

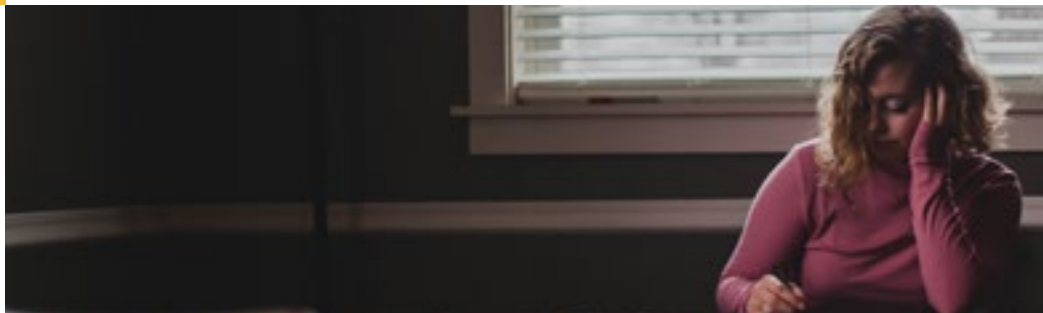
Running away

Children and young people from families in all walks of life sometimes run away from home for all kinds of reasons. It can happen because they're reacting to something emotionally in the heat of the moment or when they're testing the limits.

Most young people who run away and are reported to the police are found within 48 hours. While they usually return home within this time it can be very scary for parents and family.

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Why children and young people run away

In adolescence, the influence of friends and the media can be very strong as young people start to form their own ideas and values. As part of testing new things out, young people often believe they can take risks and still be safe. They're often torn between wanting complete freedom very quickly and wanting to be cared for as they have been in childhood. Parents are torn between trying to make sure they're safe and supporting them to gradually become more independent.

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 realise 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.

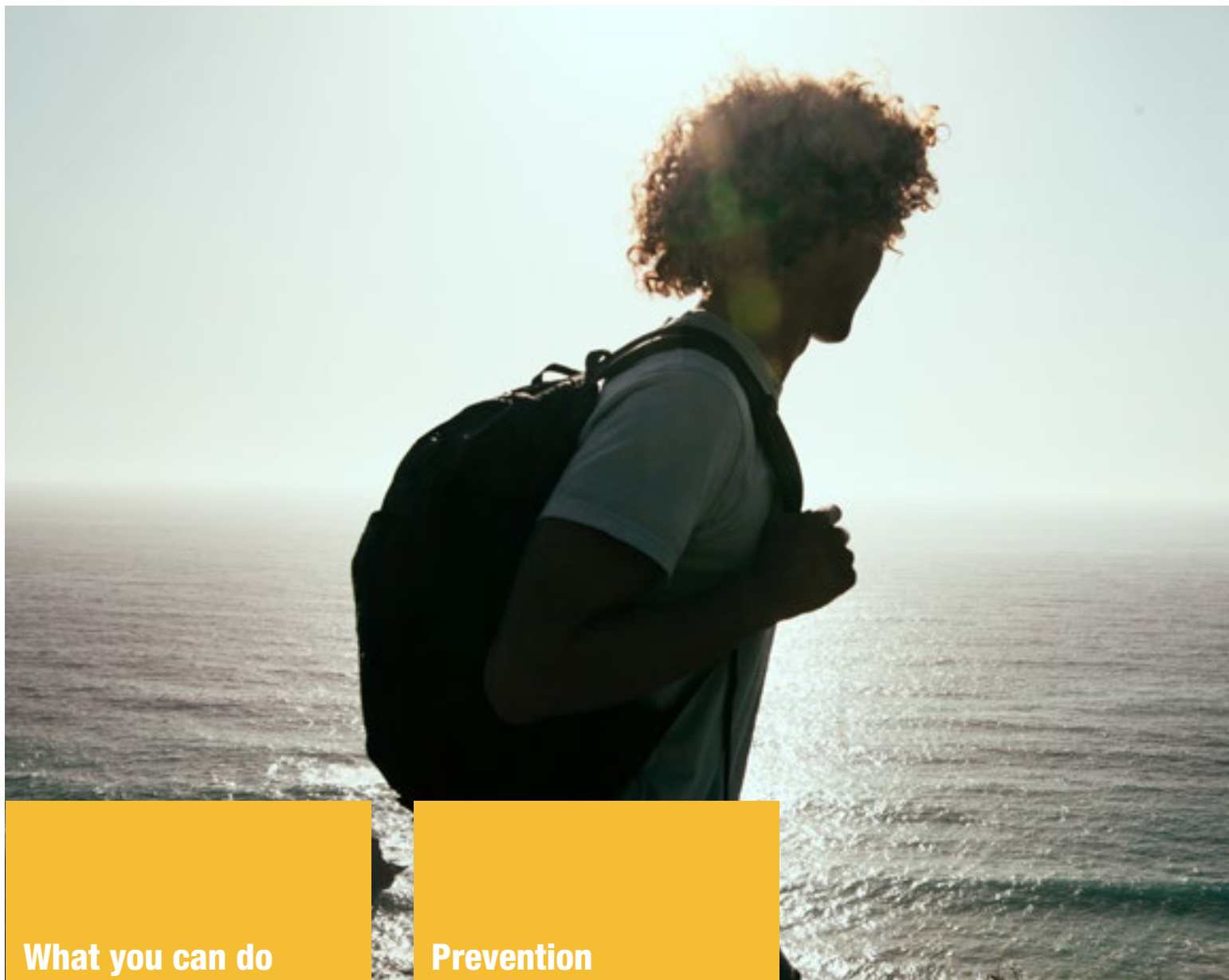
For whatever reason, some young people genuinely feel unwanted and unloved at home.

