



New Classes, Football Tryouts, and Peer Pressure:

Reducing Stress and Preventing Runaway Situations

By Maureen Blaha

When kids head back to school, parents and caretakers experience a mixed bag of feelings. You're happy their time is once again filled up, and most of them are excited to get involved at school—yet, at the same time, you worry about the academic, social, and deadline-related pressures that are kicking into high gear. That last part isn't just a gut feeling for parents.

Generally, during times of change like the back-to-school phase, the National Runaway Safeline (NRS)—which helps keep runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth safe and off the streets—observes a spike in calls to its 1-800-RUNAWAY crisis hotline and to live chat requests on its website.

There are so many things that parents need to protect their children from; sometimes, it comes down to protecting children from their own life choices. In the United States, between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth run away each year. If all of these young people lived in one city, it would be the fifth-largest city in country. Despite the numbers, running away remains a silent crisis—but prevention is possible and help is available.

There are a handful of ways in which parents can prevent a runaway situation. One of those is to better connect with kids before a crisis occurs.

- **Pay Attention.** Listen when your child is talking with you; don't feign interest while you are watching television, reading the paper, or using the computer. Children know the difference.
- **Discuss Feelings.** When parents share their feelings, children know it is safe to share their own. Talk about what it feels like to be a parent and encourage your child to talk about his or her feelings.
- **Create Responsibility.** Give your child choices, not orders. Help them understand the consequences of their actions. When punishments need to be administered, ask what they think would be appropriate. Make sure the punishment fits the "crime" and it is consistent with other actions you have taken.
- **Understand Your Child.** Try to sympathize with what your children are going through. Look at life, at least occasionally, from their point of view. Remember that when you were their age, your ideas seemed to make sense.

Many parents do everything in their power to make sure their children feel safe and happy, but that doesn't guarantee they won't decide to run away from their problems. There are a few signs parents can look for that may indicate their child is considering running away.

- **Changes in behaviors or patterns mean something is wrong.** Teens who suddenly stop eating or begin to overeat, sleep all day or never sleep, spend all their time with friends or never want to leave their room. Sudden mood swings may mean teens are unsettled and restless. They're not coping well with stress.
- **Rebellious behavior is often the start of trouble.** Dropping grades, truancy, breaking rules at home, or picking fights with family members are all signs that your child is having problems.
- **Disclosure of intentions to run away.** Some youth will hint that they want to run away; some will outright threaten their family with running. Sometimes their family will hear rumors through friends, school officials, or other parents that their child is thinking of leaving home.
- **Accumulation of money and possessions.** To survive, runaways need money and resources. Some runaways prepare for their run by slowly withdrawing cash from

their savings accounts, if they have one, or they accumulate money in another way. Keeping a bag or backpack of clothes in the closet might mean they are waiting to make a quick escape.

It is important to confront suspicions right away. Parents should clearly, calmly let their child know they are concerned about them and communicate that their behavior makes them afraid they might run away from home. The child should be invited to talk about what is troubling him/her and be supported in finding positive ways to cope with stress; at the same time, parents should let the child know that they don't want them to run away and they're committed to helping the family work things out. For more extensive assistance, NRS has a database of agencies that provide individual and family counseling.

Regardless of why a child is considering running, NRS is here to help. NRS is the go-to resource for runaway, homeless, throwaway, and at-risk youth and their families. Its free, confidential 1-800-RUNAWAY hotline, and its website, 1800RUNAWAY.org, provide support and access to resources 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Youth can also text the code 66008 to receive an automatic response featuring links to the hotline or live chat.

While it's important as a parent to pay attention to this issue throughout the year, November's National Runaway Prevention Month (NRPM) is a special time during which we can join together to raise awareness about the youth runaway crisis and educate each other about prevention and solutions. Visit 1800RUNAWAY.org to learn more about NRPM and NRS, or to find more tips. ■

Maureen Blaha is the executive director of the National Runaway Safeline (NRS), an organization with the mission to keep America's runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth safe and off the streets. Additionally, Blaha has been a featured speaker at the National Human Trafficking Awareness Day (2014) and of the Special Victims Assistance Unit for the FBI (2005 and 2010). She was invited to speak to UK parliament to help launch The Children's Society of England's national Safe and Sound Campaign (2005), and represented the runaway population at the groundbreaking White House Conference on Missing, Exploited and Runaway Children (2002). Blaha was selected as the recipient of the CASA of Cook County 2010 Spirit Award and selected to participate in the Laura and John Arnold Giving Library for high-end donors. Blaha serves on the Interstate Commission for Juveniles, appointed in 2009. Blaha was also selected as an expert for Kids in the House (2012).