

Advice  
for parents of runaways



Montréal 

# How should you react if your child runs away? How should you act when he or she comes back?

These are questions that you as a parent may have to face. More and more young people aged 12 to 17 who live in urban areas are running away from home. Since 2003, the **Service de police de la Ville de Montréal** (SPVM) has noted an average of 4,500 runaways per year in Montréal.<sup>1</sup>

That's why the **SPVM** designed this handbook, in cooperation with **Missing Children's Network** and **En marge 12-17**. It suggests possible solutions and resources so that you will know what to do and where to get help if your child runs away and when he or she comes back afterwards. The brochure is also intended to give you the tools to prevent your child from running away again.

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## Information

**Service de police de la Ville de Montréal**  
[www.ssvm.qc.ca](http://www.ssvm.qc.ca)

**Missing Children's Network**  
[www.missingchildren.ca](http://www.missingchildren.ca)

**Parents en marge de la rue**  
**(514) 849-5632**

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<sup>1</sup> Service de police de la Ville de Montréal, *Statistical data board of the SPVM*, Montréal, 2003 to 2005.

## How do you know if your child has run away?

Your teen goes out and doesn't come back to his family, his foster family or the centre where he lives. Like many parents who have to deal with this kind of situation, you're worried: has he run away or has he been abducted?

### Your child may have run away:

- ▶ if he has left the place where he usually lives;
- ▶ if she hasn't come back after a planned absence, such as a visit to a relative or an activity;
- ▶ if he has expressed a wish to do so, either verbally or through his behaviour;
- ▶ if she has left signs indicating that she may have left of her own accord, for example, by taking money, clothing or personal items.  
(You usually won't find any signs like that in the case of an abduction.)

If you aren't sure whether your child has run away or been abducted, don't hesitate to call **9-1-1** as soon as possible in order to inform the **SPVM** and start the search process.

**If your child has run away, remember that you're not the only person who's ever had to go through this. And don't keep the problem to yourself: ask for help from your friends and family and other competent resources.**



## Why do young people run away?

Very few kids run away from home just for fun. In general, their action is meant to send an important message that you need to take into consideration. Beyond the anxiety that your child's running away makes you feel, you need to try to understand the message. After that, you'll be better able to find ways to intervene to improve the situation. The first step in this direction involves identifying whether this is a spontaneous action or a planned one.

### **The unplanned, spontaneous departure**

Young people may spontaneously decide to run away after experiencing an incident, a failure, a conflict or an intense emotion (such as fear of facing the consequences of their actions, anger or grief). In these circumstances, running away seems to be the only possible solution; it may even feel like an escape hatch allowing them to avoid facing up to their problems.

**Most runaways will run away again if the situation that triggered their action is not resolved.**

### **The planned, well-thought-out departure**

On the other hand, a young person's flight may be well thought out and planned. In such cases, she is often looking for a new way of life that meets her aspirations. Flight becomes a response to one or more needs that are not being met, such as freedom, validation, experimentation, independence and adventure. Running away may also be a way of escaping from her problems, an act of defiance or an attempt to find herself. Finally, running away may represent a way of calling for help or adapting to a situation that is too difficult or full of suffering to cope with.

**You feel guilty or overwhelmed... Maybe you even feel like throwing up your hands in despair... But you still want to assume your role as a parent.**

**According to the *Civil Code of Québec*, you have a responsibility for your child. You must ensure that he is looked after, supervised and educated. In addition to this legal obligation, you are one of the most important people in your teen's life. You have a key role to play in resolving the situation with him and preventing him from getting dragged into more serious problems or running away again.**

**Among other things, kids who run away repeatedly risk ending up on the street or having experiences that could scar them for life. You can really make a huge difference by just being there for your kid. And that's true even if you need to get help from other people!**

## What should you do if your child runs away?

Despite the strength of your emotions, it is important for you to remain calm and save your energy so you can take the necessary steps to find your child as soon as possible. As you swing into action, you will surely find clues as to the reason why your child ran away and solutions to solve the problem and avoid any repetition.

