

Running away

Young people's views on running away from care

Reported by the Children's Rights Director for England



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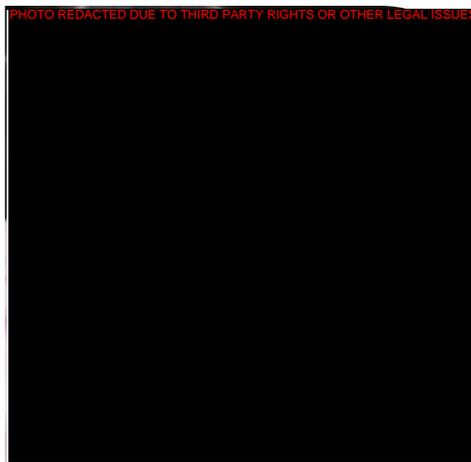
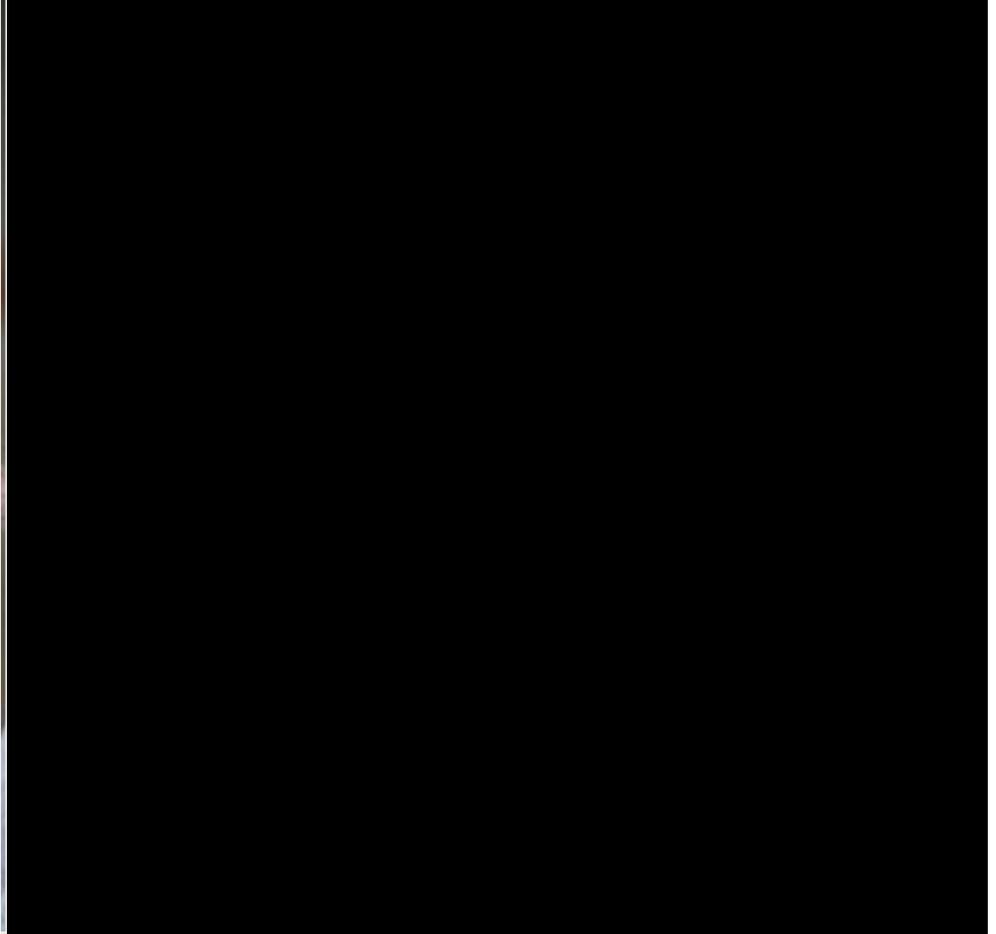
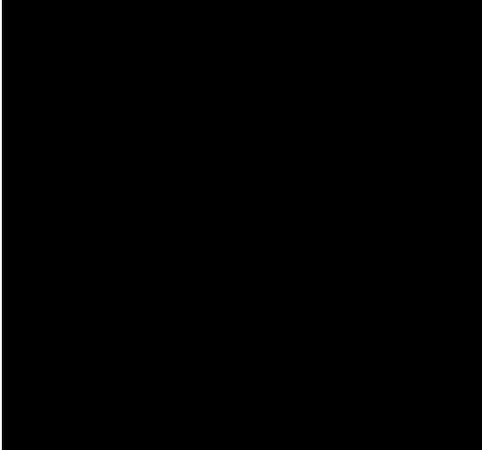


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Contents

Introduction	3
How we asked young people for their views	5
The young people who gave us their views	5
Key messages	7
The questions and answers	9
What makes children run away from care?	9
Are people more likely to run away again once they have done it once?	11
Are children getting more or less likely to run away?	11
Where do children and young people go when they run away?	12
What do children and young people actually do while they are missing?	13
What do children and young people worry about while they are missing?	15
What is it like to run away?	15
Do people mean to come back, or to run away for good?	16
What is it like coming back after running away?	17
Does running away solve problems?	18
What are the dangers of running away?	19
Who worries most about a child or young person who has run away?	19
What should staff or carers do to make running away less likely?	21
Is there anything staff or carers can do to help make children or young people safer if they do run away?	22
Last messages	24

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Introduction

Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England



As Children's Rights Director for England, the law gives me the duty to ask children and young people in care for their views about their rights, their welfare, and how they are looked after in England. The law also gives me the duty to ask children getting any sort of help from council social care services, as well as care leavers and children and young people living away from home in any type of boarding school, residential special school or further education college.

As well as asking children and young people for their views and publishing what they tell us, with my team I also give advice on children's and young people's views and on children's rights and welfare to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the government. I have a duty to raise any issues I think are important about the rights and welfare of children or young people in care, getting children's social care support or living away from home. With my team, I do this both for individual young people and for whole groups of young people.

