

# HELP!

## My Child Has Run Away From Home!

A resource booklet for parents



*Written by Natalie Robinson  
South West Child, Adolescent & Family Services*

## **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks to the parents who were interviewed for this resource booklet. Without your suggestions, comments, evaluations and experiences this resource booklet would not have been possible. This resource booklet will hopefully help other parents who are in similar situations to your own.

Thank you also to the different services in the South West Sydney Area who contributed ideas, information and suggestions for the resource booklet. These include: CAFS Adolescent & Family Counselling team, CAFS Family Support team, Liverpool Youth Refuge, Lotus House, LYAC, Centrecare, Anglicare, Reconnect, Burnside, Fairfield Parent Support, Prairiewood Community Health Centre

Illustrations by Steven Langovski

*Natalie Robinson is a Registered Psychologist. This booklet was completed as part of a Doctorate of Clinical Psychology at Macquarie University (2003) in conjunction with South West Child, Adolescent & Family Services*

# Index

	Page
<b>Section 1</b> <b>How to use this resource booklet</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Section 2</b> <b>Common reasons why children run away</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Section 3</b> <b>My child has left home. What do I do?</b>	<b>6</b>
<i>I do not know where my child is</i>	
<i>I know where my child is</i>	
<i>What should I not do?</i>	
<i>Non-custodial parents</i>	
<b>Section 4</b> <b>What if I am angry with my child?</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Section 5</b> <b>The Police</b>	<b>10</b>
<i>At what stage do I call the Police?</i>	
<i>Police Advice</i>	
<i>The Youth Liaison Officer</i>	
<i>The Ethnic Community Liaison Officer</i>	
<i>What will the Police do?</i>	
<i>Will the Police bring my child home?</i>	
<i>What happens if my child doesn't want to return home?</i>	
<i>Do I tell the Police if/when they return?</i>	
<b>Section 6</b> <b>Legal rights of parents</b>	<b>12</b>
<i>If I know where my child is, can I go and get them?</i>	
<i>Will the Police bring my child home?</i>	
<i>What if my child is keeping bad or dangerous company?</i>	
<b>Section 7</b> <b>Legal rights of children</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Right to safety</i>	
<i>Leaving home</i>	
<i>Youth Allowance</i>	
<i>Leaving school</i>	
<i>Work</i>	
<i>Access medical or dental services</i>	
<i>Medical emergency</i>	
<i>Sexual intercourse</i>	
<i>Marriage</i>	
<i>Alcohol</i>	
<b>Section 8</b> <b>Department of Community Services (DOCS)</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>Who are DOCS?</i>	
<i>What do DOCS do?</i>	
<i>Reporting to DOCS</i>	
<i>How do I make a report?</i>	
<i>Mandatory Reporting</i>	
<i>What will DOCS do?</i>	
<i>DOCS Phone numbers</i>	

<b>Section 9</b>	<b>Communicating with your child after they have run away</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Section 10</b>	<b>Self care- looking after yourself and other family members</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Section 11</b>	<b>What do I do if my child does not want to return?</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Section 12</b>	<b>Refuges &amp; alternative accommodation options</b>	<b>20</b>
	<i>Types of accommodation</i>	
	<i>Do I have to pay money to the refuge?</i>	
	<i>Can I visit my child at a refuge?</i>	
	<i>Is my child safe at a refuge?</i>	
	<i>What support do they get?</i>	
<b>Section 13</b>	<b>What happens if my child wants to return home?</b>	<b>22</b>
	<i>If my child agrees to return home</i>	
	<i>Do I discipline my child for running away?</i>	
	<i>The rules at home</i>	
<b>Section 14</b>	<b>Tips for managing difficult behaviours in adolescents</b>	<b>24</b>
	<i>Refusing to do homework</i>	
	<i>Untidy room</i>	
	<i>Leaving clothes around</i>	
	<i>Curfews</i>	
	<i>Drugs &amp; alcohol</i>	
	<i>Swearing / verbal abuse</i>	
	<i>Agreement between parents</i>	
	<i>Dating</i>	
	<i>Peer group</i>	
	<i>Repeating yourself</i>	
<b>Section 15</b>	<b>Renegotiating with your teenager</b>	<b>26</b>
	<i>(Fact sheet produced by parent-line)</i>	
<b>Section 16</b>	<b>Support Services in South West Sydney</b>	<b>28</b>
	<i>Child &amp; Family Counselling services</i>	
	<i>Helplines for parents</i>	
	<i>Police telephone numbers</i>	
	<i>Services for children &amp; young people</i>	
	<i>Helplines</i>	
	<i>Counselling</i>	
	<i>Websites to visit</i>	

## **SECTION 1**

# **How to use this resource booklet**

*This resource booklet has been put together following interviews with parents who have had children and/or adolescents run away from home. It also includes information from the different services in South West Sydney who work with either families or children.*

*This booklet is divided into different sections and it is possible to jump to sections that may be more relevant to you and your situation, especially in a time of crisis.*

**However, it is recommended that you will find it more helpful if you read through the entire booklet. You will notice as you read through it that there are quotes in each section from parents who have been in a similar situation**

## SECTION 2

# Common reasons why children and adolescents run away

There are **many** different reasons why children and adolescents run away from home. It is important that parents think about all the possibilities and reasons and do not just blame themselves. The following list provides *some* reasons why adolescents leave home but it is not an exhaustive list. Each child is an individual and leaves home for his or her own reasons but some of the common reasons are as follows:

They may believe that life at home is too restrictive.

