

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.

[Editor's Note: The intent of this article is to support parents in situations where their child uses running away as a faulty problem-solving skill in response to rules or limits that are being set in the home. Sometimes there are underlying issues that may influence a child or teen to run away. This article is not intended to address situations that may possibly involve abuse, neglect or other issues.]

"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.

[Related: Learn how to teach problem solving skills to your teen.](#)

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.

[Related: Give your teen consequences that really work.](#)

“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.

This article comes from “Empowering Parents” is a weekly newsletter, online magazine and blog published by the Legacy Publishing Company, published at www.empoweringparents.com