



**REASONS A TRAUMATIZED CHILD RUNS AWAY?**  
**PATRICK TOMLINSON (2015, Revised 2024)**

**Introductory Note:** I wrote this in 2015, revised it slightly in 2021, and recently Maria João Braga da Cruz kindly offered to translate it into Portuguese. Interestingly, she felt that there is no exact translation in Portuguese for how the word truant is used in parts of this article. Her comments in italics below are helpful and interesting.

*In the process of translating this article, thought was given to how best to convey the intention of using the term "truant". The literal translation of "truant" in Portuguese would be "absentee", the one who misses classes, and "truancy", which translates as 'absenteeism'. However, the application of the term "truant" in this article goes beyond that; it refers to the one who escapes from the place where they are expected to be.*

*To adjectivize a mind as "truant" is to refer to a mind that, through this absence, is looking for something. A good example is that of a person who is physically present but whose mind evades being present. Ultimately, to apply the concept of "truant" is to invite us to think about the one who is absent, from a dynamic perspective that goes beyond physical absence. The child or young person who is absent may be evading from and towards something at the same time. Based on this premise, which explains the more complete and complex term in English, and to facilitate translation, the decision was made to replace the concept of "truant" with other terms according to the meaning most appropriate to the context, e.g., the one whose mind drives to evasion, to be absent. (Maria João Braga da Cruz, 2024)*

**"I STARTED RUNNING AWAY WHEN I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD. IT WASN'T UNTIL I WAS AN ADULT THAT I REALIZED WHAT I REALLY WANTED WAS SOMEBODY TO COME AFTER ME WHEN I WAS RUNNING AWAY."**

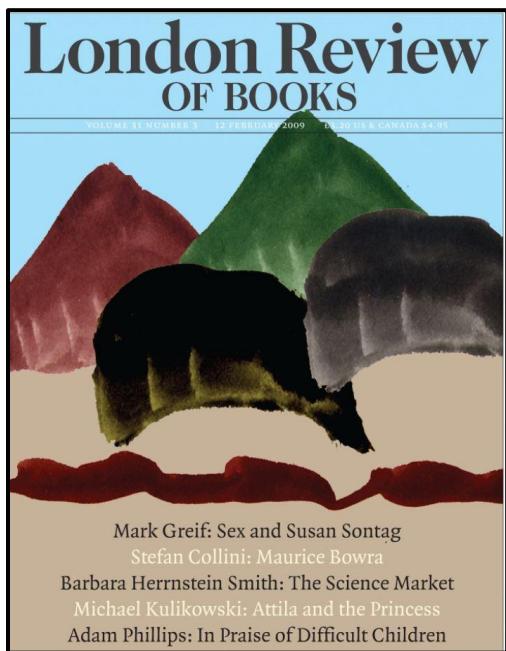
WILLIE AAMES

I have been thinking about the link between trauma and running away. Running away is sometimes referred to as being missing, or as truancy – staying away from school without leave or good reason. It can be associated with adolescence and is not necessarily an unusual occurrence. In working with traumatized children and young people, running away can be one of the most challenging and troubling themes. However, as a universal theme, it is one of the most important matters we need to find a way of thinking about and working with. We can't just 'lock' troublesome children up or ironically 'throw them out' after they've come back from running away.

I use the quote by Willie Aames because it makes at least three useful points. One is that running away, as with many behaviours, can have different meanings beneath the surface.

Secondly, Aames implies that his behaviour was a form of communication. It also seems that no one picked up on his communication in the way he was unconsciously hoping for. Thirdly, he makes it clear that his conscious view only emerged many years later. So, as a child, he didn't know why he was running away. If he had been asked, he probably could not have given a meaningful answer. Even though the quote says that he wanted someone to run after him, this doesn't explain why he had the impulse to run. Why did the impulse develop when he was five?