They may want to be with their friends or boyfriend/girlfriend.

They may not like their parent's new partner or the partner's children.

Drug or alcohol misuse.

Sexuality issues (identity /confusion).

Conflict in family relationships.

Some leave home following an argument in the heat of the moment & feel too embarrassed or scared to return.

They may be feeling out of control, trapped, angry, confused and may not know what else to do.

Some adolescents leave home because they don't feel safe at home and this can be for many reasons including physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse.

***"It's very individual, the parent, the child, and the reason for running and it can be hard to know why" (Parent of a 16-year-old runaway)***



## SECTION 3

# My child has left home! What do I do?

### *I don't know where my child has gone!*

- Check what is missing from your child's room. This may give you an idea about where they have gone or how long they intend to stay away. However, sometimes when children or adolescents leave in the heat of the moment they do not pack appropriate belongings or take things they may need later.
- Call the Police and report your child missing. The Police usually cannot report someone missing until 24 hours. However, you can approach them as soon as you know your child is missing. (See Police Section).



You may want to think about whether you should contact the school. Many children who have run away continue to go to school because they need the safety and security of their friends. You may want to speak with the school counsellor, or a teacher that your child is close to or the Principal. Different parents have had different experiences with contacting their child's school so this is an individual decision for each parent to make.

- Your child's friends are really important to them and you may want to think about getting in touch with them. Sometimes they will know where your child is, or they may know what the underlying problem is. If you make the decision to contact your child's friends, it is important to make sure that you are not angry or aggressive with them. When you are worried sick about your child it is easy to "lose the plot" but remember they are more likely to help if you explain how worried you are and that your child will not be in trouble.
- Leave messages with your child's friends and other family members that you are worried about them and would like to see them and that you are willing to work on the problems. It is important that they do not think that they will get in trouble if/when they return as this may stop them from returning.
- Try to keep the communication channels open. Your child needs to know that you want them to return home and that it is safe for them to return home!

***"If I didn't know where he was ...I'd chase every possible avenue. Have you seen him, do you know where he is and do you have other people's numbers?"(Foster Carer of an 8-year-old runaway)***

### ***I know where my child is***

- Think about whether your child is safe at the place they are staying. If it is with a friend, can you contact the parent(s) and speak with them?
- If you believe that your child is at risk of being harmed where they are staying, you can contact the Police or Department of Community Services (See Police section & DOCS section).
- Where possible, leave messages for your child where they are staying letting them know that you are willing to work on the problems and that you want them to return home.
- Try to keep the communication channels open. Your child needs to know that you want them to return home and that it is safe for them to return home!

### **What should I not do?**

- Do not be rude, aggressive or demanding of their friends. This may stop their friends from giving you vital information. This may also stop your child from telling friends where they are or from keeping in contact with their friends.
- Do not make threats about what you will do when they return home as this is likely to create a hostile environment and may make your child too afraid to return home.
- Do not reward their run away behaviour if they return (i.e. giving them presents, or agreeing to what ever they want) because of fear that they will leave again. If you do this you may find there will be problems in the future when you say they are not allowed to do something.

### **What if my child has gone to stay with their mother/father who does not have custody of them?**

- If there is a legal agreement/court order as to why the child should not be staying with the non-custodial parent or should have only supervised access (in the case of physical/sexual/emotional abuse) the Police and Department of Community Services must be informed.
- Often when children and adolescents live with their non-custodial parent, they find out that it is not as much fun as when they visit and that both parents have rules and expectations. Often your child will return home when they realise that home was not as bad as they initially thought.



- Sometimes your child will decide to stay with the non-custodial parent, (if there is no risk). In this case, let them know that it is *their* decision and that you will support them in the decision. Try to keep the communication channels open and let them know that if it doesn't work out that they will be able to return to you but that you will have rules for them to live by.

