

Just in case...

**Guidelines in case
your child is or might
someday be a runaway**



National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®

**1-800-THE-LOST®
(1-800-843-5678)**

www.missingkids.com

Guidelines in case your child is or might someday be a runaway

When running away a child becomes vulnerable as soon as he or she leaves home — potentially exposed to drugs, alcohol, crime, sexual exploitation, pornography, and/or prostitution. In the face of this many families may feel guilty, depressed, or even paralyzed by fear. It is important to be candid and direct with law enforcement concerning the circumstances that may have led to your child running away. Family members may also be reluctant to share all the details of their child's life if they are concerned doing so could call into question their possible neglect or mistreatment of the child or reveal information potentially damaging to their credibility or the child's credibility. Family members may also think if they are forthcoming about their child's lifestyle, law enforcement will not work as hard to find the child. It is important for family members to inform law enforcement of their child's recent behavior such as a change in personality, demeanor, or friends; drug use; or gang activity. Just remember all questions by law enforcement are directed at helping to ensure your child's prompt and safe return.

It is also important for families to remain calm and rational when they discover their child has run away. Don't panic or lose sight of the immediate task at hand — to locate the runaway and return him or her safely home.

Immediate Action

The first hours following the runaway episode are the most important in locating a child. While many runaway children return home on their own over time, it is critical to take every action available to you to help quickly locate and safeguard your child if he or she should run away. To help locate your runaway child, **immediately** follow the steps noted below.

- **Think clearly and logically about where your child might be and the reasons why he or she might have run away. Try to remain calm.**
- **Check with your child's friends, school, neighbors, relatives, after-school activity leader, or anyone else who may know of or have clues about your**

child's whereabouts. Ask them to notify you if they hear from your child. Also ask them to assist you in the search. Check all methods by which your child communicates with others from traditional telephones to cellular telephones and all online electronic devices and services for sources of leads or other information concerning groups or people with whom your child may have been communicating. Also look for information your child may have been obtaining as this may reveal clues about planned trips or interests. Let law enforcement know if there has been a noticeable increase in the use of the Internet by your child. It may shed light on a planned meeting between your child and someone he or she "met" online. Make sure all information discovered by anyone regarding your child's potential whereabouts is passed on to the investigating officer.

- **Report the runaway to local law enforcement.** Ask that an officer respond to your home and take a report. Write down the officer's name, badge number, telephone number, and report number. Find out who will follow-up the initial investigation. Inform the reporting officer of any previous runaway episodes, whether reported or not.
- **Keep a notebook and record all information about the investigation.** This is a good way to keep track of everyone you talked to about your child and the circumstances and issues you discussed.
- **Make sure law enforcement enters your child's name and description into the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Crime Information Center's (NCIC) database.** Law-enforcement agencies across the country have access to NCIC. This information will **not** give your child a record with law enforcement, but it may aid in his or her safe return.

If your local law-enforcement agency won't enter information about your child into NCIC's database, contact county, state, or federal law enforcement in your area to make the entry. Law enforcement must enter your child's information into the FBI's NCIC

database and your state's law-enforcement system database within 2 hours of receiving your missing-child report (42 U.S.C. § 5780). You may contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678) to verify information about your child has been entered into NCIC.

Remember no matter what you have been told, there is no law requiring a waiting period for reporting a missing child, who is younger than 21, to law enforcement or for entry into NCIC. Law enforcement is not allowed to observe a waiting period before taking a report from you. This means when you call law enforcement to report your child is missing, law enforcement cannot tell you to wait a certain amount of time to see if your child returns home before they take the report (42 U.S.C. § 5779).

- **Provide law enforcement with a recent photograph of your child that accurately depicts his or her current appearance.** If you have them also make fingerprints, deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) samples, and dental records and prints available to law enforcement. This information may need to be added to the existing NCIC entry.
- **Confirm law enforcement passes on the necessary information about your child to the missing-child clearinghouse within your state or territory.**
- **Call or visit local spots your child may frequent,** and check with area hospitals and treatment centers. If your child was employed, call his or her employer or coworkers.
- **Report your missing child to NCMEC at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) if you have not already done so.** NCMEC provides free services to families and operates the nation's clearinghouse for missing and sexually exploited children. After you have reported your child as missing to your local law-enforcement agency, call NCMEC's toll-free telephone number at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) to learn more about what NCMEC may do to help. Staff members are available 24 hours a day, 7

days a week to assist. Ask about other missing-child organizations throughout the United States that may assist in the search.

