

Running Away Part I: Why Kids Do It and How to Stop Them

by James Lehman, MSW



It's every parent's worst nightmare—you go to check on your child in the middle of the night, and she's not there. Your heart starts pounding and you fly into panic mode, calling her friends, your relatives, and the police.

Whether or not your child has run away or threatened to do so—or you fear that she might—it's vital that you read this article. James Lehman has worked with runaway teens for many years, and in this new *EP* series he explains why kids run away, ways you can stop them, and how to handle their behavior when they come home.

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"Kids who threaten to run away are using it for power."

Any child can run away at any time if the circumstances are right. Believe me, if they're under enough stress, any kid can justify running away.

Don't forget, running away is like any action. In order to do it you need three things: the ability, the willingness and the opportunity. And let's face it, kids have the opportunity and ability to run every day—so all it really takes is the willingness to do it. That willingness can develop for a variety of reasons. It could be a stressful situation your child is under, a fear of getting consequences for something they did, a form of power struggle, not wanting to go to school, or a substance abuse problem.

Another factor is that kids often idealize running away and develop a romanticized view of life on the streets. In reality, it's awful: you're cold, you're hungry and it's dangerous, but adolescents often see it as an adventure or the key to freedom, where "No one is going to tell me what to do."

Why Kids Run Away

Many kids run away because of drug and alcohol abuse. When teens and pre-teens get involved in substance abuse, they may leave home to hide it so their parents don't find out.

These kids are often using a lot more than their parents know; they want to use more freely and openly, so they run away.

In addition to fear or anger, feelings of failure can also cause kids to leave home. Some children run away because it's easier to live on their own than to live in a critical home. I remember being 15 years old and living in a hallway in the Bronx in winter. I didn't miss home at all because I felt like such a failure there. Sadly, kids with behavior management problems or learning disabilities often get tired of the feeling that they just can't get it right; it's easier for them to run than to fix the problem. Often, they don't know that what they're facing can be dealt with using other strategies.

In my opinion, the main reason why kids run away is because they don't have good problem-solving skills. Running away is an "either/or" kind of solution; it's a product of black-and-white thinking. Kids run away because they don't want to face something, and that includes emotions they don't want to deal with. The adolescent who runs away has run out of problem-solving skills. And leaving home—along with everything that is overwhelming them—seems to solve their immediate problems.

Episodic vs. Chronic Running Away

I think it's very important to distinguish between kids who run away episodically, and those who are chronic runners. The reasons behind the actions are quite different, and it's crucial to know what they are.

- **Episodic Running Away:** When your child runs away after something has happened, it can be viewed as episodic running away. It's not a consistent pattern, and your child is not using it as a problem-solving strategy all the time. It's also not something they use to gain power. Rather, they might be trying to avoid some consequence, humiliation or embarrassment. I've known kids to leave home because they were caught cheating in school or because they became pregnant and were afraid of their parents' disapproval.
- **Chronic Running Away:** Kids who consistently use running away to gain power in the family have a chronic problem. Realize that chronic running away is just another form of power struggle, manipulation, or acting out; it's just very high risk acting out. They may threaten their parents by saying, "If you make me do that, I'll run away." They know parents worry; for many, it's one of their greatest fears. Some parents may engage in bargaining and over-negotiating with their kids over this when they shouldn't because they're afraid. But you need to understand that kids who threaten to run away are using it for power. This not only gives them power over themselves, but power over their parents and their families as well. When a parent gives in to this threat, their child starts using it to train them. For example, a parent in this situation will learn to stop sending their child to their room if he or she threatens to run away each time it happens. I want to be clear here: kids who chronically threaten to run

away are not running away to solve one problem. They're running away because that is their main problem-solving skill. They're trying to avoid any type of accountability.

Are there Warning Signs?

Unfortunately, there are no real hard-and-fast signs that indicate your child is about to run away. Certainly, you can look for secretive behavior, the hoarding of money, and things of value disappearing around the house. If you ever notice this happening, don't turn a blind eye: trust your gut. You probably already know that something is up, whether it's substance abuse or your child's desire to leave home.

