

## WHY DO CHILDREN RUN AWAY?

Reasons for children running away fall into two major categories...Running TO and Running FROM

- Examples of Running TO might include:
  - Visiting biological family members
  - Returning to neighborhoods where they feel familiar/comfortable
  - Seeking opportunities to engage in age-typical “teen” behaviors
  - Engaging in more dangerous behaviors such as experimentation with sex and drugs/alcohol
- Examples of Running FROM might include:
  - Escaping restrictions established in their placement
  - Avoiding consequences for breaking rules
  - Avoiding uncomfortable interactions/conflict

## WHAT CAN WE DO TO LESSEN THE LIKELIHOOD THAT OUR TEEN WILL RUN AWAY FROM HOME?

### **Address the Function of the Behavior: Provide what the Teen is Seeking within a Safe Environment**

By nature of working within a complicated system with complicated human conditions, there are often a significant number of variables that we have no control over. Other variables that may seem beyond our control, but with further consideration, we may find that we have opportunities to exert influence. When we really look at some of what kids are seeking on the streets- and the price they pay for access- we often find that we can not only compete...we can BEAT the streets.

### ***Ask yourself...What is this child really looking for? What is the true “reinforcer”?***

- If a child is looking for more freedom, consider evaluating the rules you have in place. Look for ways to compromise. Provide opportunities for the child to earn greater freedoms.
- If a child is running away to spend time with a boyfriend or girlfriend, invite the friend over. Offer a somewhat private area of your home. Order a pizza and a DVD. Agree that he or she will leave the home by midnight.
- If a child is running away to spend time in a familiar neighborhood, can we facilitate achieving this same level of comfort in the current neighborhood? What does being comfortable there mean to this child? Is it about knowing where to go for what? Knowing people? Is there a safety component?
- Even with more extreme behaviors, there is often room for influence if we look at the variables impacting the behavior. Consider a child who engages in promiscuous behavior when on run away.

I'd venture to say that this child is seeking a high magnitude emotional connection. Can we provide that at home? Yes!

## ☑ **Teach, Model, and Reinforce Negotiating/Conflict Resolution Skills**

The skill I most see lacking in teens is the ability to negotiate conflict or appropriately self-advocate. Often, kids run away to escape from what could be successfully addressed through simple negotiation.

- Kids skip classes because they lack the skills to negotiate with teachers.
- Kids quit jobs because they lack skills to negotiate with supervisors.
- Kids withdrawal from peer groups or follow peer groups they don't entirely jive with because they lack skills to negotiate with peers. (and their peers lack the skills to respond appropriately!)
- Kids run away from home or intentionally blow placements because they lack skills for negotiating with parents and/or peers in the home.

### **Empower your child!**

- Teach Negotiating Directly
  - During stable functioning, provide a tool checklist with steps for appropriately introducing a topic for negotiation. Tell your child, "We have conflicts and that's a good thing! Here's how we address them."
  - When you sense an issue, prompt your child through using the checklist to address the issue.
- Model Negotiating
  - Use negotiation when addressing issues with your child and with other members of the household.
- Reinforce Efforts to Negotiate.
  - Reinforce ANY efforts to appropriately resolve conflict. Use pivot to strengthen more appropriate behaviors.
  - Keep in mind that even when you are not agreeing with a child's terms, you can still reinforce efforts to negotiate by staying safe and fair and by praising their efforts.

## ☑ **Stay Close- Create an Environment that Promotes Safe and Open Communication.**

Often kids tell me that either they tried to talk to an adult and it didn't work... or that they didn't bother to talk to an adult because they expected it wouldn't work. Kids are always watching. They observe you in your interactions with others. They listen to your conversations, the jokes you make, your comments on songs and movies and they make assumptions about how you'll respond to them based upon how you responded in other situations.

### **Set the Tone for Safe and Open Communication**

- Convey sincerity in your exchanges through your facial expression, tone of voice, and body posturing. When chatting with your child, put non-urgent tasks on hold and devote your full attention.
- Ask open-ended questions to show interest and to obtain information.
- Give empathy statements

- Practice listening more than speaking. Rather than offering solutions, empower your child by coaching him or her in generating their own solutions.
- Be honest when sharing information
- Follow through on all agreements.

## **HOW SHOULD A CAREGIVER RESPOND WHEN A CHILD RETURNS FROM RUNNING AWAY?**

Keep in mind that returning from running away is a POSITIVE behavior. We want to avoid punishing this positive behavior by assigning a negative consequence right at the time the child returns. Therefore, how you respond when the child walks in the door is very important.

Consider why children return home after running away.

- Kids come home when they're tired, hungry, in need of a shower. After they've been raped or beaten or robbed. When they're lonely.
- In short, kids come back when being HOME sounds BETTER than being on the street...at least for the moment.
- Prove them RIGHT! Reinforce their choice to return to the placement with a safe and caring reception.
  - Attend to their physical needs. Are they hurt? Hungry? Tired? Do they need to shower or nap?
  - When physical needs have been met, use a "Stay Close" approach to discuss the running away episode.