For most children, there is a point in their development where they realize they can run away. This may just be a sign that the child has a healthy curiosity about what else might be out there. The child realizes she has the potential to go outside of her parents' world. It may be a way of experimenting with crossing boundaries. To run away, one must go over a line. This possibility, which is more of an interest in exploration and discovery, may enter the child's imagination and fantasies even if it isn't acted out. Is the urge to run away a move towards independence? "Once I ran to you, now I'll run from you", as the lyrics to the song 'Tainted Love' say. Interestingly, this could apply to the natural disillusionment a child might feel towards his parents in the process of separation and individuation. The child psychotherapist



Adam Phillips, in his article, 'In Praise of Difficult Children' (2009), says,

"A truant mind has to have something to truant from and something to truant for. The adults provide something to truant from and the adolescents have to discover something to truant for. In straightforward psychoanalytic terms, adolescents truant from parents as forbidden objects of desire, as the people who have deprived them; they truant for accessible objects of desire, for the possibility of making up for the inevitable deprivations they have suffered growing up with their parents, for the sex the parents can't provide. Truanted has something utopian about it, and not truanted something unduly stoical or defeated. The truant mind matters because it is the part of ourselves that always wants something better; and it also needs

to come up against resistance to ensure that the something better is real, not merely a fantasy."

The child might feel excited and slightly fearful about the possibilities of being truant. A traumatized child may have far more troubling connections with the impulse to run away. Trauma happens when a person is faced with a frightening situation that is impossible to escape from. Powerlessness leads to overwhelming terror, which is traumatizing (Herman, 1992). The body is unable to escape, leaving the mind and body unprotected from the full

terror of what is happening. The only form of escape, especially for children who face repeated traumas such as abuse, can be to dissociate. In other words, their mind becomes removed from the body. As if it isn't happening to them. Physiological and psychological mechanisms kick in to reduce pain and increase the chance of survival. As a result, the child's body might feel useless to him. He may feel let down by his body and ashamed of his 'failure' to escape (Van der Kolk, 2014). We often see traumatized children who lack basic physical competence. Many have difficulties with coordination and can appear clumsy. Self-esteem deteriorates, and the problem of having an incompetent body and mind grows.

As a child begins to recover from trauma, he will begin to gain confidence. He will become physically and mentally more capable. For the reasons I have mentioned, gaining a sense of physical mastery is extremely important for these children. Running might be one of those areas of mastery, along with other physical activities. Their previously 'useless' bodies now begin to feel more capable. One consequence of this is that they can now experiment with escaping. If a small child has been unable to escape terrifying situations at the hands of an adult, as he grows bigger, it must be liberating to be able to run away. The message might be that I am no longer powerless, and I can get away when necessary. Just the experience that it is possible might be enough. The child can't necessarily trust that there won't be a need at some point.

If a traumatized child feels empowered by being able to run away, in some ways, it might be an important step forward. If this is the case, we need to be careful not to be punitive and harsh in our response.

This would be a bit like punishing a victim for giving up the victim role.

**"I wanted to run away  
from everything but I  
wanted to run towards  
something too."**

Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*

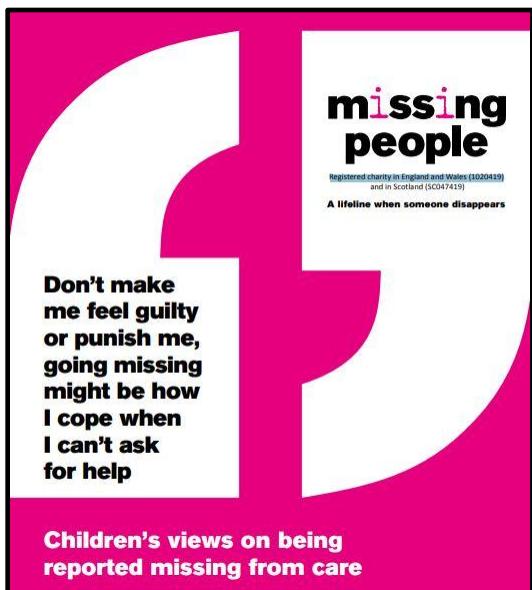


novelist Sherwood Anderson (2012, p.220) said, could it be both?