- **Talk with your NCMEC Case Manager about the benefits of using the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) as an additional tool in the search for long-term missing children.** NamUs is a program created by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) in response to the challenges involved in investigating and solving missing- and unidentified-person cases. It contains databases storing detailed information about missing persons and unidentified remains and may be searched for possible matches between cases. Talk with your NCMEC Case Manager about the benefits of using NamUs databases as another avenue in the search for your missing child. Currently NCMEC recommends entry of information for runaway children after six months of the date of last contact. NamUs is a free, online system that may be searched by the public, law-enforcement officials, medical examiners, and coroners to help solve these types of cases. For more information regarding NamUs and the services offered visit their website at www.namus.gov.
- **Call your local runaway hotline, if there is one, as well as the National Runaway Switchboard at 1-800-786-2929.** Ask if your child has left a message, and leave a message for your child. Also contact alternative, youth-housing options such as traditional, group-living shelter programs; independent or transitional living programs; and agencies using the "host home" model. There are more than 560 facilities throughout the country assisting those age 17 or younger and these facilities may be able to give you assistance and advice.¹
- **Make, or have someone else make posters or fliers of your missing child.** Be sure to use a current photograph and description of your child accurately depicting his or her appearance along with any known information about the disappearance that may be released to the public. Make certain your fliers

include the name and telephone number, **including the area code**, of the local law-enforcement agency as well as the city and state. Remember, information detailing telephone numbers without area codes or with local streets and landmarks are of little value if the fliers are sent outside the immediate area. Do not include your home, work, or cellular telephone numbers or e-mail address on the flier, because leads should be forwarded to local law enforcement only. Traditional flier-distribution methods include placing them in local store windows and on bulletin boards. They also include distributing them at local truck stops, youth-oriented businesses, hospitals, treatment centers, law-enforcement agencies, and local and out-of-town spots your child may frequent. For more distribution ideas *see* “Publicize the case” within the “Follow-Up Actions” section.

NOTE: If you have reason to believe your child may have been abducted or enticed to leave by anyone, await law enforcement’s arrival and follow their direction about further actions to take. Remember, disturbing or removing items from your home and/or the area where your child was last seen could destroy key clues about the disappearance and/or evidence at a potential crime scene. In the case of a nonfamily abduction, the first hours are the most critical in safely recovering a child.² Thus do not delay in contacting law enforcement and explaining all of the facts leading to the belief your child has been abducted.

Follow-Up Actions

- **Recheck with people such as your child’s friends, school personnel, neighbors, current employer, and coworkers.** Do not overlook your child’s old boyfriends or girlfriends; people from other areas of life including camp, a faith-based organization, after-school activities, and the neighborhood; friends from out of town; friends involved in interests and hobbies; contacts made in any online manner; each teacher, guidance counselor, and principal in your child’s school; anyone who currently works or in

the past worked in your home who may know your child; and past employers.

Be sure to explain the seriousness and urgency of the situation; ask if anyone else they know is missing; and, in the case of friends, ask to speak to their families to corroborate the information given.