When a child or young person runs away it is often a genuine cry for help. You need to take it seriously.



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What you can do

Parents can feel they've lost their influence and control and can feel helpless when their child or young person runs away. Whatever your child may say in the heat of an argument you are still very important to them and have influence in many ways. It's very scary for children and young people if they feel you've given up on them.


Hang in there. Children and young people need to know you're there for them and won't give up on them.

Prevention

- ✦ If things are starting to go wrong between you, try to work out what the problem is and rebuild the relationship before there's a crisis.
- ✦ Through all the 'ups and downs' make sure your child knows you love them. Try to listen to their point of view before giving yours. Talk with them about other things rather than focusing on problems.
- ✦ Try to find some middle ground where you can each agree on something. Leaving someone feeling they have no choice often leads to a strong reaction.
- ✦ If your child threatens to run away, take it seriously. It doesn't help to dare them, e.g. 'OK, go then, you'll

be back soon enough' or to forbid it, e.g. 'No! You're not going'. Listen to how they are feeling, what the problems are and what things could change for the better.

- ✦ You may need some time apart for a while to let things settle down. You could agree that your child could stay for a while with a close relative or friend whom you both trust. This will give you both a chance to rethink what's happening and try to do some things differently.
- ✦ Try to look at the situation differently, e.g. 'What can we do to make everyone in the family feel better?' rather than 'Why is that kid always making trouble?'



Keep building a positive relationship with your child. Try to work out rules together so your child feels they have choices.

- Seek some support and advice from your child's teacher or school counsellor. There may be issues at school or with friends that you don't know about. They may offer approaches you hadn't considered.
- Know their friends, who they mostly talk to and where they get support. When young people run away, friends will often know where they're likely to go.
- Respect their personal privacy but remember you're responsible for their safety. Get to know and understand their use of social media. The Parent Easy Guide on 'Cyber safety' has some useful guidelines.

If they run away

- Try to stay calm. Remember most runaways return by themselves.
- Find out how they left and where they may have gone. Was it planned or impulsive? Did they go off with friends, take money, clothes or other possessions? Did they leave a note or say anything to anyone? If they use Facebook or other social media sites, check for any recent information. Try to work out whether they are likely to be safe.
- Find out if they are 'running away from' something or 'running to' something.
- Contact parents of their friends to find out what they know. Don't worry about doing this as most people know from their own experience that all families have ups and downs.

- If you find out your child is with friends, let them know that you are worried and that you want to talk. This will show you care. Don't leave messages that are threats.
- When you make contact with your child you may need a third person to help you both talk things through in the beginning. Be prepared to make some changes. If things aren't sorted out they may run away again.
- In early discussions you don't have to give in on everything but it's important to discuss ways to make things better for you all.
- Have an open door attitude to coming home.
- If you can't find your child and don't know if they are safe, don't waste time. Phone the police on 131 444 to report them missing.

Running away can be a sign that something serious is going wrong and you may need to seek professional help.

When they return

- Don't launch into major discussions or lectures as soon as they walk in the door. Give them time to settle in first and know you care. Let them know you've been worried and you need to talk about what's been happening.
- Allow them to 'save face'. Don't say things like 'I knew you'd have to come crawling back!'

- Try to see and understand the problem from each other's point of view. Try to work together on ways to make things different. Use each other's ideas and work out what rules would work for both of you.
- Talk about the problem, not the person, e.g. you could say 'Wagging school is not going to help you get the things you want' rather than 'You're hopeless and irresponsible.'

If you can't talk together or you can't seem to get anywhere, ask someone else to help you sort it out. A school counsellor could be a good place to start.

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This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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