### **Do some quick checking.**

First of all, you need to do some checking to find out whether your teen has run away, so you can inform the **SPVM** as soon as possible.

- ▶ Contact your child's best friends and a representative of her school to find out the last place where she was seen, the places she usually goes to and the people she hangs out with.
- ▶ Check his room and the house to identify any items he may have taken with him.

**Based on the cases processed by the **SPVM**, the majority of runaways are returned home or located in the Montréal area within two to three days.<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> Service de police de la Ville de Montréal, *Service d'informations policières – Monthly situation report on missing persons and runaways*, Montréal, 2003–2004.

### **Inform the police.**

As soon as you have enough clues leading you to believe that your child has run away, call **9-1-1**.

A police officer will visit you as quickly as possible to collect all the information needed to trace your teen, such as a description, a recent photo, a message, the names of the people he knows, his habits, and his address book or date book.

This police officer will file an event report with a reference number that you should use when you contact the investigator assigned to your case. In addition, the **SPVM** will circulate the runaway notice to all police departments in the province.

The distribution of the runaway notice provides your child with evidence that you love her and you're taking all the necessary steps to intervene. This action proves that you disagree with her decision and that you won't let her get into situations that could compromise her safety.

**The act of reporting a runaway to the police doesn't necessarily mean that your child will be taken in charge by the **Direction de la protection de la jeunesse (DPJ)**. DPJ caseworkers only become involved when a child is in a compromised situation, that is, a situation that compromises his safety or development and from which his parents can't or don't want to protect him.**

### **Keep searching for clues.**

You can contribute to the search for your teen.

### **Check your home.**

You may well find a number of clues to the place where she's gone or the reason why she went. For example, you might find a letter, e-mails or the last caller's telephone number, which you can get by dialling \*69.

### **Contact his friends and talk to their parents.**

Sometimes parents will shelter their children's friends without checking their age or making sure that they have their own parents' permission to be there. Furthermore, they may find it easier to get information about your child than you would. Sometimes the other kids have this information but don't want to betray their friend. If you talk directly to your child's friends, ask them very clearly to mention that you would like to get a phone call from him, if he should contact them.

**The more people you mobilize, the more you increase your chances of finding your kid. Don't hesitate to contact resources that can support you in the search for your child, such as **Missing Children's Network, Parents en marge de la rue** and similar organizations.**



### **Contact members of your extended family.**

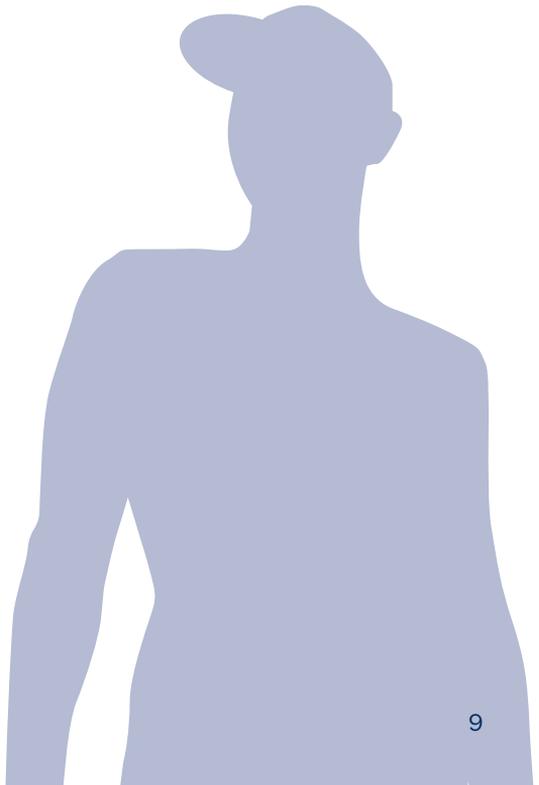
The first time they run away, most young people go to someone they know: a sister, a brother, an aunt, an uncle, friends of the family, or a parent's ex-spouse, for example. Since your child may have talked to these people, they might have information about her reason for running away. Ask them to get in touch with you right away if your child contacts them or if they learn anything new.

