

**THE ACT OF FLEEING FROM  
A SITUATION OR EVENT  
EITHER EMOTIONALLY OR  
PHYSICALLY OR BOTH**



**WHAT IS  
RUNNING AWAY?**

## **RUNAWAYS**

Ann is a very pretty girl with a round, child-like face, lovely smile and large brown eyes. She dresses colorfully and delights in collecting stuffed animals, bunnies mostly, and baby dolls. When she moves from one cheap hotel to another, as she frequently does, she piles her toys into two enormous plastic garbage bags and drags them with her.

Ann is 15. Like hundreds of other runaways, she hangs out around First and Post Streets in Seattle, a derelict in an area of porn shops, saloons, flea bag hotels. She sleeps late, spending her nights wandering the streets or sitting in the Donut Shop. While it's an unpleasant place, runaways feel welcome there, safe from those who would abuse them, and from the cops. For many, the Donut Shop is the only place they have to go.

I sat opposite Ann at one of the long formica tables, under harsh fluorescent lights. I asked her why she didn't go home to her family.

"Every time I try to go home to live, my Dad starts hitting me," she said. "Now I only go home on Christmas, Thanksgiving and on my birthday. I owe them that. I'd like to live at home again, but I know it would start all over again, Daddy drinking and beating me up. That's why I left. The first time I ran away, I was 11. When I was 12, I was gone for good. I got a job at the Exotic Body Exercise Club downtown near the Donut Shop."

"After I lost that job, I met this old man on the street. He said he needed a babysitter and I'd get paid well. He lived in a hotel in Chinatown. He had a woman who worked for him, and she had a baby I took care of. After a while, I began to work for the old man. I was 13-years-old, and I had no place to go."

"The old man knew all these Japanese guys who'd come to the hotel and use me. Two or three times a week I'd have customers--usually five or six a night. They each paid the old man \$40 for my services. He was good to me. Sometimes he gave me \$7 to go to the disco, and \$10 to spend. But I left him after nine months."

Ann glanced around the Donut Shop at the other kids. Then she leaned forward, lowering her voice, not wanting the other children to hear. Her modesty was touching and sad.

"After I left the old man," she continued, "I started mud wrestling on weekends all over the country. I was 14." Ann told me about the mud show circuit, how she was auctioned off after each match to the highest bidder. She added that her life was OK. Anyway, what choice did she have? Nobody since she first ran away had ever tried to help her--nobody.

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We left the Donut Shop. Kids were huddled in doorways or walking back and forth to keep warm, some as young as 10, waiting around in the cold for someone to stop and buy their bodies for a few dollars or a meal or a warm place to stay. Police cars cruised by, as did men peering through closed car windows, looking for kids to pick up.

Up to 1 million children in the United States run away from home each year, according to the federal Health and Human Services Administration. And most, after a few weeks, turn to walking the streets and theft for survival. The average age of a runaway child is 15.

Forty-seven percent of runaways are girls, the agency says. More than half leave home because of child abuse. One-third are sexually abused. Of these children, 83 percent come from Caucasian (white) families. The majority are never even reported as missing by their parents. Knowing all that, it was still disheartening to see so many kids with nowhere to go in Seattle.

As we walked, Ann introduced me to other street children, two of whom I asked to interview. Most of the runaways I met were unusually bright, attractive, lonely and hungry for adult regard and affection.

Before I left Ann, I asked how she envisioned her future. It was now after midnight. She stood on a street corner, her small hands shoved in her jacket pockets, looking weak and defenseless. "Oh, I don't plan to walk the streets for the rest of my life," she declared. "In Seattle, most of the runaway girls on the street end up in prostitution. It's do or die. The same with boys. Do you know how hard it is for a kid to get a job in Seattle?" She shook her head. "If I had my life to do all over again, I wouldn't live like this. I would have stayed home. I'd rather be abused at home than this. Seriously, I would." She paused. "But it's too late now."

For three days in San Diego, a runaway named Patrick took me to places where children on the lam gather--they're not hard to find. They sleep in the bus depot, or in the parks, particularly the area near the zoo. You find them in abandoned cars or empty houses or grouped around fires on the beaches. They are everywhere. They survive by doing odd jobs, stealing, and helping each other out.

We came to the park two days after the police had raided it, and we saw children with bruised faces and cuts on their heads. The police don't like children living in the parks.

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Among the runaways I interviewed there was Steven, 15, from Ocean Beach, California. He ran away when he was 13, he said. Like most runaways, his chief concern was getting enough food and a dry place to sleep. He comes from a good family, but he can't go home again.

"It's frightening to be a runaway," Steven said, "because you don't know where you're going to eat or live. Am I going to be all right? Will I be able to sleep somewhere other than in the park? You got nothing to grab onto because all that you own is what's on your back. Nothing is mine. When I want something to eat, I steal it.

"Why don't kids want to go home?" I asked.

"Some of them get beat up so bad," he said. "But the streets are bad too. The cops hassle you. Sometimes they beat you up."

"I don't want to go home because I really hate my mother. When I was 13, she kicked me out."