***"It was scary because I just didn't know what to do" (Parent of a 14 year old runaway)***

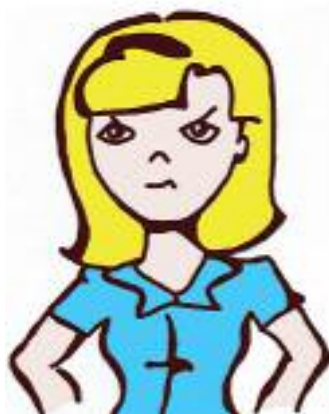


## SECTION 4

# What if I am angry with my child?

- Your child's running away may be the result of a fight that you have had or an ongoing family conflict and you may be feeling really stressed, angry and ready to give up on them.
- Most parents will go through stages of different emotions and it may feel like you are on an emotional roller coaster. Many parents have reported feeling so frustrated that they just wanted to give up and stop contacting their child.
- If you feel like this, try to keep these feelings separate for the moment. It is most important that your child is **safe**. It is important to establish that your child / adolescent is safe and to let them know that you love them and that they can return home.
- Your feelings of anger and frustration are important and will need to be addressed and you will need to make decisions about how to do this. Talking things through with a counsellor can often be helpful. However if you give up on your child, they may interpret this as you "not caring" and may be even less likely to return home.
- As hard as it is, if you want your child to return, you must be willing to work on these problems together.

***"You feel hurt, angry, upset, sad and you don't know why they left but you get through it in the end" (Parent of a runaway 14 year old)***



## SECTION 5

# The Police



### At what stage do I call the Police?

You can call the Police at any time. It is a good idea to call the Police as soon as you realise your child or young person is missing. Usually the Police cannot record someone as officially missing until 24 hours have passed, however they will still consider the child/young person as missing and will endeavour to help you find them. In the case of a child under the age of 12 years or if there is suspicious circumstances they will investigate immediately.

Try to give the Police as much information as you can. It is important to stay calm. Think about the following:

- When did you last see your child?
- What have they taken with them – money/clothes/food?
- Who are their friends / names, phone numbers and addresses where possible?
- A recent clear photograph for the Police with a smile where possible.
- Any suggestions/ideas about where they might go?
- Try to identify the clothing your child may be wearing.

### Police Advice

The Police advise that if there are two parents in the family home, that one parent looks for the child while the other parent stays near the telephone in case the child calls. If there is only one parent, it is best that the parent stay at home near the phone and that another family member or friend goes to look for the child. It is best if the person who is looking for the child has a mobile phone on them.

### The Youth Liaison Officer

Many parents have recommended that it is best to contact the Youth Liaison Officer at your local Police station so that you have one contact person rather than speaking with a different Police Officer each time you call. Not all small police Stations have a Youth Liaison Officer however; there should be an allocated Youth Liaison Officer for the area that you live in.

It is important to keep in touch with the Police if you hear any further information about your child

### The Ethnic Community Liaison Officer

Most police stations have an Ethnic Community Liaison Officer (ECLO). Families from different cultural backgrounds may find it useful to contact the ECLO for future support and assistance.

### **What will the Police do?**

The Police will broadcast to other Police stations to look out for the child. If the child has separated parents, the Police will send a car to the non-custodial parent and will check with your child's friends and school to ask about recent behaviour. The Police will keep searching until the child is located and if the Police Officers on duty finish their shift, they will pass the details of your child onto the next shift. The Police will gather other resources as needed.

### **Will the Police bring my child back home?**

If the Police find your child they will usually bring your child back to the Police Station and interview them. They will either ring the parents to let you know or drop your child back home.

### **What happens if the Police find my child but my child doesn't want to return home?**

If your child is over 15 years and does not wish to return home the Police will check for any risk of harm where they are staying. If there appears to be no risk, they are unable to do anything. If your child appears to be at risk they will bring your child back to the Police Station and interview them. Department of Community Services (DOCS) will be notified and the Police will need to find a nominated safe place for your child for the night. This can be a safe place nominated by yourself (the parent) or by your child. The Police will take your child to the nominated safe place and ensure your child will be safe there. DOCS will interview your child the next day.

### **Do I tell the Police if/when they return?**

*Always* let the Police know if your child returns. They may wish to speak to them.



***"The Police were really supportive and understanding and helpful. They tried everything they could"***

***"It felt really humiliating going to the Police all the time but they were really good and they kept saying you're not the only one. They were reassuring and they made me feel better" (Parent of a 14 year old runaway)***

## SECTION 6

# Legal rights of parents

### **If I know where my child is, can I go and get them and bring them home?**

You can go to where your child is and ask them to return home with you. It is easier to persuade a young child to return home with you, however some adolescents will flatly refuse to return home. If your adolescent refuses to come home with you and you force them to, chances are high they will run away again at the first opportunity. Instead, let them know you care about them and that you will be there for them no matter what.

### **Will the Police bring my child home if I ring them?**

See the Police Section as this depends on the age of the child. However, as mentioned above there is often no way of keeping your child at home and the chances are high that your child may runaway again at the first opportunity unless the problems at home are addressed. Mediation and counselling services can be useful for trying to address the problems at home.