### **Call or visit the places where he hangs out.**

In places such as the school, drop-in centres, arcades and parks, you may find clues to the reason why your child ran away. By talking to the people your kid spends time with, such as his teachers or street workers, you may find out whether he has experienced any problems recently, such as being a victim of bullying or teasing.

### **Contact resources that provide shelter for young people.**

You can also contact the staff at **Enmarge 12-17** or the **Bunker**, two downtown youth shelters that welcome runaways. That way, you'll be able to verify if they've seen your child. You can also leave a message for your child, which will be passed on to her if she uses this resource. The message may reassure your child and help her to think things over, and realize that you're worried about her.



## **Prepare to negotiate the return.**

Sooner or later, you're going to have to talk things over with your kid to try to solve the problem: either during the time she's gone, in a phone conversation, at a meeting or when she's back again.

Here are a few things you should think about as you prepare to negotiate your child's return:

**“What is the meaning of this action?  
Why did he run away?”**

**“What is she trying to tell me?”**

**“Who is he sending a message to?”**

**“In my view, what are the possible solutions to this problem?”**

**“What are my limits?”**

**“What am I prepared to negotiate with my kid and what's non-negotiable?”**

If possible, think about the solutions that your child might suggest and decide whether you can accept them or not. Let's suppose that your child wants more freedom. You could, for example, agree to allow him to go out more on the weekend, but in return for his telling you where he's going and with whom. On the other hand, going out on weeknights might not be negotiable.

Finally, make use of your child's absence to think about how you will avoid making promises to her that you won't be able to keep. Then, when she comes back, you can have a real discussion with her to solve the problem.

### **Take care of yourself and your family.**

It's important to take care of yourself, since you'll need all your energy to welcome your child when he comes back. So you need to take care of your physical health (sleep, food, etc.). If you feel unwell, don't hesitate to consult a doctor.

It's just as important to take care of your psychological health. You may feel all kinds of emotions such as grief, anger and anxiety. These emotions are normal, so you shouldn't feel guilty about them. If you try to ignore them, they'll probably get stronger. If you can't talk about them, writing can be a good way of expressing your emotions and how you feel.

**For guidance concerning resources that meet your needs, you can also contact your neighbourhood **Centre de santé et de services sociaux (CSSS)** formerly known as the **CLSC** or get in touch with the **Centre de référence du Grand Montréal.****



There are all kinds of ways to take care of yourself:

**Talk to friends.**

Don't hesitate to tell them clearly what you expect of them. Do you want them to listen to you, comfort you, help you take your mind off things or give you advice?

**Seek help, if necessary.**

You can get support from organizations that help young people and their parents or from your local **CSSS**. You will also find the tools to better understand what your child is going through.

**Give yourself some time to relax.**

For example, give yourself time to play sports, read, listen to music or take a bath, without feeling guilty.

**Take time to be with your family.**

The whole family is thrown into turmoil when someone runs away. You all need to try to support each other and live a normal life. Happy times with your spouse or the whole family will do you all good and give everyone some positive energy. If all your attention is focused on the runaway, the other family members may act out so that you'll pay some attention to them too.



## What should you do if your runaway child calls you?

Finally – news from your kid! He’s on the other end of the line. You need to do whatever you can to remain in contact with him, no matter what decision he makes.

### Keep in contact and remain calm.

Tell her you’re happy to hear from her.

### Name your emotions.

By naming your worry, anxiety or sadness, you’ll prevent him from interpreting your calm as a lack of interest on your part.

### Make sure she’s safe.

Ask closed (“yes-no”) questions:

“Are you safe?”

“Can you talk freely?”

“Are you able to leave the place where you are?”

“Do you want me to come and get you?”



