

Teenagers on Their Own



Age of Majority

In every state of the United States, children and teenagers under the age of adulthood (which usually, though not always, is 18) are subject to laws that apply specifically to them. The exact ages and laws are different in different states. People under the age of adulthood may be described as *minors*, *youths*, *children*, or *juveniles* in state laws.

- To find the age of adulthood in your state, google "age of majority" plus (the state).
- The age of adulthood may differ, depending on the context. For instance, a state may allow a person to hold a job at age 16, enter into contracts at age 18, but not to purchase alcoholic beverages until age 21.

By and large, it is much simpler and easier to live on your own if you can wait until you reach majority, the age when you can legally enter into contracts, seek medical care, and work full time without parental involvement. But if you were thrown out, or conditions at home

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were unbearable, this section seeks to help you understand and cope with living on your own before the age of majority.



Youth Services and Shelters

Many youths who leave their homes have very good reasons. They may have been thrown out, abused, or neglected. There may be severe family problems, such as an alcoholic or drug-addicted parent, or a death or divorce.

Punishing youths who leave for reasons like these, or forcing them to return home despite the problems, is increasingly seen as a mistake. Teens on their own can turn to a variety of services for help, but they also may face difficult legal problems.

Teenagers who contact an agency for help should be prepared to say specifically why they have left home.

It is important to state exactly why you left because answers like

“I had some disagreements with my parents,” could mean anything from:

- “My parents wouldn’t buy me the trendy shoes I wanted,” to
- “My father beats me every night.”
- Unless you speak openly, the worker you are talking to cannot give you informed advice.

- It may be hard to share distressing personal information about your family with a stranger, but stating the truth is more likely to get you the help you need.
- Feel free to ask about an organization's rules and policies about keeping information confidential before you share this kind of information.

The descriptions of the organizations and hotlines listed below are their own. The quality of services may vary depending on where you are and what kinds of help you need. If one place cannot help, another might, so it's worth trying several.

Youth Hotlines and Internet Resources

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline

1-800-422-4453 (1-800-4 a child)
(no functioning web site)

Serving abused children and their families, Childhelp is devoted to providing services that allow for each and every child to know "a life filled with love." Some of the programs and services they provide are Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline, Child Advocacy Centers, and Therapeutic Group Homes.

Childhelp has regional offices and facilities in the following states:

AZ, CA, TN, MI, and VA.

National Runaway Switchboard

1-800-runaway (1-800-786-2929)

This is a national communication system for runaway and homeless youth. Youth and family members—parents, siblings, other relatives—can call at all times to work through problems and to find local help agencies and organizations. Services are available for siblings who are caught in the middle of, or feeling neglected because of, what’s going on at home.

Teachers, agency personnel, law enforcement officers—anyone concerned about the well being of a youth—are encouraged to call.

Safe Place Program

(no phone listed)

A search engine that lists Safe Places in selected locations nationwide. Safe Place does not have locations in every state. Serving youth in crisis, Safe Place has coordinated with various entities around the country, such as businesses and schools, to provide Safe Place locations where at-risk youth can enter to receive help or get referrals to a service agency.

Girls And Boys Town

Suicide hotline: 1-800-448-3000

The Girls and Boys Town National Hotline is a 24-hour crisis,

resource, and referral line.

Trained counselors can respond to questions every day of the week, 365 days a year. The organization can help teens and parents with suicide prevention, depression, school issues, parenting troubles, runaways, relationship problems, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, chemical dependency, anger, and much more.

National Sexual Assault Hotline

1.800.656.hope (4673)

The Rape, Abuse & Incest

National Network is the nation's

largest anti-sexual-assault

organization. Among its programs,

RAINN created and operates the

National Sexual Assault Hotline.

This nationwide partnership of

more than 1,100 local rape-

treatment hotlines provides

victims of sexual assault with

free, confidential services around

the clock.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-talk (8255). (Para

obtener asistencia en español

llame al 1-888-628-9454)

A 24-hour, toll-free suicide-

prevention service available to

anyone in suicidal crisis. With

more than 120 crisis centers

across the country, their mission

is to provide immediate assistance

to anyone seeking mental health services. Calls are free and confidential. Crisis centers are equipped to take a wide range of calls. Call to speak with someone who cares if you feel you might be in danger of hurting yourself, to find referrals to mental health services in your area, or to speak to a crisis worker about someone you're concerned about.

