

A Parent's Guide To Handling The Runaway Threat

How do you handle a teenager who talks back about everything when he or she is corrected, and threatens to run away? WITH PRAYER, HUMOR, CONFIDENCE, AND ABOVE ALL, PERSEVERANCE!

How does a parent live with the constant arguing? BY REFUSING TO GET CAUGHT UP IN THE EMOTIONAL SIDE OF THE DEBATE AND BY AGREEING!

Agreement is disarming. "Yes, you are right. I am wrong and I am sorry you have to put up with a mother who is wrong so much of the time, but that's the luck of the draw." We can smile, agree and hold to limits without arguing. "I know I am abusing you by asking you to clean your room, but when it's clean, you can eat." If arguing persists, just nod and smile. "Dinner is at 6:00 p.m. if your room is clean, otherwise breakfast is at 7:00 a.m.". And stick to this!

The greatest problem is the teen's threat to run away. This threat can be imaginary or real. We know there are many runaway teens that are never heard from again, so the threat can strike terror into a parent's heart. The threat sometimes starts when a child is 3 or 4. We handled it by helping the child pack a suitcase, forbidding them to cross any streets, and inviting them to come home for a snack when they got hungry. This will not work with adolescents, but the underlying principle may. Parents cannot allow themselves to be held hostage of an ongoing threat of running away. The best way of handling the runaway threat is to deal with it rationally, rather than emotionally. When a young person makes the threat, we don't cave in and promise to relax limits, but rather say, "Well, that's your option, of course. We're not going to chain you to our home. But the law holds us responsible for you so let's look at some ways we can get you out of here legally. Do you know any parents who want you?" If not, we can sit with him or her and go over these questions: "Do you intend to run away permanently or temporarily? We need to know so we can free up your room. Let's look in the paper and see what kind of jobs and wages are available to a teen. Maybe you could get a job as a live-in baby-sitter. Lots of working mothers need these. And while we're at it, let's look at apartment rents, just to give you an idea of what you'll need to earn." And so on. This approach is lighthearted, but not entirely facetious. When parents take the threat seriously and show caring concern for the young person who threatens to leave home, it takes the power out of the threat, which is not likely to be repeated weekly.

