



What Parents Should Know About Runaways

When is a child considered a runaway?

A child is a runaway if they are under 18 years of age and leave home without the parent's permission, UNLESS the child:

- Is married OR
- Has a court order letting them live away from home.



What can I do if my child runs away?

You can call the police and make a missing child report. The police use a lot of judgment about how actively to look for the runaway. They look at things like the child's age and emotional state. If you can give a specific address where the child is staying, the police can look for the child there.

If the police find my child, what happens next?

The police decide how to handle the situation. The police may give a runaway child a ticket (also called a "citation"). Or the police may just give the child a warning. The police can also decide if they want to bring the child home, to a shelter, or let the child stay where they are.

Does my child have to go to court after getting a runaway citation?

If the parents ask the court to dismiss the runaway citation, then the child may not have to go to court. If the citation is not dismissed, the child and parent must go to court.

What happens in court?

Procedures vary by county. If the case goes to court, there may be several hearings. The court listens to the police, prosecutor, and to the child and the family. The court decides if the child is a runaway, and what kind of help the child and family need. There may be other steps if the child is member of or is eligible for membership in a federally recognized Tribe. See our fact sheet [Your Rights Under the Indian Child Welfare Act](#).

What can the court decide?

- The court can find that the child is "in need of protection or services." This is called a "CHIPS" case.
- The court can order services for the child and parents. Services might be foster care, individual or family counseling, parenting classes, or chemical dependency treatment. Even if the court doesn't order any services, families can get services voluntarily.
- The court can order the child to stay home.

- The court can order the child to pay a fine or do community service.

Court involvement can sometimes help, but there is no guarantee that it can solve your problem.

Do I have to hire a lawyer?

If you are low income, ask the county if you can get a free lawyer to represent you or your child. In any court case, both you and your child have the right to hire your own lawyers, if you feel that you need one.

What if someone takes in my child without my permission?

That person may be “harboring a runaway.” It is a crime to take away parental rights from a parent. This is true even when the person taking your child is the child’s other parent, if taking them is a violation of a custody or parenting time court order. The person could also be charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor. The police don’t often charge people with “harboring” unless another crime is also involved.

As a parent, what can I do to help my child and my family?

- **Go to all of your child’s court appearances.** Ask questions if you don’t understand.
- **Write down the names and numbers of everyone** involved in your child’s case – for example, social workers, child protection workers, and their supervisors.
- **If you think your child might run away, try to plan a safe place** that they can run to. You might want to let your child stay with a relative for a while. Let them know that this is an option. Another option is to check if there is a shelter for runaway youth in your county. Your child may be able to stay there temporarily.
- **Use the help offered in your area.** Local services might be helpful for you and your child. This might be things like:
 - chemical dependency counseling
 - individual or family counseling
 - parenting education
 - day care
 - mental health services



Services differ from county to county. To find services in your area call 2-1-1 statewide. You can also text your zip code to 898-211 for local resources or chat online at www.211unitedway.org.

* “Parent” is used in this fact sheet to mean parents, legal guardians, or legal custodians.

Fact Sheets are legal information NOT legal advice. See a lawyer for advice.

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