

Minimizing Risks: Abduction and Runaways

Parents are constantly thinking about their children's safety and well-being. This is a normal part of the job description. Keeping yourself up to date and informed is paramount, because some of the risks that children face today and the concerns parents are dealing with are different than they were even half a generation ago. Likewise, risks and challenges change as your child gets older. As you read these tips, keep in mind that addressing the safety of younger children presents a different set of challenges than those you will be dealing with in the pre-teen or teenage years.

Minimizing Risks for Child Abduction

While abduction by a stranger is the most dangerous form of kidnapping, more kids are taken and harmed by friends or acquaintances. Further, a child or teen's concept of what constitutes a "stranger" is different from that of an adult, which can lead to confusion—and mixed messages—for the child. Therefore the most important safety messages to teach kids is not so much who to avoid but how to identify and to avoid potentially dangerous situations.

To minimize risks, parents may want to teach children some or all of the following:

- To know their own and their parents'/trusted adults' names and phone numbers with area code—as well as when to dial 911
- When home alone, never open the door to strangers or tell anyone that no adult is present
- What to do if separated from family/friends in a public place (e.g. approach a mother with children for help, or a place of business)
- To use the 'buddy system' whenever possible; make sure parents know where you'll be at all times
- Establish a route if kids have to walk alone to a bus stop, and make them aware of any safe houses or businesses on the way
- Make a list of "trusted adults" and never accept rides with anyone not on the list
- Teach children to share information with a parent or safe adult if anything makes them uncomfortable
- To trust their instincts about people, but also learn how to identify "safe and unsafe adults". Safe adults don't offer gifts to kids they don't know, ask kids for directions (or for other kinds of help like finding a lost puppy), ask kids to keep secrets from their parents
- Most importantly, kids must know they have the RIGHT to say "NO!" to an adult if something makes them feel uncomfortable, without fear of embarrassment or appearing rude. Further, they must know that should someone try to touch or grab them, they should shout "No! This is not my (mom/dad)!" and get away and tell a trusted adult

Further things to consider:

- DON'T let your child wear a visible name tag on clothing or gear. While it can be a good idea for ID purposes, if it's visible from a distance it could allow someone to gain information that could help him gain your child's trust
- If you are separated from your child's other parent, DO try to keep communication channels open. The great majority of parental abductions occur within relationships of high conflict
- You can download more safety tips on Child Find of America's website: childfindofamerica.org, as well as send for a DocuPak—a place to keep vital information about your child in the event the unthinkable occurs

Minimizing Risks: Abduction and Runaways *(continued)*

The Risks of Runaway Youth

The vast majority of missing children are runaways—about 1.5 million a year. One in seven young people between the ages of 10 and 18 will run away. Luckily, the great majority of these children return home voluntarily after a short period of time. 75% of runaways are female. 46% of runaway and homeless youth report having been physically abused. 38% report having been emotionally abused. 17% report sexual abuse by a family or household member. Between 6% and 22% of homeless girls are pregnant. Between 20% and 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT.

— Statistics courtesy of the National Conference of State Legislatures

There are certain “red flags” that most frequently signal that a child may be in danger of running away. The better you know your child and his or her emotional life and motivations, the more aware you will be of the risks, and better prepared to respond.

- Belonging to a “high risk” social group (e.g. gang involvement)
- Heightened family conflict (e.g. non-acceptance of love interest, gender identification, or becoming pregnant)
- Increasing academic problems/truancy
- Problems with bullying
- Drug/alcohol abuse
- Facing juvenile justice system
- Recent relocation (e.g. away from love interest)
- Lost rights/perceived unfairness of punishment (e.g. taking away phone, grounded)
- Develops online relationship (especially with someone long-distance)
- Placed in state care/foster home
- High ACEs score (Adverse Childhood Experiences—see: As Your Child Grows tip sheet)

Probably the best way to guard against having a runaway child is for your child to know you have an “open door” policy as a parent. This means that, whatever may be important to your child, they know they can talk to you about it without fear of repercussions or punishment. Interestingly, this is also proven to be the best way to encourage a runaway child to return home—a simple offer to accept the child home without punishment and to listen to their reasons for leaving, usually delivered via social media (sometimes a source of risk but here a useful tool in resolving a runaway situation). An example would be: *“We’re here to listen; we know that things must have been hard for you and it matters to us that you were upset enough to leave home. We will find a way to work things out with you. You’re not in trouble, we’re here to help.”*

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