

Reasons Children Run from Care

A range of factors, both internal and external to placements, may prompt children to run from care. Some factors specific to the child welfare system can increase the likelihood of running away. It is important to be aware of both the underlying reasons and immediate triggers for running behavior for each child or youth who is in the custody of the child welfare agency.

Child-Specific Reasons for Running

Children leave care to feel a sense of control over their lives...it is a temporary fix of power and a need to find a place to heal themselves.

—Celeste Edmunds, former foster youth

Research indicates that young people run from care placements for a variety of reasons (Biehal & Wade, 2002):

- They are unhappy about separation from their families.
- They are unhappy in their placements. This may be because they do not want to be in the custody of the child welfare agency or the particular placement, their caregivers or foster parents mistreat or maltreat the children in their care, the placement fails to address the child's individual needs, or the placement creates a mix of children that is not conducive to the well-being of all or the management of the household.
- Running away is a strategy they developed at home or in past placements to respond to difficulties, trauma, and victimization.

- They are encouraged or intimidated by other residents in the homes or foster care, leading them to run with others to gain acceptance by peers or to run away alone to escape.
- They run as a reaction to feeling angry or upset.
- They run as a reaction to restrictions imposed by foster parents, particularly for those children unused to any boundaries being set for their behavior in the past.
- They run to return to families in the hope that they might be able to remain with them.
- They run to spend time with friends.
- They are drawn to the apparent attractions of street life including, but not limited to, criminal activity and prostitution.

Awareness and understanding of young people's motivation for running from care is a vital element of any strategy to deter them from repeating this behavior.

System-Specific Reasons for Running: The Effects and Consequences of Placement and Staffing

The environment of foster care can, by itself, have a significant effect on the likelihood of a child running away (SEU, 2002). The number of children who run from individual foster homes vary widely—some homes have no children who run away, whereas other have several. If agencies or foster families handle the same types of children and report radically different AWOL rates, this should prompt investigation. Such a disparity may suggest different interpretations of reporting requirements or underlying problems in the quality of care (Ross, 2001).

Research suggests that the culture of individual homes is likely to have a strong effect on rates of running. In homes with little evidence of structure and authority, children feel that they can come and go as they please. In contrast, children in homes with a sense of well-supported foster parents who demonstrate nurturing leadership tend to have lower rates of running away (SEU, 2002).

Sometimes running away is the most functional response to a specific living arrangement.

—Robin Nixon, Director, National Foster Care Coalition, *Connect for Kids*

Wade and Biehal (1998) found that in residential care with high rates of going missing, senior management in the units failed to offer clear leadership, staff morale was low, and staff appeared overwhelmed by a sense of fatalism about their ability to protect children or control their behavior (Biehal & Wade, 2000). Likewise, the regimes and cultures in homes where running away was less of a problem shared certain characteristics (Biehal & Wade, 2002):

- Heads of households had a clear view of how the home should operate and provided strong leadership.
- Staff felt well supported and morale was reasonably high.
- Staff had the opportunity to discuss and agree on a consistent approach to individual children.
- Young people were involved in negotiating acceptable boundaries and patterns of behavior.

Wade and Biehal (1998) also found that residential staff often feel demoralized and powerless to intervene when young people run away. Clear leadership and staff teams involvement in developing plans for each child is needed to reinforce staff's confidence in their ability to intervene effectively, with the knowledge that their intervention will occur with mutual support from their colleagues. This strategy should also facilitate a consistent response within the agency when children go missing.

Finally, the case management role of many practitioners, along with workload pressures, can result in little opportunity for direct work with young people in care (Biehal & Wade, 2002). If a case management approach is used, youth do not have a trusted professional to rely on if they are unhappy in their placements. Workload pressures can compromise the essential planning required to ensure necessary

service interventions are performed. Both aspects can have the indirect effect of encouraging youth in care to leave (Wade & Biehal, 1998).

The motivations that prompt young people to go missing are complex. Both individual and environmental factors influence and explain this phenomenon. Both have broad implications for the development of preventive services for children, teens, and families; interagency approaches to supporting young people; and the nature of foster care provision. The following sections on the prevention, response, and resolution of missing from care episodes discuss these implications.