I would add that it is generally a good thing not to be punitive and harsh towards a traumatized child. This isn't likely to induce a feeling of wanting to stay. What we do on the child's return can be crucially important. How do we express our concern but also provide her with the space to discuss, explore, and say anything that might be important? Does she feel welcomed back? How do we feel about having her back? Sometimes people may feel relieved and angry at the same time. Even if there is a healthy aspect of development in a child running away, those being run away from are not likely to welcome it. So, what are the kinds of questions to consider? One well-known and key question is whether the person is running away from or to something. Or, as the American

The person could be running away from something external or internal, or both. From herself or someone. A running away person could be, as Phillips (2009) suggests, “someone who is trying to evacuate himself from his own home because there is a war going on”. On the one hand, ‘the war’ may be internal. If the child has violent feelings, running away may feel like a way of protecting herself and others from acting out those feelings.

We know that fight-flight is one of the responses to threats (Porges, 2017, p.129). Flight may feel like a better response than a fight. On the other hand, something may be going on in the living situation that the child is running away from. For example, is she being bullied? Is someone luring her away? Are there unsafe, frightening situations that she is either running away from or to? Does the child just feel safer, freer, and in control being away from people? Is she running away from the vulnerability of forming a good relationship? Is there something positive she is running to? Such as a wish to be reunited with family. As well as missing their family, children who are removed and in care often feel worried about the welfare of their parents and siblings. Even though we might have concerns about the family situation, the wish for connection is natural (Coman and Devaney, 2011, p.42).



The UK charity, Missing in Care (2021), carried out a consultation with children and young people in the care of a local authority. In the UK, defining whether a child is ‘Missing in Care’ rather than absent is based on a risk assessment. Absence is considered a lower risk than missing. For example, a young child may be considered missing after a relatively short time, whereas an older, more mature child may be considered absent. The assessment is based on vulnerability, age, history, etc. Missing in Care (2021, p.2) states,

“Children who are looked after in the care system are disproportionately likely to go missing. One in every ten looked-after children will go missing compared to

an estimated one in every two hundred children generally. They are also much more likely to be reported missing on multiple occasions: in 2020, over 12,000 children who were looked after went missing in over 81,000 missing incidents. Nearly 65% of missing looked-after children were reported missing more than once in 2020.”

The UK Department of Education (p.4) explains that “children in residential care are at particular risk of going missing and vulnerable to sexual and other exploitation.” They summarize the reasons for children running away, such as abuse or neglect, to go somewhere they want to be, or through coercion. They emphasize that about 25% of children who go missing are at risk of serious harm.

A child running away can also be an exceedingly difficult experience for those who are being left behind. It can feel that the child is rejecting the care being offered. There can be a lot of worry and anxiety involved. When I started work, looking after ten traumatized boys, it wasn't long before I experienced a child running away. Given the children's lack of concern for safety and their vulnerability, the risks were significant. We were in a therapeutic community on a farm, about six miles from the nearest town. Sometimes, by the time a boy who had run off got outside of the community, he would come back, already tired by his efforts! This was one advantage of the location. Running away didn't put the children in such immediate danger as it might in a city. There have been many reported instances of children in out-of-home care getting involved with gangs, drugs, sexual exploitation, etc. This inevitably causes huge anxiety for the adults looking after the children. The anxiety can escalate so that all attention is on stopping the child from running away and little on thinking why she may be doing it.

We must also pay attention to our feelings and thoughts while the child is 'missing'. What is the running away evoking in us? For example, is the child projecting some of her fears onto us? Is she giving us a taste of what it feels like to be abandoned and run away from?

A colleague, Tuhinul Islam Khalil (2013), mentioned that in Bangladesh, children living in a large residential home where he worked were often running away and 'dropping out'. Contact with the children's mothers was not encouraged, as many of them were sex workers. Tuhinul recognized that the children needed their 'mums'. He changed the organization's policy so that,

Mum can come and visit any time they want. They don't even need an appointment to come. So, it is like magic, within a month, the dropout rate has nearly gone.