Covenant House

Nineline Service

www.nineline.org

1-800-999-9999

Covenant House is a privately funded agency with a Christian religious orientation that provides shelter and other service to homeless, runaway, and throwaway youth. It offers overnight shelter to youths, including people in their early 20s. The Web site lists places to ask for emergency shelter in many cities, or you can call Covenant House's "Nineline Service," toll-free, 24 hours a day. Covenant House also provides services to homeless pregnant women and mothers with young children.

California Coalition For Youth (CCY)

(California only)

1-800-843-5200

The California Youth Crisis Line is a statewide, toll-free, 24-hour,

confidential phone line available to young people between the ages of 12 and 24, and concerned friends and family members. CCY provides crisis intervention counseling on many issues including family problems, sexual assault, eating disorders, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, suicide, and more. CCY offers support, encouragement, and referrals to youth needing assistance or in crisis situations.

U.S. Family and Youth Service

The U.S. Family and Youth Service program offers three kinds of shelters. (These may be the same as some listed above.) You can check online for [information about programs in your state](#). (described below).

Basic centers

Basic centers can provide 15 days of shelter for up to 20 youths. The Basic Centers seek to reunite young people with their families whenever possible, or to locate appropriate alternative placements. Basic Centers offer

- Food, clothing, medical care, or other services that youth need (offered either directly or by referral)
- Individual, group, and family counseling

- Recreation programs
- Aftercare services for youth after they leave the shelter

Transitional living

Transitional living programs offer longer term assistance, including

- Safe, stable living accommodations for up to 18 months
- Basic life-skill building, including consumer education and instruction in budgeting, using credit, housekeeping, menu planning, food preparation, and parenting skills
- Interpersonal skill building, including enhancing young people's abilities to establish positive relationships with peers and adults, make decisions, and manage stress
- Educational opportunities, such as [GED](#) preparation, postsecondary training, or vocational education
- Assistance in job preparation and attainment, such as career counseling and job placement
- Education, information, and counseling to prevent, treat, and reduce substance abuse
- Mental health care, including individual and group counseling
- Physical health care, including routine physicals, health assessments, and emergency treatment

Maternity group homes

Maternity group homes support homeless pregnant girls and young parents between the ages of 16 and 21, as well as their dependent children. Services are provided for up to 18 months, and an additional 180 days is allowed for youth under 18 years old. Maternity group homes offer an intensive array of services, including

- Safe, stable living accommodations
- Basic life-skill building, including consumer education and instruction in budgeting, using credit, housekeeping, menu planning, food preparation, and parenting skills
- Interpersonal skill building, including enhancing young people's abilities to establish positive relationships with peers and adults, make decisions, and manage stress
- Educational opportunities, such as [GED](#) preparation, postsecondary training, and vocational education
- Assistance in job preparation and attainment, such as career counseling and job placement
- Education, information, and counseling to prevent, treat, and reduce substance abuse
- Physical health care, including routine physicals, health assessments, and emergency treatment

- Child-safe transitional and independent living accommodations
- Education in parenting, child discipline, and safety, and help in applying parenting and related domestic skills
- Mental, physical, and reproductive health care, including individual and family counseling of parent and child
- Resources to help youth identify reliable and affordable child care
- Lessons in money management and use of credit
- Facilitation of parent involvement in local schools and other child education programs

Legal Issues for Teenagers

If you are under 18, or whatever the age of majority is in your state, you may find your freedom of action restricted or prevented by laws intended to help or protect children.

Unaccompanied minors

Regardless of their reasons for leaving home, children and teenagers who are on their own may be designated by their states as "runaways," or "homeless." Consequences of these designations vary from state to state:

- In many states, underage youths who have left home without parental permission are

automatically considered to need “supervision”—involvement with the courts and/or a government agency.

- Other states require supervision for some “runaway” youths and not for others.
- In some states, designation as homeless or otherwise in need of supervision opens the door for services, including counseling and job training.
- But in a few states, runaways who have committed no other offense may find themselves sent to detention facilities for juvenile delinquents.