### **What if my child is keeping “bad” or “dangerous” company?**

As a parent this is one of the most worrying aspects of having a child. However, you cannot control whom they choose as friends. Adolescents, in particular are known for rebelling against being told who they can spend time with. It is possible to say that certain friends are not allowed in your house but if your child is not living at home, you are unable to monitor who they are spending time with. This can be very frustrating for parents who know that peers are influencing their child negatively.

***“I found that was the hardest thing, she is still a minor so we are still responsible as parents for her, but we have no rights as she is over 16. We couldn’t make her come home“  
(Parent of a 16-year-old runaway)***



## **SECTION 7**

# **Legal rights of children**

**Right to safety** - All children regardless of age have the right to safety, that is, to live in an environment free from emotional, psychological, physical and sexual abuse or risk of any harm.

**Leaving home** – “A person under the 18 years has no absolute right to leave home, although a person over 16 years would not normally be forced to return home against their wishes”. (Law Handbook, 2002. 8<sup>th</sup> Edition)

### **Youth Allowance from Centrelink**

Youth Allowance is for young people who are aged between 15 years and 24 years who are living independently (eg in Refuges, Care etc). In some circumstances children under the age of 15 years may receive special benefits if they are living independently.

### **Leave school**

Children aged between 6 years and 15 years must attend school.

### **Work**

Children can apply for work at age 15 years

### **Access Medical or Dental Services**

Children are able to access medical or dental services from the age of 14 years without their parent's knowledge or consent.

### **Medical Emergency**

In a genuine medical emergency, medical treatment can be carried out at any age without the parent or guardians consent.

### **Sexual intercourse**

The legal age for sexual intercourse is 16 years. However at 14 years and older, girls are able to see their GP for the contraceptive pill without their parents consent. There is no legal age requirement for buying contraceptives from chemists eg condoms or spermicides.

### **Marriage**

The legal age for marriage is 18 years, however with parental consent marriage can occur at 16 years.

### **Drink alcohol**

The legal age for drinking and purchasing alcohol is 18 years.

## **SECTION 8**

# **Department of Community Services (DOCS)**

### **Who are DOCS?**

The NSW Department of Community Services (DOCS) focuses on the safety and protection of children and young people. A child is defined as someone under the age of 16 years and a young person is over 16 years but not yet 18 years. DOCS work under the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998.

### **What do DOCS do?**

DOCS investigate and intervene as necessary in situations where a child or young person is at risk of harm from physical, emotional or sexual abuse or domestic violence, serious psychological harm or neglect. This includes when a child or young person runs away from home.

### **Reporting to DOCS**

If you believe your child/young person or another child/young person is at risk of harm, that is, you have current concerns about the safety, welfare or wellbeing of a child or young person you need to make a report to DOCS.

### **How do I make a report to DOCS?**

DOCS have a Helpline that is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week across NSW for the cost of a local call. You can telephone DOCS on **132111**.

They will ask your details and the details of the child or young person that you are concerned about. It is possible to make an anonymous report if you wish to and your details will remain confidential. The identity of anyone who makes a report to DOCS cannot be disclosed to anyone without your consent.

### **Mandatory Reporting**

Mandatory reporters are people who deliver services to children or young people as part of their work eg health care workers (Doctors, Nurses, Dentists etc), Welfare Workers, Psychologists, Social Workers, Youth Workers, Refuge Workers, Teachers, Children's Services (Child Care Workers, Family Day Centres etc) and Law Enforcement Agencies (Police).

Mandatory reporters are required by Law to make reports to DOCS if they suspect or have current concerns about the safety, welfare or wellbeing of a child. You need to be aware that even if you do not make a report to DOCS, any mandatory reporter will be required to make a report to DOCS if they know that your child has run away from home.

### **What will DOCS do?**

When DOCS receive your report they will give you a reference number. It is important to write this reference number down as it will be important for future calls and is your record number. They will then assess your report and determine what the appropriate course of action is to ensure the safety, wellbeing of the child or young person. Make sure you ask what their plan is and what action will be taken. If a child is over 16 years they are allowed to leave home, hence DOCS may not be able to do anything. When DOCS receive a report of homelessness they may assess and arrange appropriate services, including residential accommodation.

### **DOCS phone numbers**

Helpline (24 hours)	132 111
Liverpool	9602 8044
Fairfield	9728 1911
Campbelltown	4645 6000
Bankstown	9790 4066



## SECTION 9

# Communicating with your child after they have run away

- Many parents have reported that communicating with their child was the most difficult thing they have ever had to do. Your emotions can be all over the place with high stress levels mixed with sadness, guilt, anger and fear. At times you may feel like just giving up!
- Try to stick with it. It is important to keep the communication channels open. Even if your child is acting as if they don't care about you or the rest of the family or being abusive whenever you call, they too are feeling sadness, guilt, anger and fear and they need to know that you still love them regardless of what they have done.