In 2006, we asked children for their views about running away from care, and published our last report about this. There is a lot of concern nowadays in the media and in the government and local councils about the risks that children face if they run away, and I was asked to give children's views about this to a group of people in parliament. So we consulted children again this year to find out their views and concerns about running away from care. This report gives their views in 2012. All our reports can be found in the library section of our website, www.rights4me.org.

I am sending this report to the government, to councils and to people making decisions now about how to keep children in care safer, for them to take the children's views into account in the decisions they are making.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Morgan'.

Dr Roger Morgan OBE
Children's Rights Director for England

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How we asked young people for their views

We asked children and young people in care or living away from home in residential education for their views at a big consultation event we held in the north of England. We invited children from different local authorities across the country, and did not just choose children we already knew or who were already in local participation groups or Children in Care Councils. We asked the children for their views in a series of discussion groups. At the same event, we ran other discussion groups to ask children and young people for their views on two other subjects for our next reports. These were keeping out of trouble and the use of physical restraint. We also visited a group of children at a northern local authority to discuss running away from care.

Some of the children we met had run away from care themselves, some had thought about running away but had decided not to run. Some knew about running from care from other people, and others had no experience of their own about running from care, but gave us their thoughts on the subject. We did not ask children to declare to us or in front of others whether or not they had themselves run away from care – but many told us they had, and gave us their experiences.

Altogether we held 10 discussion groups on the subject of running away. Each group was led by a member of the Office of the Children's Rights Director, and another member of our team took notes of the views the children gave. Parents, carers, staff members and other adults who had brought children and young people to our discussion groups were not with the children during the discussions, so that the children could freely talk about their views. The only exception to this was that two members of staff of the local authority we visited did stay with the discussion group there.

We gave children a shopping token to thank them for taking part in our discussions, and they were also able to take part in activities for young people at the activity centre where we held all but one of our discussions.

At that centre, we also set up some electronic screens on which children could enter more views while they were waiting for our groups, or waiting to join activities,

or during the lunch break. The answers typed on to those screens have been used in this report alongside what was said in the discussion groups.

As in all our discussion groups, we asked open questions for discussion, but did not suggest any answers. We told the children and young people that they did not have to agree on any 'group views', but could give different views, could disagree without having to argue for their views against anyone else, and we would write down all their different views. We asked many of the same questions that we had asked six years before, for our 2006 report on running away, to see whether children's views and experiences were different now and then.

What is in this report is, as far as we could note them down, all the views given by the children and young people in the discussion groups, not our own views. We have not added our comments. We have not left out any views we might disagree with, or which the government, councils, professionals or researchers might disagree with. Where we have used a direct quote from what a child or young person said, this is either something that summarises well what many had said in a group, or something that was a clear way of putting a different idea from what others had said.

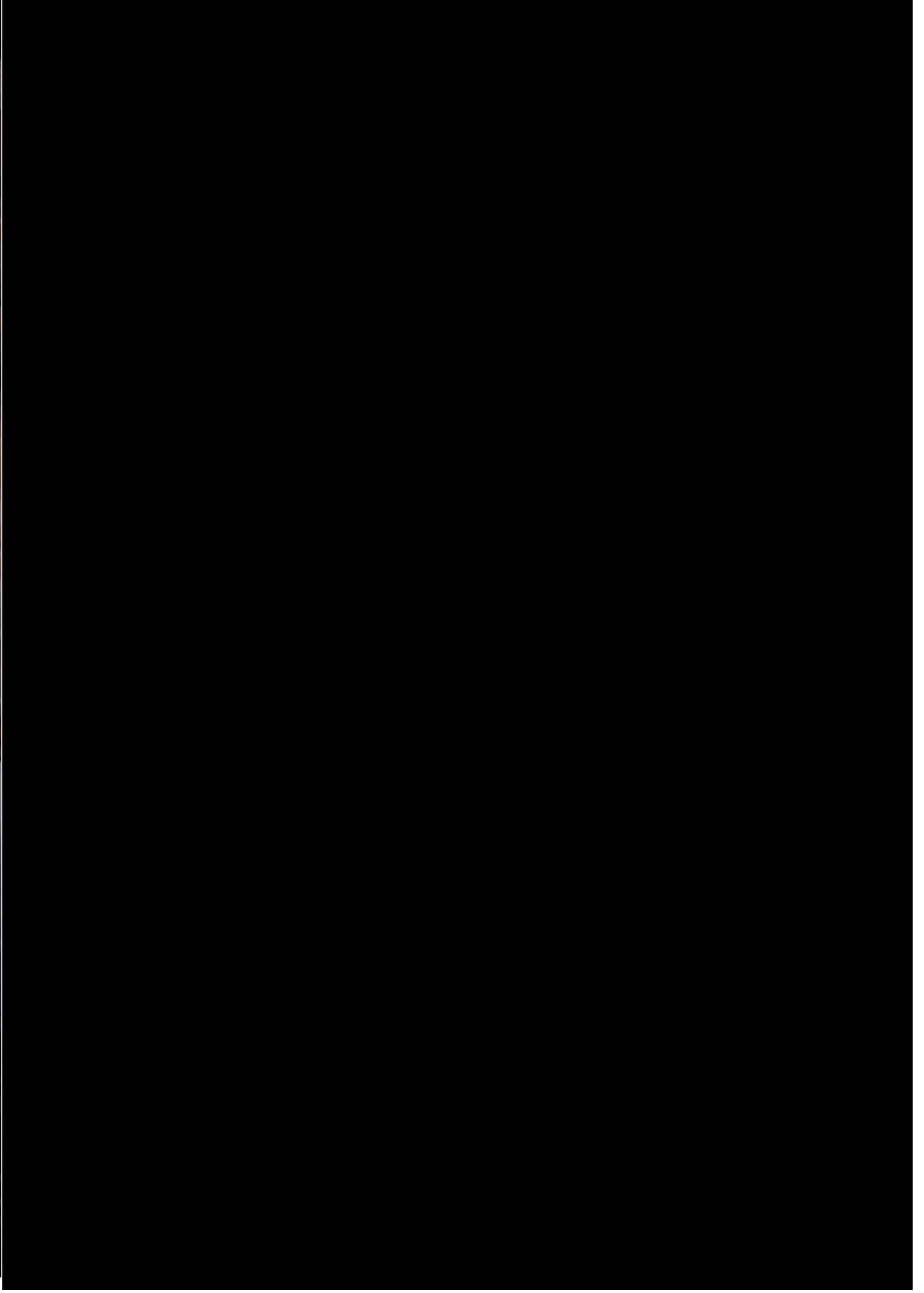
As with all our reports of children's views, we have done our best to write this report so that it can be easily read by young people themselves, by professionals working with young people and by politicians.

