

# Missing and runaway children – advice for parents and carers

A child is reported missing every three minutes in the UK, and sadly the true figure is probably much higher if you include unreported cases.

There are numerous reasons that can lead to a child going missing or running away. As a parent or carer for a child or young person, you play a really important role in helping them to stay safe. The advice in this guide may help you to do this.



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# Advice to help you keep your child safe

Some of the advice here is suited for younger children and some for older children.  
Your own circumstances will dictate which of the below is relevant to you and your child.

Teach your child their full name, your full name and telephone number; even if they have a mobile phone – these can get lost.

Include your contact details in whatever your child carries with them (mobile phone, backpack etc) so you can be easily contacted in an emergency.

Teach your child not to provide personal information – such as their home address and the name of their school – to a stranger.

Teach your child to ring 999 from a mobile phone, public phone or home phone in an emergency.

Teach your child which authority figures or public figures they can trust and reach out to in times of need.

Teach your child to yell for help if a stranger tries to take them somewhere. Get your child into the habit of asking for permission to walk away from you, even if only for a moment.

Listen to your child if they say they do not like a particular adult and ask why.

Instruct your child not to open the door at home without your permission.

Teach your child to keep their distance from people in approaching cars who speak to them and run to a trusted adult.

Agree a 'safe word' to be used if you allow an adult unknown to your child to pick them up.

Ensure your child tells you or someone you know where they are going if leaving home without adult supervision.

In crowded places, make sure you and your child know how to find each other if you get separated. Bright/distinctive clothing is a good idea (if you can convince them). Agree a central location to meet.

Encourage your child to let you know if anyone tells them to keep something secret, makes them feel uncomfortable or makes them do something that they don't want to.

Encourage your child to stay in a group and avoid quiet or badly lit locations where possible.

Remind your child to fully charge their mobile before leaving home. Also, agree with them that they will let you know when they arrive at their destination and when they are due to return.

Encourage your child to talk about their problems. If they don't feel like they can talk to you or another trusted adult they can contact ChildLine on 0800 1111.

Teach your child to spot the signs of sexual exploitation. The Thinkuknow website has information and advice for young people about this and what to do if they need help: [www.thinkuknow.co.uk/11\\_13/Need-advice/Relationship-abuse-and-exploitation](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/11_13/Need-advice/Relationship-abuse-and-exploitation)



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# Helping your child stay safe online

Taking steps to help your child be safe online, particularly when they use social media, also plays a really important role in keeping them from harm. Thinkuknow offers information and advice about the risks children and young people may face online – for example, when gaming or using social media sites and apps, how they can stay safe and where to get help.

Inform your child that once they post or share a message, photo or video, they lose control of it and it can be circulated to anybody. If they wouldn't want you to see it, they shouldn't share it.

Teach your child they can never really know or trust someone they have only met online or not in person. Explain the potential risks involved.

Explain to your child the risks of using geolocation services on their social media apps, and broadcasting their whereabouts to strangers. Ask them to place privacy controls on their account to control who has access to what they share.

Advise your child to avoid sharing too much personal information online, including how they are feeling.

Teach your child the importance of not accepting unknown people into their social network and to block people who make them feel uncomfortable.

Encourage your child to talk to their friends about these so that they can all stay safe online.



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# Indicators your child may be at risk of running away

Below are some signs that *may* indicate that your child is at risk of running away. Many of these signs are common with other factors that may be causing serious harm to a child, such as sexual abuse or exploitation. Some of these behaviours are also perfectly normal in young people. Be aware of them but trust your instincts on what it might mean for your child.

Starting to push boundaries, staying out later, leaving home without informing you or without permission.

Not wanting to come home from school, their friends, or from their youth or sports club.

Staying away overnight.

Change in behaviour – becoming more aggressive or withdrawn.

Associating with a new crowd, or getting involved in a new relationship (especially with an older partner).

Leaving home/attending school with a large bag (of clothing).

Being found with unaccounted for 'gifts' or money.

Lying.

Signs of drug or alcohol use.

Self-harming, suicidal thoughts or depression.

Becoming secretive, including private phone calls and online activity.

If you have immediate concerns for the safety of a child, dial 999.  
For advice and guidance about a child safety issue contact the NSPCC Helpline on 0808 800 5000.



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# What to do if you think your child is at risk of running away

Children who run away come from all backgrounds. There may be a range of circumstances children feel they can only escape by running away – bullying, family breakdown, violence, abuse or neglect.

With one in five missing children potentially being sexually exploited, it is important we all do everything we can to prevent this, and ensure children and young people know where to turn if they feel they have no choice but to go missing.

If you have concerns your child may be at risk of running away, talk to them. It may not be easy, but reaching out and letting them know that they have a choice can be an important step in preventing them from running away. Some useful tips on speaking to children about running away can be found online:

<http://www.railwaychildren.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work-in-the-uk/advice-for-adults/talk-to-your-child-about-running-away/>

Help your child understand running away is never the answer to any problems they face. Together, you might want to watch and discuss the Thinkuknow film 'My Choice', which looks at some of the issues that may lead to a young person running away. It also signposts sources of help and support including Missing People's Runaway Helpline available on **116 000**.

The charity Missing People is a confidential service and their support workers are available for free 24 hours a day by calling or texting 116 000. ChildLine is also available for children and young people to talk to, whatever their worry. Counsellors are available 24 hours a day by calling for free on 0800 1111 or visit [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk).



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# What to do if your child goes missing or runs away

If your child is missing or has not returned home when expected then please contact your local police station. Dial 101 and tell them you would like to report a missing person. You can make a report to the police as soon as you believe your child may be missing.

If you are extremely concerned about their welfare then dial 999 and ask for the police.

The UK Missing Persons Bureau website also has a range of fact sheets available which contain practical advice and information:

<http://missingpersons.police.uk/en/resources/factsheets-for-families>

Or you can speak to the charity Missing People 24 hours a day, seven days a week: **116 000**



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# How you can help others

You can help locate a missing child by taking a few minutes to look at appeals for children missing in your area at [www.missingkids.co.uk](http://www.missingkids.co.uk). Additionally, you can sign up to Child Rescue Alerts (CRA). CRA is a system designed to alert the public, as quickly as possible, to an abduction or other high risk child disappearance. Statistics show that the initial hours following a child's disappearance are crucial and a sighting by a member of the public can lead to the safe recovery of a child.

Alerts can be sent directly to your mobile for free – sign up at [www.childrescuealert.org.uk](http://www.childrescuealert.org.uk)

You can also show your support by sharing appeals from Missing People on Twitter by following @missingpeople. 25th May is International Missing Children's Day, and you can help us reach more people by supporting the Big Tweet.

Find out more at [www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk)

## Find out more

You can find out more about 'missing' and the risks they may face online at:

[www.missingpersons.police.uk](http://www.missingpersons.police.uk)

[www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk)

[www.missingkids.org.uk](http://www.missingkids.org.uk)

[www.thinkuknow.co.uk](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk)

[www.pact-online.org](http://www.pact-online.org)

[www.railwaychildren.org.uk](http://www.railwaychildren.org.uk)

[www.childrescuealert.org.uk](http://www.childrescuealert.org.uk)



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