***“They may not want to talk when you do, so you need to be prepared that when they do want to talk, you are there to listen, if you are going to sort it out” (Parent of a 16 year old runaway)***

- It is important to try to separate your child's behaviour from your child as a person as bad behaviour does not make them a bad person. For example, you may be angry at your child's behaviour but still love your child. It is important that your child knows you care about them.
- As hard as it is, if you can't speak with them directly or they refuse to speak with you, leave a message or write a note just to let them know you are thinking of them and you care. This will help to resolve the problems at a later date.

***“It was hard, so hard to hear that clunk as she put the phone down on me or would really abuse me with disgusting verbal language. But I didn't stop, I still rang and I listened to the Case Manager and she would let (my daughter) know that I loved her. It took forever but she eventually started talking to me” (Parent of a 16 year old runaway)***



## **SECTION 10**

# **Self Care - looking after yourself and other family members**

- Many parents report that they have become so focused on the child or young person who has run away that they seem to forget everything else.
- It is important to look after yourself! This is an incredibly stressful situation and as a parent you will need some help to get through it. Talk to your friends and family for support. Think about seeing a Counsellor, as sometimes it is good to have an outsider to talk to.
- Make sure you continue to look after yourself and try to do the things you normally do. If you have a sense of normality in your life it will make it slightly easier to cope. Try to set time aside for yourself and do something that you enjoy (even though you may not feel like it)! Activities that can help you to unwind and de-stress are particularly good eg relaxation, yoga.

***“If you’re not looking after yourself, how can you look after your kids? (Parent of a 16 year old runaway)”***

- Parents have reported that they have sometimes become so caught up in the runaway child that they forget about siblings. Remember that the siblings are worried too and if they are younger they may not understand what has happened. Allow them the opportunity to talk about it as well. Try to keep their normal activities going so that they have a sense of normality in their life too.

***“It was really hard but I had another child too and he had needs and I needed to be there for him too” (Parent of a 14 year old runaway)***

***“You need to talk to the younger siblings and even the older ones to explain what’s going on and how you feel and ask how they feel about it” (Parent of a 16 year old runaway)***

***Looking after yourself is probably the last thing on your mind but it is very important and it will help you to get through this!***

## SECTION 11

# What do I do if my child does not want to return home?

- **U**nderstand that they may feel confused and scared and may not know what to do at this point in time.
- **N**ever try to scare or frighten them into returning as they are more likely to leave again next time something goes wrong.
- **D**o let them know that they can return at any time. The door is always open for them.
- **E**nsure that you keep the communication channels open. Let them know you want to keep in touch with them and are worried about their safety and well being.
- **R**emember that relationships sometimes improve between children and their parents when they live in separate houses.
- **S**upport them emotionally but try not to tell them what to do.
- **T**reat your child with respect and understanding.
- **A**llow them to visit you or meet them in a neutral place
- **N**egotiate a way to keep in touch with your child. Can you write to them? Phone them? Visit them? Email or text?
- **D**o not encourage them to return by offering them whatever they would like. You will need to have a situation that involves both parties compromising and discussing the situation. If your child gets everything they want, there is likely to be difficulties next time a problem occurs at home.



There are services that offer family counselling which will be able to help you with managing this situation. If you can, encourage your child to attend counselling with you as sometimes a neutral party can help you resolve these difficulties.

***“I always feel better after I’ve talked with the counsellor” (Parent of a 14 year old runaway).***

***Even just talking about it helps. Someone on the end of the phone, that’s not involved. Even if they can’t help, it helps to talk” (Parent of a 14 year old runaway)***

## SECTION 12

# Refuges and alternative accommodation options



Many parents feel terrified by the prospect that their child may live somewhere else such as a refuge or an accommodation service. However, often this gives both the child and the parents some space from each other and this can help when trying to work things out.

### ***Types of Accommodation***

- **Short stay/ crisis accommodation refuges**  
These refuges are for young people who require immediate accommodation. These services have staff 24 hours a day. The most common age group for these refuges is 12 – 18 years of age. The usual length of stay can range from 1 day to three months.
- **Medium to long term accommodation**  
This is accommodation for young people who have developed some stability in their lives. These services are typically for young people aged 16 and over, as they frequently only have staff during the day.
- **Semi-independent and independent accommodation**  
Young people often move to semi-independent accommodation after being in medium to long-term accommodation. They may still receive staff support in areas such as health, budgeting, living skills, legal advice, family reconciliation and emotional support however the goal is to help young people find the appropriate accommodation given their situation. Sometimes this is returning home and sometimes this is living independently in the community.

### **Do I have to pay money to the refuge?**

No - the government will provide money to the refuge for the wellbeing of the child. The child will be given some pocket money and their expenses will be paid for from government benefits. The staff will help your child to organise this.

