



# Push and Pull:

## *Tips for Reducing the Risk of Youth Running Away from Placements*

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Youth who run away or are otherwise missing from their foster care placement is a national issue, often with serious consequences for the health and well-being of young people in our country. Youth who run away from placements are at extreme risk of homelessness, disconnection from school and social supports, sexual exploitation, and further placement instability. More needs to be done to ensure youth in foster care are connected to the resources they need to help ensure their wellbeing.

Research shows that when youth run away from foster care, they often report series of “push” and “pull” factors that influenced the event. “Push” factors refer to what youth are running from, such as conflict at home or placement, overly restrictive placements, and negative interactions with other youth in their placement. “Pull” factors refer to what youth are running to, such as friends, family, preferred activities, and autonomy. Our Youth Thrive research shows there are ways to meet a youth’s need for social connections, physical and emotional safety and autonomy in the placement they are running from, with the goal of reducing the number of youth nationwide who run away from placements.

The University of Kansas conducted interviews with youth, ages 12 to 17, in foster care and found that youth reported running away to have a say in their own lives, connect with family, and escape unsafe placements. The research team identified that empowering youth to have a say in determining their own care, maintaining family bonds and connections, receiving placement with siblings, and having supportive placements that promote normalcy and a sense of belonging were protective factors against running away.

Youth Thrive’s five Protective and Promotive factors provides a framework for how systems can help provide young people what they need to become healthy adults. For youth in foster care, the Protective and Promotive factors create a pathway for identifying, responding, and mitigating “push” and “pull” factors that youth report running to and running from. Below are recommendations for how each Protective and Promotive factor can be put into practice to promote safe, stable, and appropriate placements:

## SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

- **Support youth in developing meaningful, permanent connections with caring adults and adults who are in their own community.** Social connections are a strong protective factor against running away and experiencing homelessness, as well as a myriad of other negative outcomes.
- **Be a champion of sibling and family visits.** Wanting connection with biological family that their placement is not providing is a strong “pull” factor for youth running away. Scheduling regular family and sibling visits can meet the need youth have to be connected with family.
- **Encourage friendships.** Seeking to cultivate friendships is another strong “pull” factor. Creating opportunities for youth to have their friends over or encouraging youth to hang out with friends outside of school is a protective factor against running away.
- **Be open and available to conversations guided by the youth.** Sometimes youth just need someone to talk to. Be open to organic conversation guided by what youth need to talk about, and listen for any “push” or “pull” factors in their life.

## COGNITIVE & SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

- **Encourage the youth’s involvement in extracurriculars and community-based activities.** Feeling connected to individuals and institutions aids in the development of essential cognitive and social-emotional skills. If a youth has already experienced a runaway episode, reconnecting them to their community is especially important in preventing them from running away in the future.
- **Identify the youth’s personal goals and equip them with tools to achieve those goals.** Providing young people with information and resources that will help them discover, identify, and further their interests cultivate a youth’s sense of autonomy, which is a strong “pull” factor.

## KNOWLEDGE OF ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

- **Respond appropriately.** As the adolescent brain develops, it is common for youth to engage in risky behavior such as running away. Many youth run away multiple times, and they most often return on their own. Respond appropriately, identify the youth’s needs, and invite the youth to discuss a developmentally appropriate solution.
- **Create a safe space for social connections.** Wanting connection with friends, families, and romantic partners is a normal, healthy part of development, and youth should be encouraged to nurture those connections. Denying youth the opportunity to see friends or family has been shown to increase the likelihood of youth running away.
- **Be cognizant of overly restrictive rules and allow the youth a reasonable amount of autonomy.** Restrictive placements are “push” factors, and youth often report wanting fewer rules and more autonomy and control when making decisions. Partner with youth and make sure their placement is suitable for the youth’s current developmental needs.

## CONCRETE SUPPORT IN TIMES OF NEED

- **Empower youth to share what is not working.** If young people are running away from a placement that is not meeting their needs, take action to help them get the services they need.
- **Make sure youth feel comfortable asking for help.** Create a safe space for young people to ask for help and be intentional about responding. Providing youth with what they need reduces stress and allows young people to grow and thrive.

## YOUTH RESILIENCE

- **Equip youth with the tools they need to face challenges and identify solutions.** Similar to empowering youth to share what is not working in a placement, equip them with the tools to identify what is not working and how to create solutions, such as more time with siblings, parents, and other relatives, or a change of placement.
- **Assist youth in responding to conflict.** Negative interactions with peers are “push” factors for youth. Support and assist youth in responding to conflict and navigating negative interactions, including developing intervention strategies.
- **Create opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful decision-making in their lives.** Collaborate with youth to identify their own “push” and “pull” factors and prioritize the young person’s voice in mitigating any risk.