- **Recheck with relatives** and be sure to include, if applicable, any stepfamily, relatives of a noncustodial family member, ex-spouses and their relatives, birth parents, and members of a foster family. Again, be sure to explain the seriousness and urgency of the situation to each person, and ask if anyone else they know is missing.
- **Check with other people in your community** who may have seen your child before he or she left or may have information such as about a “favorite” spot where he or she could have gone. Ask people such as employees on day and night shifts in your neighborhood, employees of local businesses, those who work at child-oriented organizations or clubs who may know where kids like to “hang out,” current and past babysitters, mail carriers, and the family doctor. Also check with the armed forces in case your child has enlisted.
- **Search for clues** in places and items such as your child’s room, school locker, journal, notes, letters, calendars, computer files, wireless devices, electronic mail, current and past traditional and cellular telephone bills, bank accounts, automatic-teller-machine (ATM) and debit transactions, and credit-card bills. Check with the motor vehicle licensing and registration bureau within your state or territory, and other regions, if your child could have registered to drive. If your child has taken someone’s vehicle other than his or her own, consider reporting the vehicle as being stolen. Using your child’s Social Security number attempt to obtain information through the FBI, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Social Security Administration. Also check for any online recruitment options your child may have used. Children have also been known to travel with other runaway children such as by following their favorite musical group across the country.

- Ascertain if your child has a piece of favorite music, photograph, or some other proprietary item and determine if it is missing. Seek the advice of individuals such as close friends or siblings who are able to help identify what is important to your child. Officers may obtain many clues about the disappearance by looking for what is left behind and what may or may not be missing. Most importantly provide any evidence to investigators that indicates your child may be the victim of foul play. Law enforcement should be alert to information and observations that are suspicious in nature and do not fit the fact pattern of a “typical” runaway case. Make law enforcement aware of any new nicknames adopted by your child. Also inform them of any clothing or symbols on your child’s possessions that may offer clues regarding your child’s whereabouts.

- **Publicize the case** by expanding flier distribution countywide, statewide, nationwide, and internationally, if circumstances warrant. Besides the traditional distribution methods mentioned earlier, discuss additional distribution options with your local law-enforcement agency and NCMEC, such as by e-mail, facsimile, the Internet, and cellular telephone, to quickly reach individuals, groups, and organizations.

Also take advantage of any media attention via radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet to let people know of your child’s disappearance. If you have a video of your child, the electronic media may be more willing to assist, as they are a visual medium and people often respond to a moving picture. In these communications be sure to show love and concern for your child’s safety and include an appeal asking the child to return home.

- **Use all available technologies to assist in the search.** For instance outgoing messages may be left for your child and others on your cellular and home telephone/answering machine, with an answering service, and/or on voice mail. In order to keep your telephone number free at all times, explore the possibility of getting a second telephone line to be used

as a facsimile line, a connection to an online service/ the Internet, and/or as an additional telephone line. Cellular telephones, wireless devices, e-mail, instant messaging, and social-networking websites may also allow others to reach you at all times.

Telephone calling features, such as Call Trace, Caller ID, Call Return, and Call Waiting, may help in your search. Many telephone services may now also include online voicemail and an online caller ID log as well as notifications of messages on your wireless devices. If your child calls you from a cellular telephone it may be possible to determine the geographic location from which the call was placed by obtaining cellular-tower records from the wireless carrier. Check with your service provider to see if these or other calling features are available in your area to assist in your search.

Look for calls that may be found in missed, dialed, and received calls on home and cellular telephones used by both your child and you and bills of all online devices. Clues may also be found in incoming and outgoing text, picture, and video messages on all online devices used by your child. When receiving a collect call initiated by an operator, ask the operator for “time and charges” to try to determine the telephone number/location from which the call was placed. For collect calls placed automatically by the caller, contact your service provider to see if the telephone number and location from which the call was placed may be obtained.

- Have experts analyze wireless devices for possible clues of your child’s whereabouts. Be sure investigators use caution when attempting to gather information from your child’s wireless devices. Law enforcement or other trained specialists should be called on to recover and evaluate all valuable evidence. They need to look for clues such as sent, received, and saved e-mails; contact lists; instant messaging logs; cookies; history lists of websites visited; photographs; videos; and bookmarks. Electronic mail may be a means of tracing a person’s location when the address is saved and an online service is

able to provide information about the user. Also law enforcement needs to look for clues in any chat, dating, and social-networking websites your child has visited. On social-networking websites people may create online profiles with personal information such as their age, sex, hobbies, and interests. While these profiles help kids “connect” and share common interests, potential exploiters can and do use these profiles to search for victims.³

- **Consider ordering *When Your Child is Missing: A Family Survival Guide* (NCJ 228735) at 1-800-851-3420 or www.ncjrs.gov.** This guide contains helpful information about your role in the search for and recovery of your missing child. It may also be viewed and downloaded at NCMEC’s website, www.missingkids.com.
- **Check with the investigating officer** frequently to see what follow-up has been performed by law enforcement regarding your child’s case.

