



## Reaching Out to Runaways

Nearly 1,200 youths run away from home each day and many others consider doing so. The federally designated communication system for runaway and homeless youths is the National Runaway Switchboard (NRS), whose mission is to keep America's runaway and at-risk youths safe and off the streets. Runaway youths, youths thinking about running away, and adults dealing with a struggling child can contact NRS to work through problems and find local help, as well as to determine options to prevent youths from leaving home.

Maureen Blaha, executive director of NRS, answers a few questions about the organization and the role it plays in helping educators prevent students from running away.

*What is the average age of runaways in the United States?* We handled a total of 102,144 calls in 2005 and nearly half of the calls, 45 percent, were youths whose average age was 17. Fifty-five percent were already on the street as a runaway, throwaway, or were homeless. About

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17 percent of our youth callers were between the ages of 10 and 14.

*What are the main reasons why youths run away?* According to our data, 48 percent run from home because of family dynamics (divorce, remarriage, problems with siblings) and abuse (substance, physical, sexual). Other problems include peer and social concerns, alcohol and drug use, parents abusing alcohol or drugs, gay/lesbian issues, and mental health.

*How can NRS be used as a resource for middle school principals and their staffs?* We offer several resources and programs on our Web site ([www.1800RUNAWAY.org](http://www.1800RUNAWAY.org)) to help principals and teachers to identify problems long before their parents or anyone else. NRS works closely with schools throughout the country to support classroom efforts and to help teachers educate their students on alternatives to running away from home:

- **Kids Call** is a very popular program where an experienced front-line team member talks with students about important topics via a speakerphone in the classroom. We answer questions such as, “How long are runaways gone?” “What makes someone run away?” “What can I do instead of running away?”
- A **Runaway Prevention Curriculum** and a companion film provide easy-to-use lessons with all the materials needed when teaching youths, and has a component to use with parents.
- Our 45-minute **Runaway Prevention and Education Presentation Module** provides a more condensed runaway prevention overview, which may be easily administered during one class session.

We also provide numerous free **promotional materials**—including posters, bookmarks, brochures, wallet cards with our 1-800-RUNAWAY crisis hotline number, and pencils—that principals can download or order from our Web site and distribute throughout the school.


*What are some alternatives to running from home that school staff can suggest to*

*their students?* Alternatives we suggest to youths include:

- Get involved in extracurricular activities at school. Join a sports team or after-school club.
- Pick up a new hobby. Learn to play a musical instrument. Take up photography, drawing, or dance.
- Volunteer in the community. Donating time at a local hospital, nursing home, or YMCA can be very rewarding for a child.
- Call 1-800-RUNAWAY. An experienced team member is always there and ready to help.

*In what ways can school principals prevent students from running away?* Talk to them, offer encouragement, and be a listening ear. Get parents involved by having them talk with their children at home. Educate teachers to make them more aware of warning signs such as a drop in grades, absenteeism, fighting, or unusual behavior. Parents interested in participating in a chat can visit the NRS Web site and click on the Parents & Adults tab to learn more. It's a great resource.

*Is there anything else you would like to add?* In addition to reaching out to students, parents need to also be aware of runaway prevention and resources to help them and their child. NRS offers the Parent Chat program that allows adults to discuss and share solutions to challenges they may be facing with their child. Parent Chat is a twice-weekly, hour-long session hosted and monitored by an NRS crisis intervention specialist who has expertise on the particular topic being discussed.

We encourage all principals to inform their teachers and staff, *and* parents, about the National Runaway Switchboard and the resources we offer. We're here to help. E-mail [info@1800RUNAWAY.org](mailto:info@1800RUNAWAY.org), visit [www.1800RUNAWAY.org](http://www.1800RUNAWAY.org), or call 1-800-RUNAWAY. 

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