A Step-by-Step Way to Teach Your Kids that Running Away Won't Solve Their Problems

1. Teach Problem-Solving Skills

The most important thing you can do is teach your children problem solving skills. Ask them, "What can you do differently about this problem? What are some ways we can deal with this problem?" Always approach something as a problem that needs to be solved, and reward your child when they are able to do it successfully. Be sure to say things like, "I liked the way you solved that problem, Josh. The teacher was upset, but you went up and apologized. That took guts. And now she has a better opinion of you. I'm really proud of you." As much as possible, praise your child when he does something positive.

2. Create an Atmosphere of Acceptance

Unconditional love is an idea that is used a lot in parenting, but different people mean different things by it. Some people say "unconditional love" but what they mean is "co-dependency." When I say unconditional love, I mean "I can't love you any less if you do poorly and I won't love you anymore if you do well. If you get an A I won't love you any more. If you get a D I won't love you any less. I love you." I think it's important for parents to have that kind of atmosphere in their house and to reinforce it with their kids. It's also good for parents to say, "It's okay to make mistakes around here." Make it clear to your child that "the way we handle mistakes in our home is by facing up to them and dealing with them."

3. Check in with Your Child

All parents should have a system where they check in with their kids frequently. Just stop and ask, "How's it going? Anything you want help with?" You can say this two or three times in one day; go by their room and knock on the door. That way you're constantly giving your child hypodermic interest and affection. You're saying, "I'm interested in you, I care." This is a skill that parents can build; it doesn't always come naturally. I understand that parents who have worked all day come home and they're tired. My wife and I were both social workers and when we came home, the last thing we wanted to do was talk some more. But we trained ourselves to do that so our son would know we were interested and that we cared. You never lose when you show that to a child.

4. **Talk to Your Child if You Think He's at Risk of Running**

If you think your child is at risk of running away or you know that his friends have done so, you want to sit down and talk with him. Always temper your comments about other kids' behavior by what your child might be thinking. They hear you when you say, "Oh, that little hoodlum, if my kid ran away, he'd never come home." As a parent, you need to be careful about who's listening. What you really want to say to your child is, "If you screw up and run away, don't hesitate to come back and we'll talk about it." And if your child says, "Talk about what?" I would say, "Talk about how to solve the problem differently."

5. **Responding to Threats**

When your child threatens to run away, I think you should respond by saying, "Running away is not going to solve your problems. You're going to have to take responsibility for this. And by the way, if you do run away, you're still going to have to face this problem when you come home." And then tell them what will solve their problems: "These are the family rules and learning to deal with the family rules is going to solve your problems. Not running away from them."

I think you can give warnings, as well. You might say, "Listen, if you run away, I can't stop you, but it's dangerous out there. I won't be able to protect you. So not only will you not solve your problems, you'll also be putting yourself at risk. Bad things happen to kids and that's the risk you're taking. I don't think it's worth it, Jenna." As I mentioned before, you can also try to get them to take a time-out by saying, "Why don't you just calm down for five minutes and then let's talk about it."

Many families I've worked with wound up dealing with constant threats by saying, "Look, if you run, you run. But these are still our family rules." At some point, they stopped giving in because they realized it wasn't effective or healthy for their families or their child.

"I'm Outta Here!" When Your Child is about to Leave:

3 Things Parents Can Do in the Moment

Many kids leave home in the heat of an argument with their parents or after some major event. This action is probably not spontaneous—your child might have been considering how they will run away for quite some time. If you sense your child is about to leave, here are a few things you can do or say to stop them:

- **Try to Get Them to Calm Down**

Try to get your child to calm down for five minutes. You can say, "Why don't you sit right here in the living room and take a timeout. I'll be back in five minutes." I wouldn't tell your child to go to his room; have him stay right there in the living room

or kitchen. It's not a good idea to send him to his bedroom. This is because if he goes there and gets the impulse, he's going to climb out the window.

- **Ask "What's Going on?" Not "How are You Feeling?"**

When you talk to your child, don't ask him how he's feeling; ask him what's going on. All kids want to argue about how they're feeling—or they want to deny that they're feeling anything at all. Often parents get stuck there. So instead of, "Why are you so upset?" try asking, "What's going on? What did you see that made you want to leave?"

- **Use Persuasive Language**

A really good question to ask your child is, "So what's so bad about this that you can't handle it?" After he or she tells you, you can say, "You've handled stuff like this before. Kids your age deal with this all the time and I know you can do it. So you screwed up, it's not the end of the world. Face what you've got to face and then let's get on with life." That kind of reasoning is called "persuasive talking." As a parent, you're not giving in, but you're trying to persuade your child that they're okay. I used this approach successfully in my practice with kids all the time; I found that many teens yield to that type of persuasion.

