence at a potential crime scene. In the case of a nonfamily abduction, the first three hours are the most critical in recovering a child safely.² Thus, do not delay in contacting law enforcement and explaining all of the facts leading to the belief that your child is an abduction victim.

If your child uses online computer services, be advised that while the number of teens who leave home as a result of contacts on the Internet are relatively low, when it does happen, the results can be tragic,³ and a quick response is imperative.

Follow-Up Actions

- **Recheck with your child's friends, school, neighbors, and current employer.** Do not overlook your child's old boyfriends or girlfriends; friends from other walks of life including camp, a religious organization, after-school activities, the neighborhood; friends from out of town; friends involved in interests and hobbies; friends made on the computer; each teacher, guidance counselor, and principal in your child's school; coworkers; anyone who currently works or in the past worked in your home who may know your child; and past employers.

POSTER FORMAT

CHILD'S PHOTO	CHILD'S PHOTO different angle	
Date of photo	Date of photo	
NAME OF CHILD		
Date of birth:	Date missing:	
Age:	Height:	Weight:
Color of hair:	Color of eyes:	Complexion:
Physical characteristics: (braces, glasses, pierced ears, scars, marks, tattoos)		
Clothing description:		
Circumstances of disappearance: (include information on what the child was doing, anyone the child was with, and the city and state where the child was last seen)		
IF YOU HAVE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT		
Name of law-enforcement agency with city and state		
Law-enforcement telephone number including area code		
Officer assigned to case		
Case number		
Personal message to runaway: (We all love you. We want to work this out. Please call. Love, Mom and Dad.)		
National Center for Missing & Exploited Children	1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)	
Note: A missing child must be registered with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children before adding the organization's name and telephone number to this flier.		

Be sure to explain the seriousness of the situation; ask if anyone else they know is missing; and, in the case of friends, ask to speak to their parents and siblings to corroborate the information given. Attempt to obtain information on your child using his or her Social Security number through the FBI, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Social Security Administration. Check religious cults or cult-awareness groups in your area for information. Also, children have been known to follow their favorite rock band across the country with a group of other runaway children.

- **Recheck with your relatives** and be sure to include, if applicable, any stepfamily and relatives of a noncustodial parent. Again, be sure to explain the seriousness of the situation to each relative, and ask if anyone else they know is missing.
- **Check with other people in your community** who may have seen your child before he or she left or may have information on a "favorite" spot where he or she could have gone. Ask people such as employees on day and night shifts in your neighborhood, employees of local businesses, those who work at child-oriented organizations or clubs who may know where kids like to "hang out," current and past babysitters, mail carriers, and the family doctor. Also, check with the armed forces if your child is of age.
- **Search for clues** in your child's room, school locker, journal, notes,

letters, computer files, electronic mail, current and past telephone bills, bank account, automatic-teller-machine (ATM) transactions, and credit-card bills. Check with the motor vehicle licensing and registration bureau within your state, and other states, if your child is of age to drive. If your child has taken someone's car other than his or her own, consider reporting the vehicle as being stolen.

- **Publicize the case** by distributing fliers locally, countywide, statewide, nationwide, and internationally, if circumstances warrant, with a current photograph and description of your child along with any known information about the disappearance, using the format provided in this brochure.

Make certain that your fliers include a telephone number, along with the area code of the local law-enforcement agency, as well as the city and state. Local streets, landmarks, and telephone numbers are of little value if the fliers are sent outside the immediate area. Do not include your home telephone number on the flier; leads should be forwarded to local law enforcement.

Take advantage of any media attention via radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet to let people know of your child's disappearance. If you have a video of your child, the electronic media may be more willing to assist, as they are a visual medium and people often respond to a moving picture. In these communications be sure to

show love and concern for your child's safety and include an appeal asking the child to return home.

- **Use all available technologies to assist in the search.** For instance, outgoing messages can be left for your child and others on your answering machine, with an answering service, and/or on voice mail. In order to keep your telephone number free at all times, explore the possibility of getting a second telephone line to be used as a facsimile line, a connection to an online service/the Internet, and/or as an additional telephone line.

Telephone calling features such as Call Trace, Caller ID, and Call Return can help in your search, if available in your area. Cellular telephones and/or pagers allow others to reach you at all times. When receiving collect calls ask the operator for "time and charges" to determine the telephone number/location from where the call was placed. Electronic mail can be a means of tracing a person's location when the address is saved and an online service is able to provide information about the user.

- **Order a complimentary copy of *When Your Child is Missing: A Family Survival Guide from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse* at 1-800-638-8736.** This book contains helpful information about your role in the search for and recovery of your missing child. It may also be viewed at NCMEC's web site, www.missingkids.com.