You can find and download copies of all our children's views reports on our children's website: www.rights4me.org.

The young people who gave their views

Altogether, 98 children and young people took part and gave us their views in our 10 different groups. These included children and young people from different ethnic backgrounds and from different types of placement. Sixty-two of the 98 children and young people were girls and 36 were boys.

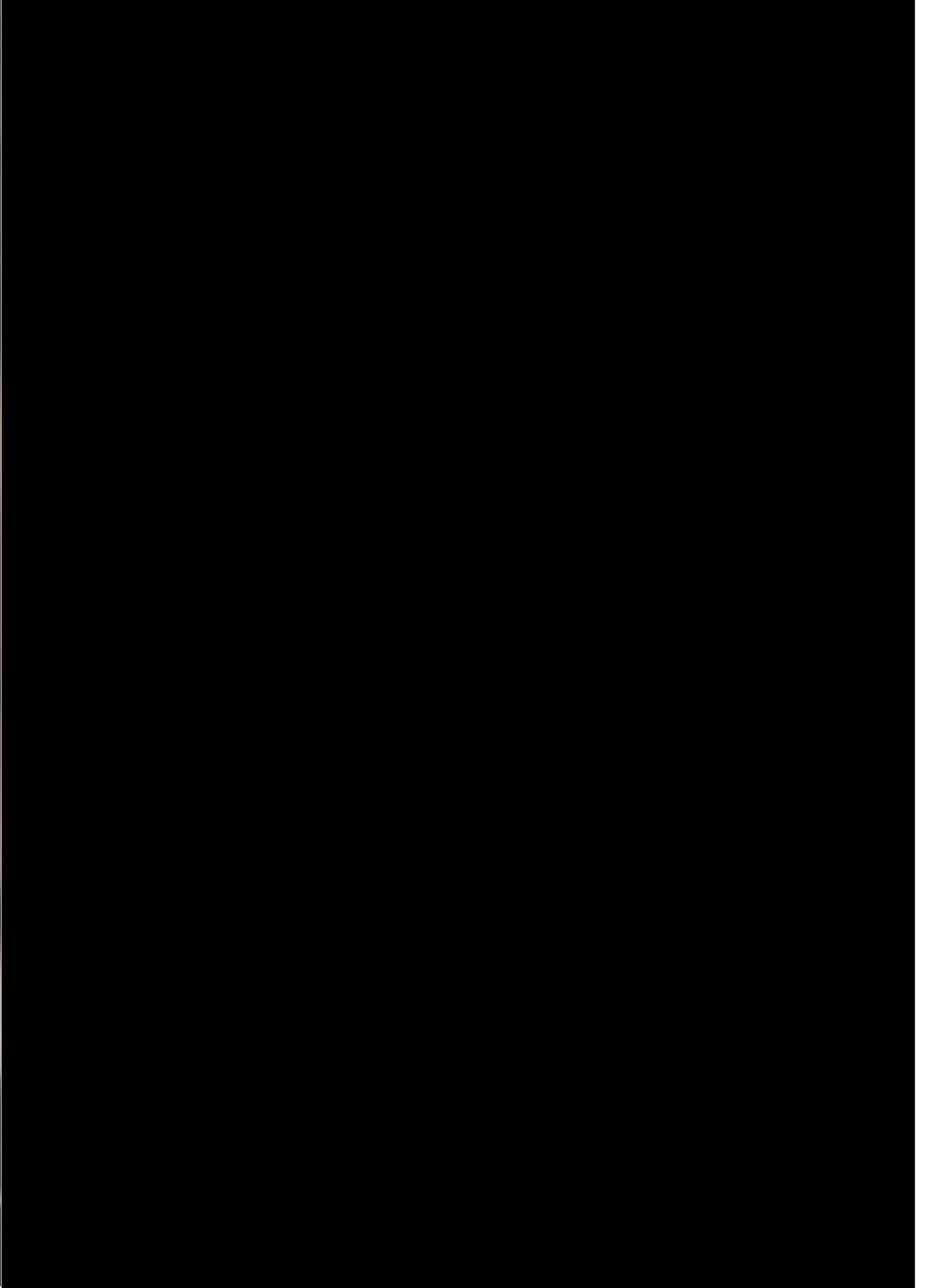
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Key messages

- The views and experiences of children on running away are similar from those we heard in 2006.
- Children may run **from** a placement or problems they cannot cope with, or **to** a place where they want to be or to a person they want to be with.
- Children running **from** somewhere they cannot cope may end up in many different places, including on the street.
- Children run away from somewhere they cannot cope for many reasons, including problems of relationships, wanting to change placements, or wanting to escape from stress and take time out to think things through and calm down.
- Some young people run to have fun and then come back.
- Some staff classify a young person as running away if they stay out later than they are supposed to. The young person, however, has simply stayed out late, not run away, and they will come back.
- Children who have run once are likely to run again, especially if the problems they ran away from are still there.
- When they have run away **from** somewhere, children are in danger – of committing crime to survive, of becoming involved in gangs, of drug or alcohol abuse, of injury through accident, and of being sexually exploited or trafficked.
- Some realise the dangers, but others don't. Realising the dangers puts some off running away but for many the pressure to run overrides the worry of danger.
- At first, running feels good and exciting, but soon becomes boring and frightening. Children who have run feel worried for their safety, about how they will survive alone, and about what will happen to them when they get back.
- Most children and young people intend to come back once they have had fun, or had time to calm down, unless they have run **to** somewhere or someone and want to stay there. Few just run and intend never to return.
- The best way to prevent children and young people from running away from a placement where they can't cope is for staff to ask and listen to their problems and try to solve them (even if it means a change of placement) before the child feels the need to run away. And to prevent the child running again once they come back, staff should ask about and try to solve any problems that caused them to run.
- It would also help prevent some children from running if staff made sure that all children and young people really understood the dangers that children face if they run away.
- Staff cannot directly keep children safe once they have run away, but can help them keep themselves safe by making sure they know about what help they can call upon, and that they have charged mobile phones to call or text staff if they want to.
- Many children believe that the people closest to them will worry the most about them when they run away, but that most professionals are only concerned because it is part of their job and are not really worried about the individual child.
- Running doesn't solve problems – staff need to do that when children return.