If your child is in danger, he may tell you so. In that case, ask him for as much information as possible about the danger and the place where he is, so you can help him. Pass this information on to the **SPVM** by calling **9-1-1**. Mention the reference number for the event (the one attached to your file) in order to facilitate police actions.

### **Try to understand and find solutions.**

Ask her directly:

“Why did you leave?”

“What are you trying to say by running away?”

“Do you want something to change?”

“If so, what is it?”

“What are you ready to do to make things change?”

“Do you need to contact youth resources?”

### **Suggest telephone appointments.**

If your child doesn't want to come back, these appointments will encourage him to call you and give you news. The frequency should be clearly determined (every day, every two days, once a week). The important thing is not to break the lines of communication with your kid, no matter how difficult that may be.

### **Suggest meeting him in a neutral space.**

You can suggest meeting him in a neutral place such as a café so that you can talk things over. If he accepts, go there yourself—don't send somebody else in your place or you'll lose his trust.

At the end of the meeting, if he refuses to come back, you have the right to tell him that:

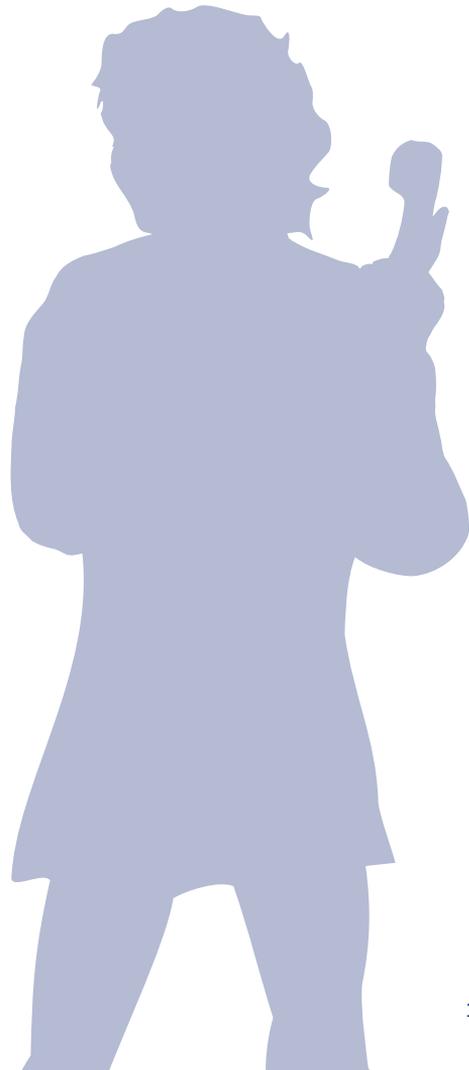
- ▶ you don't agree with running away as a response to his problems;
- ▶ you have to tell the **SPVM** where he is;
- ▶ you want to protect him and help him find solutions.

Give him the choice of staying or leaving. It's not easy but, by giving him the choice, you won't break your bond of trust.

### Avoid...

- ▶ **blaming her**, and making negative remarks;
- ▶ **making promises** that you won't be able to keep; either she won't believe you or she'll put pressure on you or blackmail you when she comes back;
- ▶ **using threats or blackmail** to make her come back, such as threatening to get the **DPJ** involved or place her in an institution;
- ▶ **insisting, if she refuses to tell you where she is**, since she may very well hang up on you;
- ▶ **going to look for her yourself** to force her to come back if she's in a shelter for minors such as **En marge 12-17** or the **Bunker**.

Such a centre legally constitutes a private place and your child is safe there. Instead, you should phone the staff at the centre and make arrangements with them; they will act as intermediaries.



# What should you do when your child comes back again?

Like many parents, you wonder how you should act when your child comes back after running away. Obviously, his return may trigger some strong emotions—both his and yours.

## **Tell the police about the return.**

If the police weren't the ones who found your child, call **9-1-1** to inform the **SPVM** and have the search stopped.

A police officer will meet with you to confirm the child's location and close the file.

