

A low-angle, close-up shot of a person's legs running on a rocky, dry trail. The runner is wearing dark athletic pants, white socks, and dark running shoes with red accents. The ground is covered in dry grass and small rocks. In the background, a grassy hill rises under a clear sky. Overlaid on the left side of the image is a semi-transparent speedometer or pedometer graphic with a circular scale and numerical markings ranging from 140 to 230.

# WHY DO CHILDREN RUN?

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# HOW BIG IS THE PROBLEM?

Running by the Numbers

Most recent reporting period, 4,240 foster youth had run

17% of youth aged 13 to 17 were reported to have run at least once

Leads to the conclusion only 1% of all foster children had runaway

Counts runaway status at the end of that one reporting period

Excludes absences of 24 hours or less and recurrent runs of the same child

Includes too many children and understates the problem



# WHO ARE THE CHILDREN MOST-LIKELY TO RUN?

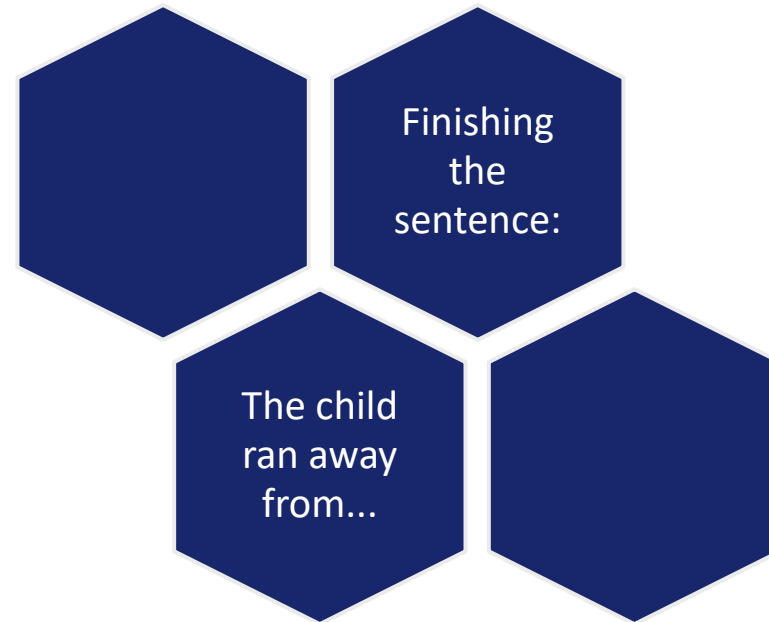
## Children's characteristics

- Older children, especially 15 and above
- Girls are more likely to run than boys
- Youth with substance abuse problems or with mental health diagnoses

## Foster care history

- Children with unstable placements
- Youth in congregate or group home care
- Youth not placed with their siblings
- Children who have run already
- Children with a permanency plan other than reunification

# HOW DO CHILDREN TALK ABOUT RUNNING?



# HOW DO CHILDREN TALK ABOUT RUNNING?



“Running to” and  
“Running from”



Running to Family, Friends, and  
Connections

Reconnect or stay connected with  
people and places they remember

Searching for someone who cared  
about them

May understand these relationships  
and places are not safe for them



Running from Foster  
Care

Normal teenager experiences are  
missing

Rules keep changing or are overly  
restrictive

Treated unfairly or differently

Feel grown-up after taking care of  
themselves



# WHAT DANGERS DO FOSTER CHILDREN FACE?

More likely to have a health-related crisis

Higher likelihood to engage in substance abuse

Greater likelihood to attempt suicide

Running is the most common pathway to being sexually exploited or trafficked

# WHAT STEPS MUST THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILD SAFETY TAKE?

## Examples of first and immediate steps to be taken

- Notify the child's parents, attorney, and/or guardian ad litem
- Make a home visit to child's parents, relatives, or other people whom the child may have contacted
- Contact the Assistant Attorney General within 24 hours and initiate a motion for an order to pick up the child
- Contact the child's school for information regarding the child's disappearance
- Attempt to contact the child's friends



# WHAT STEPS MUST THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILD SAFETY TAKE?

## Examples of first and immediate steps to be taken

- Reach out to prior caregivers whom the child may have contacted
- Contact law enforcement and National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
  - Photo of the youth
  - Description of the youth's physical appearance, such as height, weight, sex, ethnicity, race, hair color, eye color, and other identifying characteristics
  - Information that a youth may be at increased risk, such as pregnancy, prescription medications, mental health conditions, suicidal ideations, any other health or risk factors, including vulnerability to sex trafficking



# WHAT INDICATES A SEX-TRAFFICKED CHILD?

## Red Flags for a Sex Trafficking

The recruitment, harboring, transportation, patronizing, or soliciting of a child for a commercial sex act, in which the sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion

- Runs away frequently
- Has previous history of abuse
- Shows significant change in appearance

# WHAT INDICATES A SEX-TRAFFICKED CHILD?

## Red Flags for a Sex Trafficking

- Has tattoos, scarring, branding that indicate being treated as someone's property
- Has a significant change or escalation in substance use
- Has access to unexplained money, credit cards, hotel keys, gifts, drugs, alcohol, or transportation
- 79% of older youth with sex-trafficking histories report they were trafficked while in a foster care



The background is a dark blue gradient. On the right side, there is a faint, close-up image of a brown teddy bear's head and shoulders. Overlaid on the entire background are several white circular patterns, including concentric circles, dashed lines, and arcs with arrows indicating direction. Some of these circles have numerical markings around their perimeters, such as 150, 160, 170, 180, 190, 200, 210, 220, 230, 240, 250, and 260.

# WHAT TO DO WHEN A CHILD RETURNS?

## AWOL



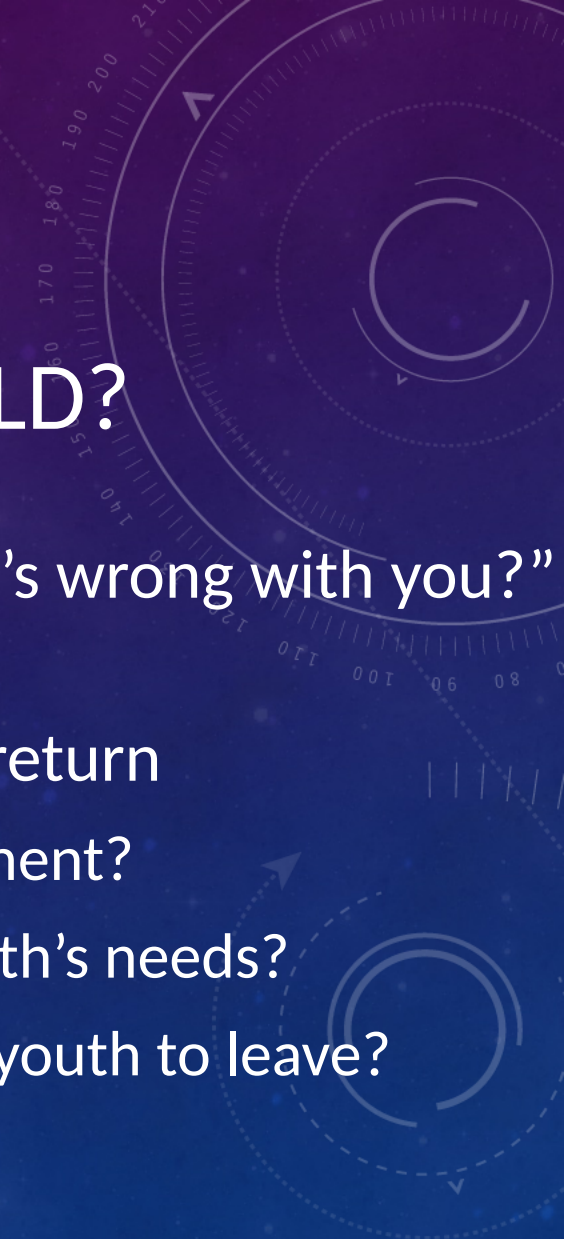


## WHAT TO ASK A CHILD?

“What’s happened to you?” v. “What’s wrong with you?”

Engage youth immediately after they return

- What led the youth to leave the placement?
- Was the placement addressing the youth’s needs?
- Was there an incident that caused the youth to leave?





A large crowd of stylized human figures in various shades of brown and gold, with one figure in the center highlighted in white. The background is a dark blue gradient with faint circular patterns and numbers on the right side.

# WHAT TO ASK A CHILD?

Evaluate whether to return the youth to the same placement

- Is a new or previous placement in the youth's best interests?
- Can something be done to support the youth and placement provider?
- Will the youth feel safe, cared for, and comfortable in the same placement?



# WHAT CHANGES TO MAKE?

Child's Case Plan Must Address Running Away  
Using Clear and Measurable Goals

Family, Friends, and Connections

- Improve family visitation and other contacts
- Maintain self-identified family and connections

Placements and Services

- Introduce activities to increase the youth's engagement
- Support older youth in their interests in exploring and getting jobs



# WHAT CHANGES TO MAKE?

## Youth voices and choices

- Include youth in case planning
- Confidentially discuss the current placement with the child
- Include youth in placement decisions
- Include youth in every decision point and activity

## THE FINAL THOUGHT

Running is one of the worst possible  
outcomes for a child.

If ignored, it won't go away.

In fact, it is likely to get worse.



# EXAMPLES OF SCREENING TOOLS FOR SEX-TRAFFICKED CHILDREN

American Academy of Pediatrics



National Child Traumatic Stress Network