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The questions and answers

What makes children run away from care?

In our 2006 consultation on running away, children and young people told us that there were three main things that led children to run away from care:

- Running somewhere simply to have some fun, and then come back
- Running to somebody you wanted to be with, or somewhere you wanted to stay (like a family member or a friend's home)
- Running away from your placement because you can't cope with things there.

Also in 2006, some children told us that sometimes a teenager gets reported as missing when they have not in fact run away, but have stayed out long after the time they had been told to be back, or have gone somewhere without permission but with every intention of coming back.

This year, 2012, children in our groups told us of many different reasons for children and young people running away from care. Again, these included **running away from a placement because of things that were happening there or which they could not cope with there**. Again, they included running away from a placement to go to somewhere or somebody else – like to get back to their family and out of care, or from a new placement back to their last one. Sometimes, as one person put it to us, children run to try to get to a 'happy place'.

'You run away from something to go to something'

One person summed up how many saw running away in our 2012 groups: 'You run away from something to go to something – eg running away from something that worries you to somewhere where you can talk.' **Running is very often running away from something – but it can also be running to something, somewhere or someone else.**

Here is the full list of reasons children and young people in all our groups in 2012 gave for people running from care (not in any particular order):

- Anger
- Stress
- Pressure
- Being unhappy with being in care
- Fear of people living in the same placement
- Being extremely annoyed about something
- Finding a placement too strange
- Changes in the people in charge of where you live
- Not liking your placement
- Running away to escape police
- Feeling you don't get what you want or need in your placement
- Feeling you need a new start somewhere else
- To try to calm down if you are very stressed
- Not being listened to
- Not getting your own way
- Being scared
- To get people to notice you because you're 'not being seen or heard'
- To get away from bullies
- Not liking people you are living with
- Being affected by your own family issues
- Curfews
- To get away from staff you don't get on with

- Rules
- Problems at school
- Not being allowed to see certain members of your family
- Not being allowed to go home from care
- Relationships in your placement breaking down
- To avoid going into a children's home
- Not settling in a new place
- To escape from violence
- Because you can't cope
- Arguments and conflict
- Because you want to stay out
- Running to somewhere you feel safe
- Loneliness
- To test foster carers to see if they really care
- Being anxious about the consequences of your own behaviour

Some quotes that summarised some of these reasons were: 'different staff have different personalities and can make young people run away'; 'problems at home even if you don't live at home'; 'you want to go home and they'll not let you so you think, I'll go anyway and eventually they'll get the message'; 'if they say you're not going out... just going out anyway'; 'relationship

'A way of getting moved'

starts breaking down'. One person simply said that running away might be a 'cry for help'.

One group talked about many children and young **people running away because they are not happy with the arrangements for contact with their families** and want to see them more, or to see members of their families they are losing contact with. Some thought that this was especially a problem for younger children, who were less able to keep contact for themselves (for example using Facebook and texts) and had to rely more on what was arranged for them by carers and social workers.

One group talked about **running away often being to do with wanting to move to a new placement**, for all sorts of reasons: 'a way of getting moved'; 'it was my way of saying I didn't want to be there, without actually saying'.

Some other children and young people told us why they had run away from their placements in the past. One said that her foster carers had promised to take her with them on holiday, but in the end they went without her, so she ran away.

One young person told us that they had been afraid that they were going to be rejected by the people looking after them, so they ran away because 'I wanted to be the person ending it rather than being rejected'.

Another said that children in care often believe nobody is going to want them, and this can lead them to run away: 'When you are first put in care it feels like your parents don't want you, so no one wants you.'

As we had been told in 2006, **sometimes a young person is said to have run away when in fact they had simply stayed out later than they were allowed to**. They had no intention of running away. We were told that some staff tried to control young people by threatening to call the police and report them missing whenever someone stayed out late: 'They say that if you're not home by 11pm we'll call

the police.’ Young people told us, ‘We know how long we’ve got before the filling out of form procedures.’ They said it would be better if staff used fines for coming back late (but not just taking all of someone’s money if they were at all late – instead fining them an amount that got bigger the later they were). We were also told in one group that their staff regard running away and going somewhere you haven’t got permission to go as one and the same thing.

Are people more likely to run away again once they have done it once?

When we asked this question in 2006, most of the young people we asked said yes, people are more likely to run away again once they have done it once.

Again in 2012, most of the children and young people in our groups thought that **once someone has run away, they are more likely than other people to run away again**: ‘once you’re into it, you could do it all the time’; ‘more likely because you know you can do it’; ‘young people living where I live get into the habit’. This could be because **for some people running away is fun** (‘it’s like a hobby’; ‘it’s a taste of freedom’), while **for others it is something they keep doing to escape from stress and try to calm themselves down**: ‘It’s more of a stress technique to try to calm down.’

One group summed up how, **once someone has taken the step of running away once, it becomes easier to do after that, especially if nothing changes as a result of running away from problems the first time**: ‘they would if in the same circumstances’; ‘it’s hardest to run away the first time’.

Running away can become just one way of dealing with problems: ‘It can become an easy option of a way of dealing with things.’ It can also happen more than once if the same problem is still there at the placement: ‘If they haven’t sorted out the problem first time around they will run away again.’

Are children getting more or less likely to run away?

This was the question we asked children and young people to answer on electronic screens while they were waiting to join our groups or activities, or during the lunch break on our discussion day.

We had 31 answers to this question from the children and young people attending our consultation event.