If Your Child Contacts You But Is Not Yet Ready To Return Home

- **Show love and concern, not anger, blame, or fear.** Remember the goal is to help work through problems together as a family with everyone’s involvement and have your child return home.
- **Avoid conversations about punishment or discipline when you have the chance to communicate.**
- **Ask law enforcement to assist you in picking up your child from a particular location, or have law enforcement pick up your child and bring him or her to you if you think a confrontation may occur during the pick up.**
- **Encourage your child to contact a local runaway shelter or the National Runaway Switchboard at 1-800-786-2929 for assistance.**
- **Ask if you may stay in touch.** If so, set specific plans regarding a form of contact such as through a traditional or cellular telephone, mailing address, electronic mail, facsimile number, or third party.

When Your Child Returns Home

When your child is recovered or returns home, remember to show love and concern for his or her safety and well-being — **not** anger or fear. If you react angrily, your child may feel unwanted, misunderstood, and unloved. Make sure your child understands you care about what happens to him or her.

Promptly notify law enforcement, the missing-child clearinghouse, NCMEC, the National Runaway Switchboard, and anyone else who may have assisted you.

If your child has been away for an extended period of time, a complete medical examination is needed when he or she returns home including tests for sexually transmitted diseases.

Most importantly, when your child returns, try to resolve the problems in your family prompting your child to have left home in the first place, especially if those unresolved issues could lead to another runaway incident. If you are unable to effectively address family problems, seek the assistance of a trained counselor or professional.

If finding a counselor on your own becomes difficult, contact NCMEC’s Family Advocacy Division (FAD). FAD provides case-specific intervention designed to enhance service delivery to the families served by NCMEC. Staffed by master-level, trained, child-welfare professionals, FAD proactively works with families, law enforcement, social-service agencies, other family-advocacy agencies, and legal professionals to provide technical assistance regarding reunification practices for missing children, training, referrals, support, and crisis-intervention services. FAD also coordinates the Family Advocacy Outreach Network, a proactive initiative designed to partner with licensed treatment professionals throughout the United States who are able to provide brief therapeutic intervention or long-term support on a *pro bono* or sliding-fee scale basis to families served by NCMEC. In addition FAD manages Team HOPE (Help Offering Parents Empowerment). Team HOPE provides assistance to families with missing or sexually exploited children by offering peer support, resources, and empowerment from trained volunteers. Contact FAD by e-mail at familyadvocacy@ncmec.org or telephone toll-free at 1-877-446-2632 extension 8373.

Families also may contact the local department of social services, family services, or other public or private agencies that help families. School personnel, members of the clergy, or the law-enforcement community may also direct you to available services and resources. If possible make these arrangements before your child returns, so the services may be immediately accessed upon his or her return.

It may be necessary for your child to go to a runaway shelter or other government-sanctioned housing option while the family works toward resolving problems. A trained counselor may help you make this decision.

Preparation...Just in Case

There are several ways families may be prepared in the event their child runs away. While some of these measures may be more appropriate for a younger or older child, they all provide valuable information to aid in the recovery of a runaway.

- Keep a complete and updated written description of your child including hair and eye color, height, weight, complexion, and date of birth. In addition the description should include identifiers such as eyeglasses or contact lenses, braces, body piercings, tattoos, and/or other unique physical attributes.
- Take color photographs of your child every six months or more often if your child's appearance changes such as due to loss of a tooth or a change in hair style. Head and shoulder portraits from different angles, such as those taken by school photographers, are preferable; however, candid photographs are sometimes more representative of how your child looks than posed photographs. Consider having these photographs in an electronic format in order to more quickly and easily disseminate them.
- Consider recording videos of your child to show movements and mannerisms and update the videos whenever your child's appearance has changed.
- Make sure your dentist prepares full dental charts and prints for your child and updates them with each exam or when dental work is performed. Also have dental prints taken and update those every 2 years

until your child is 18. If you move, get a copy of these dental records to keep in your files until a new dentist is found.