## **Manage your emotions.**

It's best if your discussions with your child don't get too emotional. That's why it's so important to think things over carefully while your child is away. Moreover, your reflection process should have given you a chance to express your emotions.

To prepare for these discussions, you can write down your emotions and what you want to say to your child:

- ▶ what you have been feeling,
- ▶ why you think he ran away,
- ▶ the solutions you think are possible,
- ▶ your limits and the aspects you're ready to negotiate about.

It's normal to fear that your child will run away again and your child may use this feeling to put pressure on you.

**Don't forget: the best way of avoiding a new episode of running away is to find a solution to the problems revealed by this one.**

### Welcome your child.

Remain courteous with your child. Tell her you're glad that she's back. Take the time to decompress before starting any more serious discussions. A bath, a nice meal and a good night's sleep will do you both good.

### Open the door to communication.

Good communication with your child can be your best ally.

If you find it difficult to communicate with him, you can suggest bringing in someone else. The role of this third party will be to take a neutral position and facilitate communication between you and your child.

In addition, you can **contact your neighbourhood CSSS** to get help from professionals such as a social worker, psychologist, educator or other competent professional.

And don't hesitate to **ask for help from someone you know**. But remember that this help has to be the kind you need.

This kind of support could come from a person who:

- ▶ **advances your discussions while remaining neutral**, and whom both you and your child can trust;
- ▶ **gives your child a place to stay** for a while after she returns, to give everyone a break, once you have clearly defined the host's responsibilities and the length of the stay;
- ▶ **lets your child visit from time to time**, when she needs a break, while following the recommendations mentioned above.

### **Look for solutions.**

The discussions with your child may take place in one or more stages. Here are a few tips to guide the process:

- ▶ **Give her a chance to talk about her experiences** while she was gone.

If she doesn't want to tell you everything, maybe it's because she doesn't want to worry you.

- ▶ **Validate the reasons why he run away.**

The reasons you came up with may not be his real reasons.

The important thing is to give him a chance to talk about it or suggest some resources if he prefers to talk to somebody else.

- ▶ **Set limits on what you want to hear.**

Talking about some street activities, such as drug taking or prostitution, can be very hard on a parent. If you can't bear to listen to your kid's answers, don't ask any questions but give her a chance to talk to somebody else.

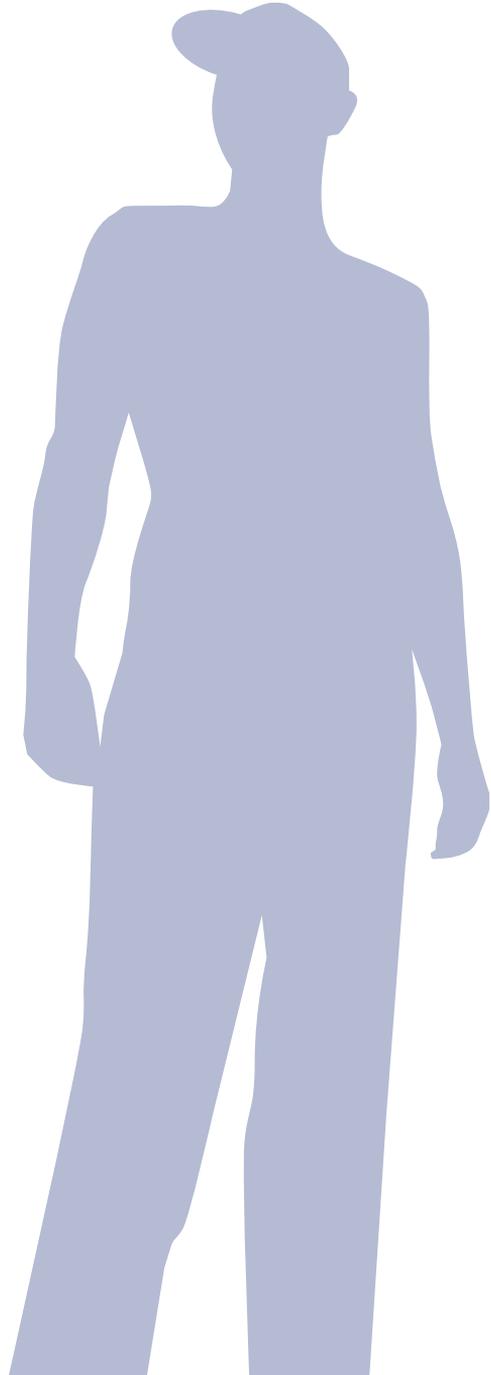
On the other hand, you need to be involved in the discussion of the reason why she ran away and the search for solutions. Together, you need to search for solutions that suit all of you. This is the time when the thinking you did while she was gone will be important, since you'll need to express your limits and what's negotiable for you.