The overall ‘vote’ of the 31 who answered this question (of course, they may or may not be typical of the views of others) was that **children are getting more likely to run away from where they live nowadays**. Nineteen of the 31 said children are getting more likely to run away, and six said they are getting less likely to run away.

We need to note, though, that not all the people who answered this question were talking about running away from care placements like children’s homes or foster homes. Two of those who said children are getting more likely to run away were clear that they thought children were getting more likely to run away from living with their families, rather than from care placements. They thought this was because of increasing family problems these days. One described their own experience: ‘Many different families that have different problems... I live back at home with my mum and I am always running away and getting brought back with the copper.’

‘If they haven’t sorted out the problem first time round they will run away again’

Some people added their reasons for saying whether children are getting more or less likely to run away from care. One person who said children are getting more likely to run away said this naturally happens as children want more to be with their families, especially as they get older. Another thought that children in care are getting more likely to run away because those from care are nowadays more likely to feel that they stand out from other children and young people. A third person wrote that they thought whether a child is or is not likely to run away is very much to do with the area they are living in.

One child said that children are unlikely to run away 'if they have good foster carers who are strict and have sensible rules and boundaries'.

Finally some of the people answering this question were clear that they thought all children are more likely to run away as they get older, not that more running away is happening these days.

Where do children and young people go when they run away?

In 2006, children and young people told us that if they had run away to go somewhere they wanted to be, or to be with someone they wanted to be with, then that is where they would be. If they had just run for some fun before coming back, then they would be wherever they had run to have that fun. The worry, they told us then, was if they had run to get away

from things, then they might just try to run a long way from where they left. They would end up on the street or in the countryside, far away from places they knew and without food or shelter.

We had similar answers to this same question this year, in 2012. **Sometimes people do run away just to have fun, though not many people in our groups this year said this. Sometimes people run away to places where they want to be or people they want to be with:** 'home to family'; 'back to family'; 'mate's'; 'boyfriends or girlfriends'; 'back to previous placement because I didn't want to leave'; 'to someone that means something to you'. The most usual answers in our groups were that **children and young people run to their friends or family.**

In two different groups we heard that **when a young person runs to stay with a friend, their friend might try to hide them:** 'to mate's house to hide there'; 'sometimes friends don't tell anyone, young people haven't told their parents that they're staying at their house'.

More generally, **a child might try to run back to 'a happy place, to bring back memories'**. They might also run to a place where they feel safer than the place they have run away from: 'Away from unhappy to somewhere safe.'

Children and young people told us **they do realise that when they run to members of their families, often parents they have been taken from into care in the first place, this can be risky:** 'run to the people that are the reason why they are in care. Like run to their mum and they're not supposed to. This will make them vulnerable'; 'most people run away to be where they came from, which was unsafe'.

But again this year we heard that **people might just run away from things and find themselves headed for a range of different places:** 'anywhere to sleep'; 'libraries'; 'town'; 'some run away and end up on the streets'. One young person told us they had lived in a cave for three weeks after running away. Another told us they had spent £2 on a train ticket and once

'Away from unhappy to somewhere safe'

through the barriers had just boarded lots of different trains to get a long way away. They had been found on a beach the next day by members of the public.

Once a child has run away, they may feel they have to stay away, even on the streets, because they can't face going back: 'Sometimes it's not planned, so they don't feel they can go back to where they ran away from.' Children running **away** from things they can't cope with where they are, rather than running **to** people or places where they want to be, can just end up 'wherever you end up!'

We heard that **if a child or young person doesn't have someone they know to run to and be safe with, they may agree to be taken in by someone they meet after they have run away.** This can end up with the person who has taken them in being charged with abduction: 'the young people are taken in so as not to see them sleeping on the streets, but then got charged with an abduction order'; 'you could be at the Queen's house and if police find you they could get an abduction order because they think they're a perv'.

What do children and young people actually do while they are missing?

In 2006, children who had run away from care told us that if they had simply run away to have fun, or to go to a place where they wanted to be or to a person they wanted to be with, then that is what they did. However, if they were running away from something they could not cope with where they were living, they would usually just 'walk around', and would often get involved in stealing to survive on the streets. They might also get involved in harmful activities such as taking drugs, drinking too much alcohol, or sexual activity.

According to our 2012 discussion groups, if children had run to be with their friends, or to have fun before going back, then they would simply 'chill out with their mates', 'have fun' or 'party'.

But this year children again told us that **people running away from something, rather than just**

going to have fun and then return, or going to be with parents, friends, relatives or carers they used to have, are very likely to steal what they need:

'if you've got no money and you've run away, you're going to go out and steal'; 'robbery, stealing; you need money to survive'.

They again told us that **children running away from something will often just travel as far as they can away from the place they have left:** 'just get on a train and feel free'. One group told us that children are likely to self-harm while they are away. Again we heard that children running away from things they cannot cope with are likely to get involved with drugs or alcohol: 'Mess it up by getting drunk.' **Children who have run away are likely to break the law** and may get involved in fighting. Some may commit crimes 'to show your mates'. Others may try hard to keep out of trouble. You might try to keep out of trouble but fail to keep away from trouble: 'Get into trouble although you'd want to keep a low profile.' Even if they have a mobile phone with them, they are likely to ignore calls from carers. This sort of running away often ends up in getting arrested.

Two of our groups talked a lot about how **children who have run away from things where they are living try to sort themselves out once they have run away.** They will 'think a lot'. If they are with a friend, or have run to a friend, they may talk things through: 'just go somewhere to clear their mind and talk to friend'; 'go to someone they trust and

'If you've got no money and you've run away, you're going to go out and steal'

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can share their issues a bit'. From this it is clear that some people might run to a friend's because that is somewhere they want to stay instead of staying in their placement, but some people might also run to a friend's place, not to stay, but to talk and for a friend's help to sort their problems out.

One group gave us this summary of what people might do when they have run away from somewhere: 'Hide from police, window shopping, thieving, hiding in a hole.'

What do children and young people worry about while they are missing?

