

CASA Conversations



California **CASA**
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN



*This project was generously
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Youth Runaway/AWOL from Placement

Introduction

Youth leave placements without permission for a variety of reasons – and for varying lengths of time. Some will just leave for several hours, others for months at a time. It is important to try to keep lines of communication open when a youth is on runaway status, and begin this long before the youth runs away. Having an open, non-judgmental relationship with your CASA youth will help him feel safe and comfortable discussing concerns and reasons he may want to run away, and also make it more likely that he will contact you if he does run away.

Make sure you know your local program's protocol for runaway youth.

The Facts

Between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth run away in a year (National Runaway Safeline)

Some of the reasons a youth may run away include:

- Distancing themselves from their problems
- Need for a time out
- Boredom
- Frustration or anger
- "Drama"
- Anticipation of bad news related to family reunification
- Easy opportunity or accompanying another youth
- Desire to have fun, to party, it's a holiday....
- Missing family
- Need to gain "control" over a situation
- Disregard for the consequences

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Former foster youth share why they ran away:

"You're running away from a place you don't feel safe to a place where you do feel safe." – Jynnah

"They cut off the TV in my group home. Okay – I'll go to my friend's house and watch TV." – Terrell

"Everyone seems to think if you AWOL, it's because you're disrespectful, or you want to prostitute yourself or sell drugs. But those aren't the only reasons." – Brianna

Remember, teenagers' brains are still developing, and at this age, they are still learning about actions/reactions and consequences. The following questions are geared to help a young person think about options and consequences when they discuss wanting to run away, or are dealing with a problem.

- Can I improve my situation instead of leaving?
- Do I have any other options?
- What would need to change to make me want to stay?
- What will I do if I get sick or get hurt?
- How will I stay safe? Where will I sleep? How will I eat?
- Who can I count on to help me? If I end up in trouble, who will I call?
- What will happen when I return? Where will I go?
- What is my plan? Do I have a plan?

In many situations, your youth might feel that running away is the only way to get what they want, and unfortunately, sometimes this is true. AWOLing from a placement you hate is a surefire way to get yourself kicked out, and when your life feels out of control, doing what YOU want can make you feel in control.

*"We're already trained to be in survival mode."
– Emily*

*"When I ran away, I was never scared. I always had somewhere to go."
– Brianna*

"I was never a disrespectful child. I was an, 'I'm gonna do what I'm gonna do' child." – Katina

"If I've already told you what the issue is, and nothing has happened, I'm gonna run. Help me get what I want." – Unique

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Starting a CASA Conversation

If a youth runs away, do your best to stay in contact with them. Let them know they can call you (if you feel comfortable, give them your cell number; if not, have them call the CASA office).

Here are some suggested questions to ask, or to have them ask themselves if they are on the run:

- Are you safe?
- How do you know you are safe?
- Are you staying in the same place, or moving around?
- How are you paying for what you need?
- Are you staying with friends? Are there adults there?
- Can I see you?
- May I tell your social worker I spoke with you?
- Are you going to school?
- Will you go to school?
- Do you have transportation to school?
- Can we meet in a neutral location to discuss your concerns?

What can a CASA do? Listen, and don't judge:

*"Don't judge us off
our AWOLing."
– Katina*

*"If you can listen, that's all I want
somebody to do. You may not agree, but
just listen." – Unique*

Remember, too, that running away can become a coping mechanism. Some former foster youth say that running away became their immediate, automatic response to any problems that arose in their lives:

Emily: "When I got to be an adult, I was so used to running away. And when I became an adult, I was still running away."

Unique: "I got tired of bouncing from city to city to city. And I said, 'by the time I hit 18 and graduate, where am I going to be?'"

If you think your youth has taken on AWOLing as a panacea for all the troubles in his life, you can talk with him about what else he can do to deal with stress. Maybe emphasize that leaving the situation seems to work for him, but perhaps instead of running away, he could take a long walk or run to reflect on the issue and come up with solutions.

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Pitfalls to Avoid

Don't put yourself in jeopardy. Don't ever go looking for a runaway youth without telling someone where you are going, and don't put your safety at risk. If you think your youth is in a dangerous location, let the police handle it.

It is crucial that you remain nonjudgmental, and always let them know that your concern is for their welfare. You want to keep communication open, and for them to want to stay in contact with you. Many youth who run away do choose to go to school, and remain in contact with their CASA and friends. They may just wish to not be in their current placement. Remember, they are not breaking the law, even if there is a pick-up warrant for them, it is not an arrest warrant.

The goal is for the youth to be safe. If they have run away and are living with a family, or adults you think seem safe, see if they may become caregivers sanctioned by the courts. Ask the youth if you may talk with the adult she is staying with. If you do speak with the adult, emphasize that it is illegal to harbor a runaway, but if they are willing to go through a screening process, they could become an official caregiver for the youth.

Be careful not to make promises you can't keep. But as a successful advocate, you know that already, don't you? If your program or county requires you to disclose the youth's location, make sure you let the youth know this.

You may not let the youth stay with you. It may be tempting to ensure they are safe by letting them stay with you, but this is absolutely not allowed by both state law 355.65 and National CASA rules. There are always other safe places for your youth to go.

Do keep in close contact with your supervisor, case carrying social worker and child's attorney. It can be very stressful if your CASA kid is on the run, and it is important to have support and share information.



Additional Resources

California Department of Justice missing persons website

<http://ag.ca.gov/missing>

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children nationwide services

<http://www.ncmec.org>

National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth

<http://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov/about/brochure>

National Runaway Safeline

(formerly the National Runaway Switchboard) This is an excellent resource for youth on the run, or contemplating running away, and the adults who care about them. NRS has training materials, a 24 hour hot line, and can provide free bus tickets to anywhere in the US for runaways.

<http://www.1800runaway.org/>