Remember, kids run away from problems they can't handle. It's in our culture. Adolescents often see running away as a way to achieve a sense of power and independence. They don't understand that it's false power and independence, however, because they can't take care of themselves in a legitimate way on the streets. Still, those feelings can be very ingrained for some kids. Personally, I think the most important thing for a child to learn is how to solve his problems differently. Your child is going to have to face whatever he's avoiding eventually, and it's of the utmost importance that he understands that critical life lesson: "Eventually, you're going to have to face this."

When your child is out on the streets, you feel powerless, afraid and isolated. And if they decide to come home, your joy can quickly turn to dread as you see them fall into the old patterns of behavior that caused them to run in the first place. Look for Part II of "Running Away" in Empowering Parents the week of October 12th. James will tell you more about what you can do when your under-age child runs away, and how to handle their behavior— and give them consequences— when they come home.

Running Away Part II: "Mom, I Want to Come Home." *When Your Child is on the Streets*

by James Lehman, MSW



In part two of this series on running away, James tells you how to handle it when your child is on the streets, and what to say when they come home—including giving them consequences for their actions.

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For kids, running away is like taking a long, dangerous timeout. They may use it to avoid some difficulty at home, or to hide from something that's embarrassing to them. You can also look at running away as a power struggle, because kids will often run instead of taking responsibility for their actions or complying with house rules. Above all, as a parent, what you *don't* want to do is give it power. That's the cardinal rule: do not give this behavior power.

The forces that drive your child to run are more powerful than the thought that he might get a consequence.

In the last article, I discussed what you can do before your child leaves, and how to create an atmosphere of acceptance at home. In part two, I'd like to talk about what you can do when your child is out on the streets, and how you should handle their re-entry back into home life.

WHAT TO DO WHILE YOUR CHILD IS ON THE STREET

Leave a Paper Trail

If your child has run away, you need to call the police, plain and simple. I understand that not all parents want to do this, but I think it's imperative that you take this step. I can't stress this enough: you want to have a written record that your child is not under your supervision, and that should be recorded at the police station. Also, if you call and report your child missing, know that your call will be recorded. I hate to say it, but one of the paradoxes for parents is that the authorities will often ask, "Why did you let your child run away?" when in fact, there's no way they can make them stay at home. Do your best to answer as honestly as you can, because it's very important to document what's happening. You should also call the Department of Human Services to create a paper trail there, too. They may very well tell you that they can't give you any help, but the point is, you documented it. Be sure to write down the name of the case worker you talked to for future reference.

Should You Look for Your Child on the Streets?

I personally don't believe in going and looking for your child on the streets if they are children who chronically run away. I don't think you should give that kind of behavior a lot of power. The rules should be really clear in the family: "If you run away, you've got to make your way back here. I'm not going to come looking for you or call all your friends. If you're not home, I'll call the police."

There are those parents who look for their kids to make sure they're okay. I understand that impulse, but again, I don't think you want to give your child too much power or special status when they run away. If they get too much attention and too much power, you're just encouraging them to do it again the next time there's a problem. Unintentional reinforcement is something you have to be very careful about.

If you do find your child, you can say, "Look, when you're ready to come home, we'll talk about it." I'm personally very leery about parents who chase after their kids and beg and plead. If you do beg them to come home, when your child comes back, they will have more power and you have less. From then on, whenever they want something or don't want to be held accountable for their actions, they'll play the runaway card.

The Sad Truth: Lack of Community Support for Parents of Runaways

Remember, it's your child's responsibility to stay at home since you legally have no way to keep them there. In fact, I know of kids who've actually left while the police were there. They just said, "I'm not taking this anymore," and they walked out. And the cops said to the parents, "We can't do anything until he commits a crime."

In the states where I've lived, if your child runs away and you call the police, by law they can't do anything. Part of the obstacle that parents face is a lack of community support. Amazingly, there's no statute that requires kids to live in a safe place. That really puts parents in a bad place because society won't make your child stay at home or even in a shelter. When I was a kid, if you ran away from home they would take you to court and put you on probation; you were simply not allowed to run the streets and be a delinquent. Unfortunately, that law has changed. Today, it's estimated that there are between one to three million kids on the street in this country. If you decide to file a Missing Persons report, even if the police find your child living on the street, they can't make him come home. Now your child is no longer a "Missing Person," and you have even less power in some ways. When that happens, you just have to wait until your child wants to come home.