Our groups told us that major worries after running away are how to cope on your own – needing money, food and shelter. As those in one group put it: 'where to sleep or eat'; 'where you are going to eat'; 'who you are going to talk to'; 'what you are going to do'. Once you have run to a strange area a long way from the place you ran from, there is **the worry of being lost**. One person said they worried about 'what to do when you've got nowhere else to go'.

Some groups told us that they have been **afraid for their safety** once they have run away: 'what's going to happen to you, eg raped, run over'; 'getting hurt'; 'being taken advantage of'; 'scary people'; 'risks from other people'; 'being groomed – if someone offered a place and they come across as nice'; 'how you are going to defend yourself'; 'getting manslaughtered'.

'You might think secondly about it if you knew the danger'

In two groups we heard that **people running away don't always realise the dangers they are putting themselves in**. If they did, they might not run. One person said after realising the dangers they were in, 'You might think secondly about it if you knew the danger'; and another in a different group said, 'They wouldn't run away if they knew the risks.' We also heard though that **for some, it was so important to get away that you didn't think about the risks**: 'To some people, knowing the risks would not matter because they need to get away.'

Some in our groups had particular worries. One told us they had worried about how they could get a shower to keep themselves clean. Another was worried that if they were picked up and taken back to where they had run from, they would have to run all over again: 'Thinking they are going to find me. I'd do it all and they'd come and pick me up and I'd have to start all over again.' The same person also said that they might go back home for food, but then run away again. For some, **the main worry was about what would happen to them when they got back after running away**, and the trouble they would be in. Being arrested was a major worry for one person. Another concern was worrying about your family. Some were worried about getting run over on the roads or on the railway.

In 2006 we had heard that **many were worried that if they had run away from things they could not cope with, they would just be taken back where they had run from and nothing would change for them**. Again in 2012 we heard that a worry was 'getting caught and being placed where you were again'.

What is it like to run away?

As many in our discussion groups had experience of running away, we asked them to tell us what it had been like.

We heard about some common feelings from most of our groups. Some told us that **running away can be a mixture of feelings, of fun and boredom**. How you feel can quickly change once you have

actually run. Running away might be an excitement at first, but then became very boring; as some put it, an 'adrenaline rush', then 'extremely boring!'. Also, running could be exciting, even though you probably didn't run away in order to get that excitement: 'Had a buzz when ran away, but didn't run away to get a buzz.' **Feelings could change from feeling good at first to feeling scared:** 'At first you feel good you are out and afterwards you feel really emotional and scared.' Other feelings in the mix were feeling angry, then feeling empty.

Another common feeling was **being scared:** 'get scared of running away – what's going to happen and you get all paranoid'; 'daunting – don't know who is around you and if you are safe'. For some, there was a fear of being caught by the police, or chased 'with sniffer dogs'.

A third common feeling was **a feeling of freedom, escape from where you were, and having some time on your own to try to sort your problems out:** 'You feel free and it gives you time to calm down.' It can become an 'emotional journey'. You might feel you could 'push the limits coz you know they can't hit you and you can get away with it'.

Some told us that they **felt bad or guilty** for running away: 'You feel bad for running away.' You might start out feeling good that you had run from somewhere, but that feeling often didn't last: 'Good but then you regret it.'

'Daunting – don't know who is around you and if you are safe'

One group summarised their feelings once they had run away, with the words 'freedom, independence, scary, happy, insecure'. You could also feel lonely and unwanted.

Do people mean to come back, or to run away for good?

When we asked about this six years ago, most of the children we asked told us that the majority of people who run away intend and expect to come back again. If they had run just to have fun, they didn't plan to stay away, and if they had run to try to calm down or to think their problems out, they planned to come back when they had done that.

In 2012, children and young people again told us that **most of those who run away do intend to come back:** 'it's to make a point, but you mean to come back'; 'it's to calm down'; 'might just need a break'. Some told us they would expect to be brought back in the end, so might come back themselves before that happened: 'Some young people think about what they have done and go back.' In the end, police do find them and bring them back, whether they intended to stay away or go back: 'Some people go back because the police make them.'

However, as in the answers to many of our questions, there was always the point that for some children, running away is to escape from something they cannot cope with, and they do not want to go back to the same situation or placement: 'Others don't want to go back to that situation.' **If something is wrong and people are not listened to about it, we heard that they will run away and may keep running away.** We were told that children run away for many different personal reasons, and staff need to find out and properly deal with what the issue is for each child.

Some children simply told us that when they had run away, they had not intended to come back. For some, of course, they intended to stay living somewhere else they wanted to be: 'If I could've stayed with someone permanently, I wouldn't have come back.' Another child said, 'If you're living with someone that hits you, you won't want to come back.'

'If you're living with someone that hits you, you don't want to come back'

We did hear in one group that even if a young person means to come back after running away, they are not always allowed to do that: 'They run away and then lose their placement.'

What is it like coming back after running away?

Words children and young people used in 2012 to describe how they felt when they came back after running away included 'awkward', 'sad', 'hard', 'annoyed', 'disappointed', 'ashamed' and 'awkward – you know you are in trouble'. You can be worried about whether staff will accept you back. One young person, summarising it for many, said, 'You've gone to the effort of running away and coming back makes you feel stupid.'

One group told us that **coming back after running away can bring a sense of relief as you are no longer in danger from the risks of being on the streets**. Another said that they got positive special treatment when they came back.

Coming back from running away can be 'scary'. How it feels can depend a lot on how staff or carers react to you: 'depends on how staff deal with it. For example some staff are happy you are back, but are worried and you get in trouble'; 'you get a bit of an earache – why, where, would you do it again?'; 'depends on staff, sometimes they can go on at you for days'; 'some staff can go on about it and some are genuinely worried'.

You expect to have to explain where you were and what you were doing. It is also important to many that children are not treated differently from other people because they have run away and come back: 'Don't want to be treated differently because you've run away.'

Coming back from running away is hard to do: 'coming back can be harder than going'; 'the longer you leave it the harder it gets'. Worrying about the reaction of staff can put someone off coming back: 'you're scared of the repercussions'; 'they are going to get mad at you'; you're going to get loads of shit'. Running away may change things for the worse: 'It'll not be the same when you go back.' One group thought it would be **best to have the option of going to a new placement when you came back**, to receive kindness from someone who had not been involved in any of the reasons you had for running away. In one group we heard about a child who had not come back and 'hasn't got a goal to make him go back home'.