This was an excellent example of thinking about the underlying reason and meeting the need. Continuing with the theme of understanding the reasons, Missing in Care (2021, p.31) says,

The young people we consulted want carers, social workers, and the police to avoid making assumptions about them and why they might have gone missing. These professionals should try to understand their reasons, acknowledging that every child is different and will be facing different challenges.

Referencing quotes from young people, Missing in Care (p.17) states,

Everyone is different, so don't treat us all the same. We do things for different reasons, you need to know, and... Talk to me, get to know me, don't judge me, understand why I might go missing, and help me manage those feelings and situations before it gets out of hand. Young people go missing for a reason; try to understand that. When we go, don't be angry or make us feel bad.

Interestingly, the young people consulted with are in effect saying, Think about the meaning of behaviour. Going back to my days of trudging around the muddy fields looking for runaway children. Sometimes I might find the child, and he would return with me. Often, it felt like a

game of cat and mouse. This could be exciting for the child and maybe sometimes for the adult. After a few hours, he would usually return on his own accord for a warm bath and food. Simon Bain, a resident of this therapeutic community in the 1970s, commented (2012),

Although you could say I wasn't a success, the funniest and indeed my fondest memories are the 'running outs' we used to do, with the staff spending half the night chasing us.

This raises the question of whether the need to 'run away and be found' can be built into daily life. For instance, hide-and-seek types of games or more adventurous orientation activities for older children. Hide and seek is a universally popular childhood game. Capturing why this game can be so meaningful, Winnicott (1963, p.186) said,

It is a joy to be hidden and a disaster not to be found.

The child has a simultaneous wish both to be hidden and to be found. Symbolically, this may represent the child's inner self, being hidden but also wishing to be found. Some children might feel like no one cares enough to look for and find them. They might feel they aren't even noticed or seen. 'Out of sight, out of mind' is so often the reality for traumatized children. Phillips (2009) states,

... the truant child, is experimenting: he is finding out whether the adult's words can be trusted, whether the adult is keeping an eye on him, whether the adult's word is his bond, whether he can withstand the adult's punishment, or even hatred. You find out what the rules are made of by trying to break them.

In my experience, sometimes when a child ran away, being the one to go look for him could feel like a preferable activity to some of the alternatives, such as cleaning the house or attending a difficult meeting. Of course, we couldn't easily acknowledge this, but it highlights one of the possible dynamics. As adults, what might we have invested in the child running away? Might the child be running away for the adult? Is the child running away from something that he senses going on between the adults? Thinking about what we do and feel in response to the runaway child may give us a helpful clue. Just as in the example above, the adult may wish to stop the child from running away and, at the same time, wish to join her in truancy. The child psychotherapist Adam Phillips (2009) says,

The upshot of all this is that adults who look after adolescents have both to want them to behave badly, and to try and stop them; and to be able to do this the adults have to enjoy having truant minds themselves. They have to believe that truancy is good and that the rules are good. 'The most beautiful thing in the world,' Robert Frost wrote in his *Notebooks*, 'is conflicting interests when both are good.' Someone with a truant mind believes that conflict is the point, not the problem. The job of the truant mind is to keep conflict as alive as possible, which means that adolescents are free to be adolescent only if adults are free to be adults. The real problems turn up when one or other side is determined to resolve the conflict: when adolescents are allowed to live in a world of

pure impulse, or adults need them to live in a world of incontestable law. In this sense therapy for adolescents should be about creating problems - or clarifying what they really are - and not about solving them.

This suggests that while wanting children to be safe and not truant, we also need to recognize the possible value of truancy to the child. If truancy is especially common in adolescence, it suggests that it is part of a process, possibly of separation, discovery, and experimentation. It is not difficult to identify with Phillips's comment,

When you play truant you have a better time.

In one of the training sessions, I attended in those early days of my career we watched a video of the psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim (1986, Part 2, 5.58), talking about his pioneering work in the Orthogenic School in Chicago, explained that sometimes a child could not be stopped from running away so rather than 'run after him' they tried to 'run with him'.