### **Take the time you need.**

If your kid tells you he ran away for a reason you didn't expect, you can tell him that this is a new idea for you and you need time to think about solutions, so you would like to put off your discussion until the next day.

If the discussion becomes stormy and difficult, you can break it off and start it up again when everyone's calmer.

When you make an agreement with your child, you can decide with him that it will be in place for a certain time, and after that you'll assess it together and see how well it's been working. This will give you a chance for a new talk with him. Both of you will be able to express how you feel about the agreement. You'll have a chance to congratulate your kid on what's going well and show him that discussion can be a better way to solve problems than running away.



**If necessary,  
think about different options  
for the return.**

In some cases, it may be necessary to take a break and some time to think before your child can be integrated into the home again. Letting your child stay with a trusted person can be a good way of letting everyone decompress. However, it's important to define the length of this stay and the person's responsibilities right from the start.

In the case of young people who put themselves in serious danger, it may be necessary to place them in an institution. The **DPJ** may decide on a month's placement for evaluation or a quick, intensive intervention, depending on the situation. If you think this approach with the DPJ may be necessary, you can contact the Service de réception et traitement des signalements, which will evaluate your situation.

In some cases, life at home may become intolerable for the whole family. If your child is over 16 years old, she can stay temporarily at a community shelter organization, such as **En marge 12-17** or the **Bunker**. This solution is possible if you and your child agree to it.



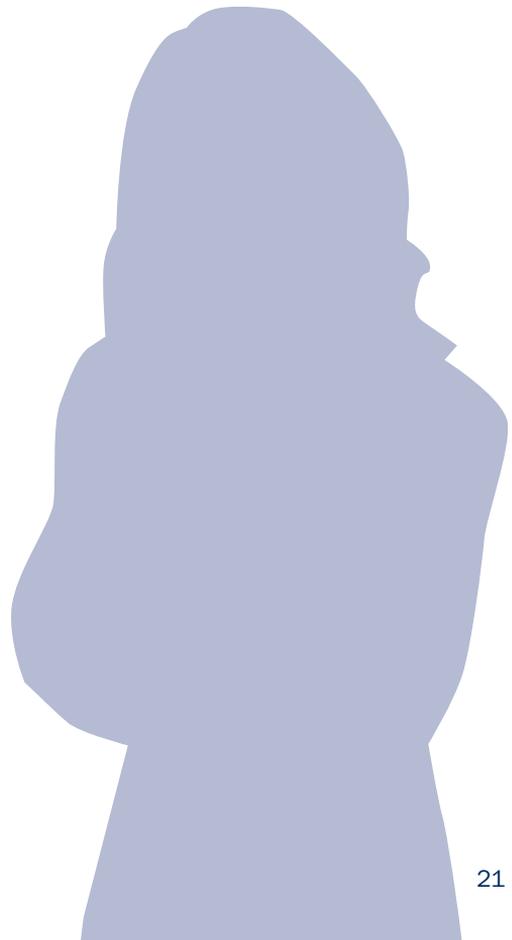
## Conclusion

If your child runs away, he is calling on you as a parent. Whether he acted on the spur of the moment or after long thought, he's sending a message that you need to try to decode to find long-term solutions to the problem.