Staff can react in many different ways to someone returning from running away. One young person told us that your shoes can be taken away from you, another that they can be put on a 'supervised spend'.

Many children and young people told us that they **might want to talk with somebody about their problems when they got back – though equally, some might not want to discuss things at all**, so there should be a choice about this: 'If you run away

'Coming back can be harder than going'

and get emotions out, then go back, you might not want to talk about it.' Talking about things can be better than alternatives when you return: 'Some staff can sit down with you and make a brew, which is a lot better than three staff congregating round you or the police.' It can be very important that staff ask about any problems that led to you running away in the first place, not just about where you have been and what you did while you were away: 'They need to ask and find out about safety, but find a way of talking to a child, a way of asking.' One young person told us that staff sometimes asked these things in front of other children, and they did not think this was right.

One group told us that girls can get into more trouble when they come back than boys do, because they have put themselves into more danger. Another group told us that staff and carers 'stress at you, but only because they care'.

Does running away solve problems?

In 2006 children and young people told us that running away didn't usually sort things out, and could add to the problems you already had. For some, though, just taking time out of a situation you couldn't cope with could be helpful. It could help to sort things out if staff talked through your problems with you when you came back, and then did something about them.

'Doesn't solve anything, coz by the time you get back home the problems are still there'

In 2012 we again heard from most of the children and young people we consulted that **running away doesn't solve problems**: 'doesn't solve anything, coz by the time you get back home, the problems are still there'; 'you still have to go back to the same situation'. Again we heard that running away can create new problems, and puts you in danger while you are away. It can make the situation worse for you after you come back.

Again, though, some saw it as a way of changing things, sometimes for the better. We heard that staff often don't understand why a child has run away, and so make their own assumptions about the reasons. Again, we heard that for some, running away can give a young person cooling-off time to calm down. Two young people told us that running away led to a change in their placement, which is what they had wanted.

Running away was most likely to change things for the better afterwards if staff listened carefully to the child when they returned, and tried to sort out their problems. This can be because staff are good at talking to children who return. Or it could be because running away has succeeded in forcing staff and social workers to listen to the child when they return. One young person told us that 'my social worker doesn't really listen, but when I run away, she's there the next day asking what the problem is'. Another said that when they gave themselves up two weeks after running away, they threatened to run away again if they were not allowed to see their father, and this worked.

A few children told us **that they had learned new skills while they were away**: 'I learned a lot I wouldn't have if I hadn't run away'; 'you do learn to look after yourself independently'.

Overall, the key message from many this year was that staff need to listen to what problems led to a child running away and to take them seriously: 'If you are running away, it's showing that there is something wrong from the young person's perspective.'

‘Risks and dangers are endless. There are some risky people out there’

What are the dangers of running away?

We last asked children and young people this question in 2006, and all the groups we spoke to then told us that children who have run away are in serious danger on their own. They told us about the dangers of physical and sexual abuse, the risk of becoming a permanently homeless person on the streets, and even of rough treatment by police when caught. They also told us that children who have run away might try to protect themselves by staying in a group, by trying to keep themselves awake, and even by carrying a weapon of some sort.

When we asked this question again in 2012, every group we spoke to again told us that **children and young people who had run away were in danger**: ‘risks and dangers are endless. There are some risky people out there’, and ‘paedophiles on the streets’. The **dangers included getting raped, being sexually exploited, being stabbed, being kidnapped, being taken and trafficked for sex, being murdered, getting robbed, getting involved in drugs, or being made pregnant. There were also the dangers of being injured in an accident**, such as falling or getting run over on the road, possibly while drunk. Hunger was always a danger, along with getting hopelessly lost.

We heard that running away makes it **likely you will lose contact with members of your own family**. Young people who had run away were in danger of

joining a gang or being forced to join a gang.

Young people who have run away are likely to commit **crimes to survive**, even just to get somewhere to sleep; they ‘might steal to survive and get arrested’.

Some in our groups told us that although they had been **aware of the dangers of running away, these aren’t at the top of your mind when you first run**: ‘you don’t weigh up the options, you just see a door and go through it’; ‘when you leave, you feel that you are invincible, and that you can cope – but you can’t’.

Who worries most about a child or young person who has run away?

Our groups this year all said **parents and relatives were some of the people who would worry the most about a child who has run away**. Some groups told us that their friends would be worried. Carers who cared about you would also be worried. **The people you are closest to would worry the most**. People who don’t know you would care less.

Our discussion groups in 2012 said much the same things as our discussion groups had back in 2006.

Sometimes people who knew you only slightly would worry enough to help try to find you – those in one group gave us examples of how a teacher, a neighbour, and in one case the postman, had been worried and had helped.

‘No one really worries – they’re just doing their job’

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One group discussed how other people worrying about you depends on the sort of person you are, and how likely you are to cope with running away: 'If you're a confident person they don't worry, but if you're not, people tend to worry.'

Our groups talked about social care services worrying, but not so much for the young person who has run as about the effects on them of losing a child: 'social services and care homes because it affects their pay cheque'; 'staff worry because they need to write a long report'. Various professionals – including teachers, social workers and personal advisers – would be affected by someone running away. The news media might become interested, though not exactly worried. The government could become worried that children running away might look bad for them.

For professionals, worrying about children running away isn't the same thing as actually caring about the child: 'everyone can worry – it doesn't mean they care about what happens'; '**no one really worries – they're just doing their job**'. However, in one group we were told that a Children's Rights Officer would be worried for the child.

Young people also talked of the police worrying – mainly because they had to try to find the child: 'The police will be mental.' In one group, though, we heard that the police can become really worried for a child: 'It's surprising how much the police would – they really worry when it's a missing teenager!'