### **Can I visit my child at a refuge?**

This would normally depend on the reason why the child or/adolescent is at the refuge. The Refuge Staff and DOCS are likely to decide whether parents can visit the refuge. It is a good idea if you have the phone number of the refuge to discuss with your child's

key-worker or case manager what the best course of action is. In cases where a child is at risk of harm from a parent, only supervised access to the child may be allowed and this is unlikely to be at the refuge.

### **Is my child safe at a refuge?**

Most refuges have rules and curfews that children and young people need to follow in order to stay there. They will not be allowed to wander the streets at night and will be expected to help with chores, dinners etc. Where there are people under 16 years of age, refuges are staffed 24 hours and staff are available as needed. In some refuges for people over the age of 16 years, staff may not stay 24 hours but are generally on call for the residents if there are any problems.

### **What support do they get?**

They will have a key worker or case worker who will help the child or young person to make plans/goals, stick to them and working towards achieving the goals. These goals can and often include mediation with family, daily activities (school or work).

***“The staff at the Refuge were outstanding. There is not enough good stuff I could say about them. They let me know as a parent, as I was still her guardian, that she was okay or that she wasn’t and they let her know they were talking to me. Even though I wanted her home I knew she was safe and in good hands”  
(Parent of a 16 year old runaway)***



## SECTION 13

# What happens when my child wants to return home?

### If my child agrees to return home:

Listen to your child's feelings on the situation

- Understand what your child is saying. Ask questions to clarify what they mean and how they feel.
- Compromise – you and your child will both need to compromise and listen to each other to work things out. Sometimes it is helpful to access a counselling service to help you with mediation and/or counselling to determine how you can both compromise and manage future conflicts.
- Kindness – Your child needs to feel safe and needs to know that you care and want the best for them. A calm attitude will encourage them to be open to talk
- You will also need to explain your feelings to your child about the situation. They need to understand how scary the situation has been for you and what your feelings are



### **Do I discipline my child for running away?**

- It is up to each parent whether you decide to discipline your child if they return, however there are some things to keep in mind.
- Harsh discipline is likely to increase rebellion. If you plan to use discipline ask your child what they think is reasonable. This will help them to take some responsibility for their actions.

- The child may have left due to not liking the discipline at home, hence more discipline may not help the situation.
- Threats such as - “if you leave again, don’t bother coming back” may increase the distance between you and your child and push them further away.
- It may be more helpful to sit down and discuss with them **why** things went wrong and what you both can do to make it better. Depending on your child’s reasons for running away, it may be more reasonable to devote your time and energy into resolving the conflict in a compromise rather than punishing your child.
- Be clear about what your rules and expectations are for your child. Giving in to them and giving them everything that they want may not be helpful in the long run.

### **The rules at home**

#### ***Always check before setting any rules***

1. Are the rules reasonable?
2. Are the rules similar to the degree of freedom other children of the same age have?
3. Same as friends?
4. Age appropriate?

Many parents have suggested that it has been helpful to sit down with children who have been breaking the house rules repeatedly to discuss the rules. Ask your children what they think the rules should be (within reason) and try to come to an agreement together. You may want to talk about how the rules can change as the child gets older or behaves appropriately. If children have been involved in rule setting they may be more inclined to follow the rules.





## SECTION 14

# Tips for managing difficult behaviours in adolescents

Even though advice given by parents is usually right, most adolescents need to explore the world and make their own decisions and often make their own mistakes. This is one of the hardest parts of being a parent but sometimes you have to let them make the mistake so they can learn (unless they are doing something that is going to place them at high risk of harm).

Using “natural and logical consequences” is the most useful way of managing an adolescent’s difficult behaviours. Natural and logical consequences give the child the responsibility for their behaviour rather than the parents. It also means that children and adolescents learn from the natural and social order of events, about what behaviour is appropriate rather than from being told by their parents. The consequences must be logically linked to the behaviour in order to be effective.

Some examples of this are as follows:

**Refusing to do homework** - If your adolescent has homework remind them that there is a natural consequence for not doing their homework, that is they may not pass school. You cannot force them to do homework and the more you try to force them, the less likely they are to do it. Parents need to say I trust that you will make the right decision about your homework and that you will get it done on time. If you don’t do your homework the consequence is that you may fail school and may have trouble getting a job.

### **Untidy Room**

Parents need to express their feelings but it is always best not to lecture adolescents or the adolescent will switch off! Give the adolescent the responsibility for their actions to let them know they are moving into the adult world. Eg “I want your room to be tidied but from now on in this area of your life I feel that you should take responsibility. I will back off from telling you what to do. You need to make choices about the way you keep your room. I know you are responsible enough to make your own decisions”

### **Leaving clothes lying around on the floor**

Parents need to explain to the adolescent that he/she needs to take responsibility for his or her own belongings. Explain that if the clothes are not in the laundry or in a specified place that the consequence is that they will not be washed.