To find out how runaways are regarded in a given state, google “runaways” plus (name of the state), and look for the state’s official Web site listing.

Status offenses

Some conditions and behaviors that are legal for adults are illegal for minors.

These are called *status offenses*.

- In many states, police are allowed to take runaways into custody simply because they are not living at home.
- Truancy—failure to attend school if younger than a given age—is a status offense.
- Curfew—forbidding people under the age of majority from being on

the street or in other places at given times—is also a status offense, as is

- Underage drinking of alcoholic beverages.

Harboring an unaccompanied minor

Many states frown on or even criminalize the act of helping a minor who has left home.

- These laws, intended to protect young people from being exploited by predatory adults, may backfire in cases where the protection truly needed is from parents.
- Adults who take in a youth who has left home, even though they are family members or friends, may find themselves charged with violations such as “contributing to the delinquency of a minor” or “interfering with custodial rights.”
- You can get some guidance from the [National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty’s state-by-state summary of laws about harboring an unaccompanied minor](#) for each state. However, this publication has not been updated since 2003, and some states may have changed their laws.

Emancipation

Emancipation is a legal process that designates as adults, for legal purposes, persons under the age of majority who have demonstrated that they are able to support themselves. Emancipated minors can

- legally enter into a contract—for example, to rent a place to live or to buy a car, and
- to make decisions about their medical care, education, and so forth

—actions that would otherwise be in the power of their parents.

The benefit of emancipation is that young persons who are able to support themselves can, in cases of abandonment or severe family conflict, function in daily life. The downside is that emancipated youths are no longer entitled to support or care from their families.

Not all states provide for emancipation, and the process and requirements vary in those that do. For summaries of state emancipations laws, visit

- a site that [links to state laws about emancipation,](#)

or look through

- [Alone Without a Home,](#) a publication of the National Law

Center on Homelessness and Poverty.

These summaries may not reflect up-to-date information because some states have recently changed or added laws on emancipation. State Web sites may also have information, although it is often phrased in technical legal language difficult for non-lawyers to understand.

It's advisable to have professional guidance if you want to obtain emancipation. You can find leads to free legal help at

- [American Bar Association](#),

or at

- [Legal Services Corporation](#), an organization that funds legal services nationwide.

If you are under court supervision, you should already have a lawyer, called a *guardian ad litem*, or GAL, who should be able to help you.

Involvement with Child Protective Services and the Courts

Because of the legal issues outlined above, it is likely that anyone younger than the age of majority who leaves home—with or without parental permission—will end up involved with child protective services and the courts.

The key issue for the courts is the safety and well-being of the children in their custody; but federal law establishes "family reunification" as the primary goal in child welfare work—that is, workers and the court must do everything they can to return a child home before considering a permanent separation.

Young people born and raised in cults or high-demand groups may find that, to secure their freedom, they must publicly accuse their parents, even though they may later be returned to the custody of those parents—sometimes because the parents and other adults in the group have lied to the authorities.

Child protective and child welfare services

Child protective and child welfare services (the exact title will differ from state to state) are government agencies assigned to oversee and ensure the safety and well-being of children in their service areas. In general, child protective agencies are empowered to

- Investigate allegations of abuse and neglect of children;
- Recommend that children be removed, either temporarily or permanently, from their parents' custody;
- Help families make changes

necessary to keep their children in the home;

- Look after the welfare of children placed in foster care or in homes under supervision; and
- Oversee the care of children and teenagers who cannot return home.

Most child protective workers know little or nothing about conditions in cults and high demand groups.

- They may find children's reports hard to believe.
- Because group members tend to support each other, investigators may find that not only the family in question, but also unrelated adults will contradict the children's reports.
- For these reasons, youngsters and teens may find themselves regarded as unreliable reporters, or in unreasonable rebellion against their parents.

Here are some of the ways you can back up your report about the conditions that caused you to leave:

- Documentary evidence—photos; videos; group publications that promote mistrust and hostility toward government officials (especially anything that justifies lying to outsiders), or that prescribe child-raising practices

that you think are abusive or neglectful. For more information about maltreatment, see [Abuse and Neglect](#).

- Physical evidence—cuts and bruises, untreated illness, the aftermath of sexual abuse—may be persuasive if you act immediately so that outside medical personnel can confirm the abuse.
- Witnesses—people who have left the group—who will testify to group practices.