One group talked about young people worrying about themselves. A few would worry about themselves, about getting into trouble or whether you would get killed: 'I'd be more worried about myself than about someone worrying about me.' One group told us that some young people who had run away would worry about how their carers might be feeling. Another group decided: 'Everyone's worried. Everyone knows, but you don't know and you're not bothered at the time.'

What should staff or carers do to make running away less likely?

All our groups this year told us that **talking and listening more with children, and trying to sort out their problems, were the major ways of avoiding children feeling they need to run away**: 'saying what you've got to say and getting it all out might help to keep you calm'; 'need someone you can trust'; 'support you to find out the actual reason why you want to run away'. One group told us that this isn't asking a lot: 'Not even go an extra mile – just that extra step.'

One group summarised the views of all the groups: 'Sit down and talk to young people – listen to the young people more – find ways of sorting things out for the young people.'

We heard from some that listening to children and trying to sort their problems out before they feel they have to run away also means not treating children as 'an age younger than they are' and is a lot about respecting and taking seriously a child's views and concerns. Staff need to be able to put themselves in the child's shoes, and to understand children as well as speak to them. Children need to be able to talk about problems with 'someone who isn't judgemental and will keep things in confidence'. It is also very important that children are given choices about important things in their lives.

'Sit down and talk to young people – listen to the young people more – find ways of sorting things out for the young people'

Sometimes a **child or young person needs to be able to talk things over with someone of their choice**, not necessarily the person in charge. The person a child or young person chooses to talk over their problems with would be someone they trusted, and could be someone like an Independent Visitor, or a Designated Teacher at school. Children might want to speak with someone who wasn't directly involved in the situation they had problems with. One young person told us that they were able to speak to anyone they wanted to in their social work team. They felt comfortable with that and because of that they had never felt the need to run away.

One group told us that it was especially important that staff and carers were trusted by young people with learning difficulties, who might otherwise run away.

One group talked about the **need for some children to have the chance to move from their placement instead of having to run away from it**: 'sort you out a place to go if you don't like where you are'; 'finding alternative accommodation'.

Some young people told us that having support and advice networks, and centres to drop into for help and advice, would make young people less likely to need to run away because of problems they had.

The last word in this section must go to the young person who told us: 'My carers are psychic – they know when I am going to run away. They don't give me money that day and take my bus pass away.'

'If you run away, your safety is in your own hands'

Is there anything staff or carers can do to help make children and young people safer if they do run away?

Many young people told us that **being able to make contact with mobile phones** is an important safety factor for children and young people who have run away. As one young person summed it up: 'make sure your phone is fully charged so they can contact you'; 'so if they do calm down they can call you'. Another suggestion was for all children to carry enough money for a call back from a phone booth. Another was to make sure each child or young person in residential care was able to text their key worker after they had run away.

Some groups talked about staff **needing to have a plan to trigger a search for someone who has run away**: 'sometimes they should wait half an hour and if you're not found, call the police'; 'carer should have a plan where they should call your social worker'.

Some young people told us what staff or carers should do depended on what they knew about the young person, and where they were likely to be: 'Parents and carers should know the young person.' **For some young people it might be important to let the person who has run away stay away a while to calm down**: 'Give you a break and let you stay at a mate's to let you calm down.' One of our groups said that if staff or carers find out where a child has run to, there is then a decision to be made on whether the child needs to be fetched back or is allowed to stay where they are for a while.

Those in one group thought it was important for staff and carers to **educate all children about the help that could be called on by someone who had run away**. This might include help from organisations like the Salvation Army and any refuges there were locally – though some were concerned that some of these might simply send you back to where you had run from. They did not think that **'safe houses'** were always helpful, because you 'may as well go home because you'll get exactly the same treatment'.

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time'. One group told us that there were 'night stops' in their area for this, and that young people could also telephone these if they needed to. Staff could also inform children and young people about what help there was to get food, and help with any health problems, while they were away. We heard that what support is available for people who have run away varies widely in different parts of the country.

Some told us that very practical things might help keep children safe and make it more likely that they would come back after running away. Examples were children and young people **having their own key to let themselves back in to their placement**, having some money with them at all times, and **staff and carers having contact numbers for the child's friends and family they might have run to**. It might also help some to just offer to track where they are by mobile phone contact, without pressing them to return straight away.

might help put some people off running away.

The best people to advise children on this would be young people who had experienced those dangers themselves after running away.

One group didn't think there was much staff or carers could actually do to make children safer once they had run away from their care: 'If you run away, your safety is in your own hands.'

Last messages

We asked all our groups whether they had any last messages they wanted us to put in this report about running away.

Some gave us advice they thought would help other young people – like remembering to take personal items you needed with you when you ran, and looking at street names on boards so you would not get lost so easily. (They also advised that someone running away should turn their phone off to prevent the police from tracking it.)

We were given more messages about how important it is to **sort out children's problems before things get bad enough for them to feel they need to run away**. As one young person put it, 'Compromise, give us freedom, and we won't run away.' Sometimes it might just be a matter of giving young people some space.

Others stressed again how important it is that staff or carers **treat children well when they come back after running away**: 'treat them with respect when they come back'; 'staff and carers have to be ready to receive the young person back'. We were told that it is important to **do something positive about problems when a young person comes back**, rather than just saying, 'I have heard your side of things.' Social workers too need to think about what the child or young person has done and why they have done it.

We were given advice from some young people in foster care – to **make sure foster carers are trained to know that children usually run away for a reason**, and that making foster children fully part of the family will probably make them less likely to run away.

We also heard the message that **sometimes children and young people in care need to contact someone for help and advice outside office hours**, but social workers are usually not available after 5pm.

We were also asked to put in this report that staff need to sort out the problem of young people coming home later than they are supposed to, without calling this running away. As one young person put it, 'Some don't mean to run away' – they are just late back.

One group wanted to add the message that **children in care keeping contact with friends and family is important in reducing the risk of children running away** from their placements.

Finally, here are some quotes from young people's last messages to end this report.

'When you run away you think it leaves your problems behind, but it doesn't'

'Running away makes things worse'

'If you want to run, you will'

'It should be made easier to talk about it'

'Staff where you live only listen when it's serious – they should listen earlier'

'It shouldn't take running away to get your problems sorted'

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