### **Curfews**

If your child repeatedly comes home after the set curfew you need to look at the curfew. Is it reasonable? Is it consistent with what other teenager’s curfews are? Negotiate this time with your adolescent. If the curfew is reasonable and the

adolescent repeatedly comes home late then you need to calmly speak to them. "I have said that I expect that you will be home by 12pm and I trust that you are responsible and that you will do the right thing. I worry when you come home late, but I know that you need to make your own decisions about this. However, if you are not responsible you will not be able to go out next time".

### **Drugs or alcohol**

It is important that you try to be open and honest with your child about their use of drugs and alcohol. Merely telling them that they are making a mistake or yelling at them is unlikely to help. Try to get some information from your local community centre about the different types of street drugs, the dangers and the effects of drugs. You can also ring ADIS (Alcohol & Drug Information Service) on 331 2111.

It is a good idea to talk through the information with your child. If they refuse to discuss it with you, leave them a copy of the information so that they can read it in their own time. Let them know that you expect that they will be responsible with their choice of whether to take drugs or not.

### **Swearing / Verbal Abuse**

If a verbal disagreement has occurred between you and your child and your child is swearing or verbally abusing you, it is important to ensure that you are not swearing back at them. Try to contain their behaviour before it gets to this point. They may be trying to provoke you and may want you to react so it is important not to overreact to this behaviour. If they get a reaction from you they are more likely to repeat the behaviour. Let them know that you will not tolerate this language or behaviour and that there is a consequence for it. Remember that you are the adult and often you have to be the one to walk away when conflict starts to escalate.



**Agreement between parents:** If there are two parents at home, both parents need to agree. Don't give your child the opportunity to play one adult off against the other!

**Dating** – when your adolescent starts to date there is very little that you can do. If you say that you do not approve of the person or the relationship, you are likely to drive your adolescent even further into the relationship and you may drive the adolescent away.

**Peer Group** - An adolescent's friends are most important to them. Parents need to be aware of this and be careful not to help their adolescent 'lose face' with their friends.

**Repeating yourself** – Repeating something over and over means the adolescent is likely to switch off and think that you are just nagging them.

**Parent Line**  
Help for Parents  
Phone: 132055

## Renegotiating With Your Teenager

**The Problem:** Parents sometimes find themselves in a situation where they have tried everything and still cannot seem to get through to their teenager. You love them but don't like some of what they say or do; you are worried about them, want them to learn a lesson but don't want them to get unnecessarily hurt in order to learn it. You find yourself resorting to their level of thinking and behaviour, battling with them on their ground.

**Your Situation:** If you are reading this it is likely that you are in some turmoil or predicament where you feel your teenager is calling the shots. She or he may have left home temporarily, is threatening to leave, or is simply not responding to any rules or directions in the home. Everything can appear to be going their way and you appear to have little option. Your fear may be that you will lose your son or daughter or that they will find life outside of home to be much more attractive than 'boring' old home with you 'nagging' them to death!

**Towards Solutions:** You are probably wishing that there was some way you could get through to your teenager. Your attempts to talk, tell, convince etc., are all seen as nagging. Our suggestion is that if what you are trying is not working, try something different. Our aim is to offer you a few ideas to keep you on track as a parent. After all, your aim is to show love and care to your teenager, not to end up screaming and shouting or feeling frustrated and angry that they are not listening.

### **Step 1 - Offer an Invitation**

You are the adult here, you have the maturity. Manage to get direct contact with your teenager, saying you want a short and straight talk, not a nagging session. If direct contact is not possible, a phone call or even a written note will do.

### **Step 2 - Opening Lines**

Face your teenager with reality. For example, they are over 14 years old, they can choose to live elsewhere, they can choose to not attend school or to continue to steal if they wish. YOU DON'T WANT THIS, but if they choose to do this, then you, as their parent have a responsibility to allow them to experience the consequences of their choices. You love them and don't want them to come to any harm; you would love them to accept the rules of your home, but if they can no longer do this, then it appears that THEY are making a decision to leave.

### **Step 3 - Being an Adult Means...**

Now proceed to let your adolescent know that you (and your partner) want them to stay and continue to be part of the family. Tell them that they are loved and wanted, you too want the 'nagging' to stop. What you also want is for meaningful talking, like adults to start .

After all they are almost ready to join the adult group of the family. They are asking for adult freedoms. You would like them to behave like an adult, so that you can then start treating

them as one (you really want that to happen). Adults have freedom to make many decisions, but they have RESPONSIBILITIES which come with those freedoms.

You are prepared to discuss and negotiate the freedoms as well as the responsibilities with them.