- Find out from your doctor where your child's medical records are located. All identifying marks such as permanent scars, birthmarks, blemishes, broken bones, and medical needs should be recorded.
- Arrange with your local law-enforcement agency to have your child fingerprinted. The agency will give you the fingerprint card. They will **not** keep a record of your child's prints.
- Consider having a DNA sample taken from your child as this is rapidly becoming the "gold standard" for identification. There are many DNA-collection kits available, but it is simple for you to collect a sample. For example an old toothbrush used by your child is rich with his or her DNA. Allow the toothbrush to air dry and place it in a brown envelope, have your child lick the envelope shut, and label the envelope. The same procedure may be used for baby teeth, a hairbrush used exclusively by your child for at least one month, and dried blood on a bandage. Store the envelope in something such as a shoebox at room temperature in a dry place away from heat. Each family member should use a separate shoebox. The DNA sample should be good for up to six or seven years.
- Consider giving your child a global-positioning system (GPS) enabled wireless device or using technological applications that allow for tracking the approximate, real-time location of a wireless device.
- Consider providing your child with a pre-paid calling card or personal, toll-free number to allow him or her to make calls free-of-charge at any time from traditional or cellular telephones.
- Be aware of what websites your child is participating in, including social-networking websites, and what personal information he or she may be revealing online. Know who each of your child's friends are on instant-message buddy lists and social-networking lists of friends.

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) was established in 1984 as a private, nonprofit organization. Per 42 U.S.C. § 5773 and other federal statutes NCMEC is authorized by Congress to perform 19 core functions including the operation of a national, 24-hour, toll-free telephone line by which individuals may report information regarding the location of a missing child and request information about the procedures necessary to reunite a child with his or her legal custodian; operation of the national resource center and information clearinghouse for missing and sexually exploited children; provision of technical assistance and training in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of cases involving missing and sexually exploited children; and operation of a CyberTipline® for reporting Internet-related, child sexual exploitation.

A 24-hour, toll-free telephone line, **1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)**, is available in Canada and the United States for those who have information regarding missing and sexually exploited children. The “phone free” number is 001-800-843-5678 when dialing from Mexico and 00-800-0843-5678 when dialing from many other countries. For a list of other toll-free numbers available when dialing from specific countries visit www.missingkids.com, and from the home page respectively click on the “More Services” and “24-Hour Hotline” links. The CyberTipline is available worldwide for online reporting of these crimes at www.cybertipline.com. The TDD line is 1-800-826-7653. The NCMEC business number is 703-224-2150. The NCMEC facsimile number is 703-224-2122. The NCMEC website address is www.missingkids.com.

For information about the services offered by NCMEC’s other offices, call them directly in California at 714-508-0150, Florida at 561-848-1900, New York/Buffalo at 716-842-6333, New York/Mohawk Valley at 315-732-7233, New York/Rochester at 585-242-0900, and Texas at 512-465-2156.

To learn more about the existence and nature of other programs being carried out by federal agencies to assist missing and sexually exploited children and their families visit www.ncjrs.gov or call 1-800-851-3420 to obtain *Federal Resources on Missing and Exploited Children* (NCJ 216857).

A number of NCMEC publications, addressing various aspects of the missing- and sexually exploited-child issue, are available free-of-charge in single copies by contacting the



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Endnotes

¹Gordon J. Vance, National Runaway Switchboard, personal communication, September 10, 2010.

²Katherine M. Brown, Robert D. Keppel, Joseph G. Weis, and Marvin E. Skeen. *Investigative Case Management for Missing Children Homicides: Report II*. Olympia, Washington: Office of the Attorney General, State of Washington, and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, May 2006, page 13.

³*Keeping Kids Safer on the Internet: Tips for Parents and Guardians*. Alexandria, Virginia: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2006, page 5.