COMING HOME: RE-ENTRY AND FAMILY RULES

If Your Child Says They are Ready to Come Home...

If your child has dropped out of school and is abusing substances and living on the streets, I don't think they should be allowed to come home without certain conditions. And if it's decided that they can return, their re-entry to home life should be very structured.

I know it's hard, but I think that even if your child is crying on the phone, what you want to get clear is, "We love you very much and you can come back again, but the rules aren't changing." I've seen parents with abusive kids tell them very simply, "You can't come home until we have a meeting and agree to some rules. And until then, stay with your friends." It's difficult for parents to do, but I support that.

Have a Frank Discussion: What to Say When Your Child is Back Home

One of the main things you want to talk to your returning child about is what they're going to do differently *this* time. Ask, "What's going to be different about the way you solve your problems, and what are you going to do the next time you want to run away?" I recommend that you have a frank discussion with them. Let them know that running away is a problem that simply complicates their lives and makes their other problems worse. Again, we want running away to be viewed as a problem your child has to learn to deal with. We know as adults that once you start running from something, you may run for the rest of your life. Running away is one of the ways kids solve problems, it's just not an effective way to do so. And in fact, most solutions that depend upon power and control are ineffective.

The Consequences for Running Away:

If your child has run away to avoid consequences, he should do them when he comes back—immediately. That's what he ran away from, and that's what he needs to face. Running away is a very dangerous and risky behavior, and I believe there should be a consequence for it, as well. The consequence doesn't have to be too punitive; keep it task-oriented. One of the problems with consequences is that if they're not lesson-oriented, then the concept you're trying to teach is lost. I like a consequence that says, "Write out the whole story of how you ran away. What were you thinking, what were you trying to accomplish? And then tell me what you're going to do differently next time." Sit down with your child and get them to process it with you, and then talk about what your child can do differently next time together. Always hold them accountable. For kids who run away chronically, if you send them to their room, they won't learn anything. But if you ground them from electronics until they write an essay, make amends, and tell you how they're going to handle it differently, eventually the behavior will change.

Here's the truth: nobody ever stopped running away because they were afraid of punishment. Nobody ever said, "I'm not going to run away because the consequences are too severe." If you're a parent of teen who is in danger of running away, realize that the forces that drive him to run are more powerful than the thought that he might get a consequence.

Use Repetition and Rehearsal to Change Behavior

If your child writes an essay about why they ran away and tells you they are sorry, whether they mean it or not really doesn't matter. The important thing is that the learning is going to change. Think of it this way: if you had a spelling test every day, whether you tried or not, you're going to learn to spell. It's the same way for your child—he has to write those words out. One of the primary ways kids learn is through repetition and rehearsal. Part of that, by

the way, is giving them task-oriented consequences, over and over again. It's much better to have your child write an apology five times than to send them to their room for five hours. Eventually, that learning will sink in—I've seen it happen time and time again.

Should You Ever Tell Your Child to Leave?

Sometimes kids come home and start falling into their old patterns of behavior. I know parents who have told their kids to go to a shelter or to go couch surf for a week. I am sympathetic to this approach, but I think there's a very high risk involved; each family has to make decisions like these very seriously. If you're going to tell an under-age person to go couch surf, you have to think that through carefully. This is not because you're going to be held criminally responsible or go to jail, but because bad things can happen—and you're going to have to live with the consequences, no matter what. Parents of girls often worry more because of the simple fact that it's riskier for girls to run than for boys—more harm can come to them. Remember, each family has to live with its own decisions when it comes to safety—and there's no joking about that.

The Key to Dealing with Kids Who Run Away

In my opinion, the key to dealing with kids who run away both chronically and episodically is teaching them problem-solving skills, and identifying the triggers that lead to risky decisions. Kids have to learn coping skills that help them manage their responsibilities in the here and now, so they don't have anything to run away from in the future. That means doing their homework and chores, being honest and not lying about responsibilities and schoolwork, getting clean and sober if they have a substance abuse problem, and being able to face the music when they've done something wrong or publicly embarrassing. The bottom line is that kids need to learn how to take responsibility, be accountable, and not run away from consequences. Kids are not told enough that life is what you make it—and that means now, not when you're 25.