#### ***Step 4. Negotiating the OK List.***

Ask your adolescent to consider that if they also want everyone to be able to live together more successfully as a family, then together you can work this out. You should lead the way by stating clearly, or better still to write down a list of:

\* Some points which you feel are the most important ones. These may be house rules or responsibilities which are expected of people living in the house, including those which apply to your teenager. It is best to start with just a few points which include the bare minimum of what you are able to live with. For example, this may include 'Saying hello to each other in the morning', 'Everyone to be home by the agreed time on the weekend' or 'Everyone to be responsible for washing their own clothes.' Also include some privileges you think your adolescent would like.

\* Ask the teenager to read your points, see if they think they are grossly unfair and to comment if necessary. If they do comment, show them that you listen to what they have to say and BE FLEXIBLE. They may make a good point, one that can lead to a change in what you have written down.

\* Ask your teenager to write down their own points, responsibilities and freedoms they think are fair and reasonable. This gives you the opportunity to see how they think and feel about important things for them. You may learn a lot from this.

\* As with any negotiation, both sides need to give and take and meet in the middle, so although both parties may have given in a little, both have also gained what is most important to them.

\*Finally, together you can put together a final list of points that you both agree upon. This list is a starting point and one that can be re-negotiated as needs change.

#### ***Hints and Tips***

During all times in you renegotiating remember to BE AN ADULT, don't allow your adolescent to draw you in to their ways. Keep giving a clear message that you love them and want them to be part of the family. You want to be a parent and friend, not an enemy. Give yourself time to go over and over how you will say things, use another person to practice this with. Remember at all times, you are demonstrating how an adult communicates. Speak to your child clearly and calmly. Be firm, yet remain loving and caring. Listen to what your child is saying. If you follow the above steps you are likely to get a positive response. Indeed this could be the start of a new friendship with your teenager.

**Parent Line**  
**Help For Parents**  
**Phone 13 2055**

## **Support Services available in South West Sydney**

### **Child & Family Counselling Services**

South West Adolescent & Family Counselling team (12 –18 years and their families) (Liverpool, Fairfield & Bankstown)	9826 8077
South West Family Support Team (1-12 years & their families)	9607 8833
Reconnect (Fairfield & Liverpool)	9755 0233
Liverpool Community Health	9828 4844
Fairfield Community Counselling Team (Up to 12 years – call between 1pm - 4.30pm)	9794 1739
Bankstown Community Health	9780 2777
Anglicare Liverpool	9821 1014
Burnside Cabramatta	9728 4411
Burnside Minto	9824 7355
Centrecare	9822 9855
Parent Support Program – Fairfield	9756 1384
Private Psychologists (Contact Australian Psychological Society For a list of Psychologists in your area)	03 866 23300 1800 333 497
RAPS – Parramatta	9890 1500
Relationships Australia (all areas)	9418 8800 1300 364 277

### **Helplines for parents**

National Runaway Switch	1800 621 4000
Parent-Line	132 055
Department of Community Services Helpline:	132 111
Domestic Violence Helpline	1800 656 643
Salvo Care Line (24 hours)	9331 6000

### **Police Telephone Numbers**

Emergency	000
Liverpool	9821 8451
Fairfield	9728 0399
Green Valley	9607 1799
Cabramatta	9725 8999
Bankstown	9707 5299
Campbelltown	4620 1199

### **Websites to visit**

National Runaway Switch Board -	<a href="http://www.nrscrisisline.org/faq.asp">http://www.nrscrisisline.org/faq.asp</a>
Department of Community Services - (Includes information about the Children & Young Persons (Care & Protection) Act 1998 and information on parenting.	<a href="http://www.community.nsw.gov.au">http://www.community.nsw.gov.au</a>
Parenting Information	<a href="http://www.parenting.nsw.gov.au">http://www.parenting.nsw.gov.au</a>
Anglicare	<a href="http://www.anglicare.asn.au">http://www.anglicare.asn.au</a>
	<a href="http://www.relationships.com.au">http://www.relationships.com.au</a>
Mission Australia	<a href="http://missionaustralia.com">http://missionaustralia.com</a>
Families with drug Issues	<a href="http://www.fds.org.au">http://www.fds.org.au</a>
Parent line	<a href="http://www.centacare.org/help_parent.shtml">http://www.centacare.org/help_parent.shtml</a>

# Services for Children & Young People

## *Helplines*

Kids Helpline	1800 551 800
Youthline/Lifeline	131114 (24 hrs)
Emergency Youth Accommodation Line 24 hours	1800 424 830 9267 5918
Salvo Youth Line	9360 3000
Legal Advice for Under 18's	1800 101 810

## *Counselling / Support*

Adolescent & Family Counselling Team (Liverpool, Fairfield, Bankstown)	9826 8077
The Corner Youth Service Bankstown	9796 8633
Fairfield Liverpool Youth Health Team (FLYHT)	8717 1717
Reconnect (Fairfield & Liverpool)	9755 0233
South Western Sydney Area Mental Health Team (Need referral from GP, Counsellors, Paediatrician or other professionals)	8717 1700
Reachout (Support service for young people)	9818 3055