With the help of this brochure, you have identified some actions to take to find your child as soon as possible. You've explored some possible lines of thought so you can express your emotions and negotiate your child's return. In addition, you have identified different ways of keeping in contact with him if he calls you while he's gone. You have also been made aware of some resources that can support you when you need help.

When your child comes back, communication will be your best ally to end the standoff and prevent her from running away again. Once the crisis is over, it is important to continue to make a point of having discussions with your child, either about topics of general interest to teenagers such as friendship, or about your child herself. And share some happy times alone with your child or as a family.

Even if the teen years are filled with conflict, it's important to never break the lines of communication with your kid. He needs to feel that the door is always open with his family, so that he can **come back to stay!**



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# Checklist

## What should you do if your child runs away?

- ▶ Do some quick checking.
- ▶ Inform the police as soon as possible.
- ▶ Keep searching for clues.
- ▶ Prepare to negotiate the return.
- ▶ Take care of yourself and your family.

## What should you do if your runaway child calls you?

- ▶ Keep contact and remain calm.
- ▶ Name your emotions.
- ▶ Make sure she's safe.
- ▶ Try to understand and find solutions.
- ▶ Suggest telephone appointments.
- ▶ Suggest meeting him in a neutral space.
- ▶ Avoid blaming her, making promises, using threats or blackmail, insisting, if she refuses to tell you where she is, or going to look for her yourself if she's in a shelter for minors.

## What should you do when your child comes back again?

- ▶ Tell the police about the return.
- ▶ Manage your emotions.
- ▶ Welcome your child.
- ▶ Open the door to communication.
- ▶ Look for solutions.
- ▶ Take the time you need.
- ▶ If necessary, think about different options for the return.

**At any time, you can contact the nearest **CSSS** or the **Centre de référence du Grand Montréal** if you need to be guided to resources that can meet your needs.**

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## Some resources

**Direction de la protection de la jeunesse (DPJ)** (514) 896-3100  
[www.centrejeunessedemontreal.qc.ca/dpj/default.htm](http://www.centrejeunessedemontreal.qc.ca/dpj/default.htm)

- ▶ Receipt and processing of reports concerning youths less than 18 years old
- ▶ Evaluation and quick, intensive intervention service

**Batshaw Youth and Family Centres** (514) 935-6196  
[www.batshaw.ca](http://www.batshaw.ca)

- ▶ Receipt and processing of reports concerning youths less than 18 years old (in English)

**La ligne parents** (514) 288-5555  
[www.teljeunes.com/principal/parents.asp#2](http://www.teljeunes.com/principal/parents.asp#2)

- ▶ Telephone advice service for parents and parenting skills support program

**Le Bunker (Le Bon Dieu dans la rue)** (514) 524-0029  
[www.danslarue.com/an/](http://www.danslarue.com/an/)

- ▶ Emergency shelter for kids aged 12 to 19

**Centres de santé et de services sociaux (CSSS)** [www.aqesss.qc.ca](http://www.aqesss.qc.ca)

- ▶ Services from doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, specialized educators
- ▶ Youth clinic

**Centre de référence du Grand Montréal** (514) 527-1375  
[www.info-reference.qc.ca/index\\_a.html](http://www.info-reference.qc.ca/index_a.html)

- ▶ Referral to find a resource that meets your needs
- ▶ Information on community services related to welfare, health and recreation in Montréal

**Service de police de la Ville de Montréal** 9-1-1  
[www.spvm.qc.ca](http://www.spvm.qc.ca)

- ▶ Search and runaway notices

**En Marge 12-17** (514) 849-7117

- ▶ Welcome and shelter for minors

**Parents en marge de la rue** (514) 849-5632

- ▶ Support and referral for parents
- ▶ Tools to understand why kids run away and prepare for their return
- ▶ Mediation meetings and information sessions on running away

**Missing Children's Network** (514) 843-4333  
[www.missingchildren.ca](http://www.missingchildren.ca)

- ▶ Support for parents during the search and prevention tools
- ▶ Production and distribution of posters

Other resources	Contact information