It is critical that you—and anyone who bears witness on your behalf—stick carefully to exact, specific information about why you left. Avoid loose, sweeping statements, or displays of anger and spite. A detailed, factual recitation in the most matter-of-fact tone you can achieve is the most convincing way to tell your story.

Every state has written procedures for investigating allegations of child abuse or neglect, but the quality of child protective service varies widely from state to state and county to county. Due to lack of funding and lack of qualified workers, states may not live up to their own procedures:

- “Emergency” investigations that are supposed to happen within 24 hours may take up to a week.
- Workers may have more cases

than the regulations prescribe, which severely limits the time and attention they give to any one case.

- If pay is low and the work load is difficult, turnover may be high; a single case may have a succession of different workers assigned, making it hard to form relationships with the people involved and keep the case moving forward.

Nevertheless, reporting suspicions of abuse or neglect to child welfare authorities is an important step, and may be the only possible step, to helping minors whose parents may not be meeting their responsibilities.

Underage youth and the court system

Although child welfare services do most of the investigative and day-to-day work, judges have the actual power to decide what happens to minors brought to the attention of the government. Once the courts enter the picture, no one can say what will happen. It would be wonderful, but it is misleading, to think that justice is always done and right always triumphs. All concerned may be making their best efforts, but there are too many uncertainties and complications to guarantee the outcome.

Each case is assigned to a judge, who eventually decides whether or not the

child or youth involved will go back to her family. The judge receives and considers evidence and information from several different sources:

- Child welfare services, represented by the minor's caseworker
- The minor's parents
- The parents' lawyer (Usually the court appoints a lawyer if the parents cannot afford one.)
 - If the parents are no longer together, each parent may be assigned a lawyer.
- The minor's lawyer (a court-appointed lawyer, often called a *guardian ad litem*/GAL).
- Often, specialists such as doctors, psychologists, or educators are called in to testify about particular aspects of the case.
- Whether or not the minor is allowed to speak to the court depends on local laws about the age at which minors may testify and/or the judge's opinion about the minor's competence to testify.

Judges make decisions based on

- the evidence presented about each case;
- their understanding of the law;
- their assessment of the minor's needs, maturity, and capabilities;

and

- unknowable factors such as their personal perspectives and outside pressures.

Because of the federal law about “family reunification,” the judge must first explore the possibility of providing necessary changes or services that will enable the minor to be safely returned home. If that cannot be justified or arranged, the judge will consider the other options:

- adoption (not usual for teenagers),
- long-term placement in a foster home or institution,

or

- emancipation.

The case proceeds with a series of hearings, at which the judge, the lawyers, and the child welfare worker discuss the issues. All the lawyers will argue on their various clients’ behalf. Often, the parents are present at hearings, but not the minor. (Parental attendance at a hearing is usually considered a positive indicator.) The court generally assumes that the minor’s interests are adequately represented by his attorney.

- There may be only one or two of these “hearings,” or the case may drag on for years.
- Sometimes, everyone on the case works together as a team, and the

case moves smoothly.

- Sometimes, the conflicts between parents and child spread to the legal personnel, and there are many disputes and delays.

Ultimately, the judge makes a ruling.

Throughout this process, the minor in question has little control over the knowledge, skills, and competence of those who will decide his future. Judges, caseworkers, and attorneys may be energetic, competent, and conscientious; or they may be overworked, careless, and stressed out—or anything in between. The minor has no voice about what caseworker is assigned to the case.

- Unless someone pays for a lawyer to represent the minor, the court (that is, the judge) appoints a lawyer for this purpose.
 - Some court-appointed lawyers are capable and conscientious, while others do the minimum necessary.
 - It is difficult to replace a court-appointed lawyer; but if you can show that, for instance, the lawyer misrepresented your requests, or failed to consult you appropriately, you might be able to get someone else

appointed—with, of course,
the same risk as before that
you will not get very good
help.

- And, unless there is an extremely obvious reason—such as a close relationship between the judge and someone in the case, no one can ask for a different judge.

Parents' rights and children's rights often conflict in these cases. You can find a brief discussion of parents' and children's rights in the [Rights](#) section.

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