"One of the changes I made when I took over the school was to change all the locks and do away with all the keys. Because when I took over, every door had a lock, and the children could be locked in. I thought this was an abomination. So, I took all the locks of all the doors inside the institution, and so the locks were only against the outside. The entrance doors could be locked against the outside but not against the inside. So, any child who wanted to run away could run away, which, in short, did away with most running away. Now, there were always some children

at their beginning who had to run. What we tried to do was have a staff member run with them and accompany them, but not run after them, because to run after a child is very risky. He might run out in the street in front of an oncoming car. So, when we run with the child, we had to be very clear that it was to keep him company wherever he wanted to go and to protect him against all dangers in the running away. But not to bring him back or force him back."

At the time, I found this an insightful way of re-framing the problem. Maybe sometimes our job wasn't to stop a child from running away but to make the running away safe. To be alongside the child. There may be other things we can do to help improve safety. For example, if we think that a young person is likely to run away, we can make sure that he has useful phone numbers he can use if he needs help. According to Streifeld (1990), Bettelheim could also identify with the truant mind.

Or when a child was found to be skipping school, instead of chastising him, Bettelheim admitted: "If I had the courage, I would have skipped school too. The only problem was, I wasn't brave enough. He must have a good reason for not wanting to go. I wonder what it is." The point wasn't to excuse; it was to understand.

Sometimes a child may run away on his own, and other times with another child or group of children. This can raise additional worries and questions. Such as is one or more of the children abusing another? What are they doing when they are away? Are they getting into delinquent activities? If they feel excited about having adults on the run, do we make matters worse by joining in with the chase? If we don't, are we like neglectful parents? What happens to any children who do not join in with the running away? Is our attention on them distracted, so running away becomes a way of gaining attention? Is what we are providing in the home interesting, nurturing, and stimulating so that there is a bigger pull towards staying rather than leaving?

Knowing the child's history may also give us important clues. Is there a pattern of running away in the child's life? Did important people in the child's life run away? Was the family always on the move? If the child did run away in the past, what happened afterwards? Was she punished or moved to another placement? Is running away a form of testing to see what we will do?

Running away can also be a symbolic wish to escape fears and situations. These might be connected to the past rather than a reality in the present. A traumatized child feels as if the trauma or the possibility of it is still present. Is being on the move a way of avoiding pain? If the child had someone alongside her to hold and work with her pain, would the need to run away change? If we work on facing the pain, might the need to run away get worse? Thinking about what running away may mean symbolically can be a helpful area to explore. A psychologist, Rudy Gonzalez, explained a useful example to me. He had noticed in Australia that children in a care home often ran to a nearby train track. Young people and adults who have 'behaviour problems' are often referred to as being 'off the rails' or 'on the wrong track'. Rudy refers (Barton et al., 2012, p.99) to Sharon, who could often be found by the train tracks.

We could have judged Sharon's behaviour as being only destructive, which may have resulted in a punitive response. In contrast, seeing the behaviour as an attempt to act out a positive desire, which was to get on the 'right track', led to a more empathetic response. Through her behaviour, Sharon had introduced the symbol of the train tracks. Travel metaphors such as trains and train tracks are full of symbolic possibilities – excitement, envy for those on the train, danger, change, escape, being on the move, a new life.

I think that is a good place to finish; there is plenty to think about on this subject.

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**Patrick Tomlinson Brief Bio:** The primary goal of Patrick's work is the development of people and organizations. Throughout his career, he has identified development to be the driving force related to positive outcomes for everyone, service users, professionals, and organizations.

Patrick's experience spans from 1985 in the field of trauma and attachment-informed services. He began as a residential care worker and has since been a team leader, senior manager, Director, CEO, consultant, and mentor. He is the author/co-author/editor of numerous papers and books. He is a qualified clinician, strategic leader, and manager. Working in many countries, he has helped develop therapeutic models that have gained national and international recognition.

In 2008, he created Patrick Tomlinson Associates to provide services focused on development for people and organizations. The following services are provided,

- ✓ Therapeutic Model Development
- ✓ Developmental Mentoring, Consultancy, and Clinical Supervision
- ✓ Character Assessment & Selection Tool (CAST) for Staff Selection and Development

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