If Your Child Contacts You But Is Unwilling to Come Home

- **Show love and concern for your child, not anger or fear.** Remember, the goal is to help work through problems and have him or her return home.
- **Encourage your child to contact a local runaway shelter or the National Runaway Switchboard at 1-800-621-4000 for assistance.**
- **Ask if you can stay in touch with your child.** If so, set specific plans on a form of contact whether it be through a telephone number, mailing address, electronic mail, or facsimile number.

When Your Child Returns 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 and unloved and may run away again. Make sure your child understands that you care about what happens to him or her.

Promptly notify law enforcement, the state clearinghouse, NCMEC, the National Runaway Switchboard, or anyone else who may have assisted you.

If your child has been away for an extended period of time, a complete medical examination is indicated when he or she returns home including tests for sexually transmitted diseases.

Most importantly, when your child returns, try to resolve the problems in your family that prompted your child to leave home in the first place. In general, children run away because of problems or stresses in the family or at home—such as divorce, remarriage, alcoholism, or physical or sexual abuse.

If you are unable to deal with the family problems effectively, seek the assistance of a trained counselor or professional. Parents can contact the local department of social services, family services, or other public or private agencies that help families. Members of the clergy, school personnel, or the law-enforcement community can also direct you to available services and resources. Make these arrangements before your child returns, so the services may be accessed immediately upon his or her return.

It may be necessary for your child to go to a temporary residence or runaway shelter while the family works toward resolving its problems. A trained counselor can help you make this decision.

Preparation...Just in Case

There are several ways that parents can be prepared in the event that their child runs away. While some of these measures may be more appropriate for a younger child, they all provide valuable information to aid in the quick recovery of a runaway.

- Keep a complete written description of your child including hair and eye color, height, weight, date of birth, and specific physical attributes.

- Take color photographs of your child every six months. Head and shoulder portraits from different angles, such as those taken by school photographers, are preferable; however, candid photographs are sometimes more representative of how your child looks than posed photographs.
- Make sure your dentist prepares full dental charts on your child and updates them with each exam. If you move, get a copy of these dental records to keep in your files until a new dentist is found.
- Find out from your doctor where your child's medical records are located. All permanent scars, birthmarks, broken bones, and medical needs should be recorded.
- Arrange with your local law-enforcement agency to have your child fingerprinted. The agency will give you the fingerprint card. They will **not** keep a record of your child's prints. You may also be able to obtain a sample of your child's DNA, which may be useful for identification purposes. Be certain that you maintain the only record of the DNA sample.

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), established in 1984 as a private, nonprofit organization, serves as a clearinghouse of information on missing and exploited children; provides technical assistance to the public and law-enforcement agencies; offers training programs to law-enforcement and social-service professionals; distributes photographs and descriptions of missing children worldwide; coordinates child-protection efforts with the private sector; networks with nonprofit service providers and state clearinghouses on missing-person cases; and provides information on effective legislation to ensure the protection of children per 42 USC § 5771 and 42 USC § 5780.

A 24-hour, toll-free telephone line, **1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)**, is available in the United States and Canada for those who have information on missing and exploited children. The toll-free number when dialing from Mexico is 001-800-843-5678, and the "phone free" number when dialing from Europe is 00-800-0843-5678. The CyberTipline for online reporting worldwide is available at www.cybertipline.com. The TTY line is 1-800-826-7653. The NCMEC business number is 703-274-3900. The NCMEC facsimile number is 703-274-2200. The NCMEC web-site address is www.missingkids.com.

For information on the services offered by our NCMEC branches, please call them directly in California at 714-508-0150, Florida at 561-848-1900, Kansas City at 816-756-5422, New York at 585-242-0900, and South Carolina at 803-254-2326.

A number of publications, addressing various aspects of the missing- and exploited-child issue, are available free of charge in single copies by contacting the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's Publications Department at

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End Notes

¹Sandra Gaines, National Runaway Switchboard, personal communication, October 15, 1998.

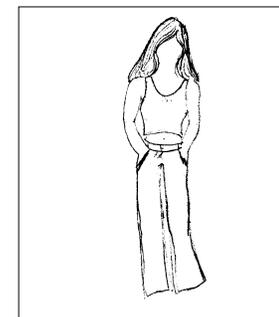
²Kenneth A. Hanfland, Robert D. Keppel, and Joseph G. Weis. *Case Management for Missing Children Homicide Investigation: Fact Sheet*. Olympia, Washington: Office of the Attorney General, State of Washington, and U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, May 1997, page 2.

³Lawrence J. Magid. *Teen Safety on the Information Highway*. Alexandria, Virginia: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 1998, page 3.

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www.missingkids.com

OJJDP Office of Juvenile Justice
and Delinquency Prevention