"If I had a child who ran away, I'd find him. I'd do my best. I'd sit down and ask him what was on his mind. And after we talked, I'd try to change the things he didn't like. We'd compromise. What's troubling you, kid?

"I want to go back home, but I can't. I see how small I am--I'm nothing. I can't live on my own. It's mad out there. It's crazy and scary! I can't pay my own way and I know it."

The day I was to leave San Diego, Patrick and I went to Ocean Beach to interview more runaways. I talked to a girl and a boy who lived in a broken down car, to a girl of 15 with a year-old baby, and her friend of 13. They had been traveling together for two years and could not see beyond tomorrow. Also, there were young runaways spaced out on drugs or staggering about on cheap booze, children obviously undernourished, unhealthy, unwanted. America's children.

But Patrick's story seemed to be the most disturbing. He had a pretty hard life. "I don't want to tell you all of it," he said. "I was always made to feel less. My mom hated me because I reminded her of my dad. Then when I was 13, I was sent to live with my grandparents," he said. "They cheated and lied. When I was 15, they sold me to a lady for \$500. I ran away. So I never had a real family. I never saw my real father. I was always lonely, feeling like there must be something wrong with me. How come nobody ever loved me? I must be bad. I feel like I don't exist because nobody ever loved me.

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"My mom used to beat me with boards," he continued. "You wouldn't believe some of the stuff she whipped me with--Hot Wheels Tracks. And my stepfather? He whipped me 25 times on the back of the legs with a rubber hose. I tried to block it, and I got hit on the hands. I counted every swat. Twenty-five times he hit me. And now he beats my little brother. How can I get even? I can't get even. But I'll remember it, believe me."

I asked Patrick if that was why he ran away, because of the beating.

"I didn't want to be a runaway," he said. "I didn't want to steal. I had nowhere to go. There's a lot of things I don't know, and I'd like to learn. I want to learn to survive legally," he went on. "I don't have my ID and I don't know how to get it. I'm willing to learn. I don't want to be a bum, because I'm better than that. Do you understand where I'm coming from? I need to know things to survive! I don't know anything. I can barely read, to tell you the honest truth. My mom never helped me with my school work. They didn't care about me."

I looked at him, his eyes expressing pain and deep humiliation. "I can barely read."

"Patrick," I began and gave up. I had no answer to give him.

"Don't you think loving is hard?" he asked. He glanced at me, and then he declared manfully, "I never cry!"

With that Patrick rushed to the fence, climbed it, and like a circus acrobat ran along the top of it quickly -away from me.

National Runaway Hot line (1-800-231-6949) or the National Runaway Switchboard (1-800 621-4000).

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**RUNAWAYS**

1. Children that run away are largely from the \_\_\_\_\_ class.
2. Why did Ann leave? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How did Ann earn money? \_\_\_\_\_  
Why didn't she get a respectable job? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Up to \_\_\_\_\_ children in the US run away from home each year.
5. Most runaways turn to \_\_\_\_\_ for survival.
6. The average age of a runaway child is \_\_\_\_\_.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ % of runaways are girls.
8. More than 1/2 leave home because of \_\_\_\_\_.
9. 1/3 are \_\_\_\_\_.
10. 83% come from \_\_\_\_\_ families.
11. Runaways are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ for adult attention.
12. Where do children on the lam generally sleep? \_\_\_\_\_
13. What is the chief concern of most runaways? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Why is it frightening to be a runaway? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
15. Why don't kids want to go home? \_\_\_\_\_
16. What did Steve say was important that a parent and child do?  
\_\_\_\_\_
17. If you were in a situation where you wanted to run away, what alternatives could you take instead? List at least five (5).
  1. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_
  4. \_\_\_\_\_
  5. \_\_\_\_\_

Ex. \_\_\_\_\_

Ex. \_\_\_\_\_

Ex. \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### RUNAWAYS - TEACHER KEY

1. Children that run away are largely from the middle class.
2. Why did Ann leave? because of child abuse at home
3. How did Ann earn money? prostitution  
Why didn't she get a respectable job? no skills
4. Up to one million children in the US run away from home each year.
5. Most runaways turn to theft for survival.
6. The average age of a runaway child is 15.
7. 47 % of runaways are girls.
8. More than 1/2 leave home because of child abuse/abusive parents.
9. 1/3 of those that run away are sexually abused.
10. 83% come from Caucasian/white families.
11. Runaways are hungry and lonely for adult attention.
12. Where do children on the lam generally sleep? in cars or abandoned homes
13. What is the chief concern of most runaways? food to eat & a place to sleep
14. Why is it frightening to be a runaway? you don't know where you are  
going to live or if you will have anything to eat
15. Why don't kids want to go home? because of the abuse
16. What did Steve say was important that a parent and child do?  
talk & compromise
17. If you were in a situation where you wanted to run away, what alternatives could you take instead? List at least five (5).
  1. stay with friends or other relatives
  2. social/youth services
  3. talk to counselors
  4. talk to a teacher
  5. try to settle things at home

Ex. \_\_\_\_\_

Ex. \_\_\_\_\_

Ex. \_\_\_\_\_