

# Aspiranet

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~October 2021~

## Monthly Regulation Training

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### Preventing and Responding to AWOL Behavior

With the continued impact of the pandemic combined with some youth struggling with returning to school, we have seen recent increases in “AWOLing” behavior (leaving without permission) as a possible way to cope. While sometimes difficult to not to take this behavior personally, it is important to remember that behavior is communication – and they are communicating that they are struggling. And while the struggle is different for each child or youth, research shows that early intervention and prevention are keys to helping to prevent a youth from “AWOLing”.

In order to better intervene and understand AWOL behavior, it is important to consider the possible motivations for youth going AWOL:

#### “Running To”:

- Interviews with youth reveal they tend to “run to” their existing connections with others.
- Youth often AWOL to see family, friends, a boyfriend or girlfriend. Youth equate being with their family and friends with being “normal”.
- The “pull” to be with family can be particularly strong when contact is not occurring regularly. The pandemic has also impacted family contact significantly for some children and youth.
- The strong desire for connection is evident by the fact that youth that are placed with relatives or siblings have a lower incidence of AWOL behavior.

#### “Running From”:

- Often the motivation to “run from” is the desire to have more freedom and autonomy.
- For many youth, being AWOL and caring for themselves feels consistent with their experiences in their own families and communities.
- This also supports the desire youth have for “normalcy”.
- Being placed in foster care does not feel “normal”, and youth become more likely to “run from” when they do not feel a sense of safety and trust within their placement.
- Struggles in their relationships may include their resource parents as well as other family members, such as conflicts with foster siblings.

### Early Intervention & Prevention: Learning all You Can about a Youth Placed with your Family

#### At Placement:

Although information can sometimes be limited, obtain as much information as possible at the time the youth is being considered for placement with your family.

Ask questions about:

- the youth’s previous placement(s) & current needs
- the youth’s behavior
- family and sibling contact
- academic status & school behavior
- substance use/abuse history
- possible CSEC history
- possible gang involvement
- previous AWOL history

## **After Placement: Rapport & Relationship Building**

Once a youth is placed, start developing rapport by showing your support, empathy, and genuine interest in getting to know your youth.

- Understand the changes or transitions your youth is experiencing: new home, often a new school, new friends to make and possibly even a new community.
- Take the time to talk and really listen to your youth about their feelings, wants, dreams, and needs to determine how you can together work through the transition period and develop your relationship.
- Show your acceptance: learn your youth's likes/dislikes (music, food, activities, school subjects, clothing style, movies, etc.), ask about their family and other significant relationships, get to know their friends.
- Review family rules together: Have a family meeting to discuss family activities, rules, and decisions. Develop a clear and concise list of house rules. Discuss the structure and routines of the household. When appropriate, make adjustments to accommodate your youth's needs and familiar routines.
- Acknowledge the need for "normalcy": We know that for youth in foster care, being with family, friends, and participating in "typical" teen activities helps youth to feel "normal". Along with your Aspiranet Social Worker, discuss the plan for family contact, as well as develop a plan for appropriate peer contact and community-based time, as appropriate.

## **Building Trust**

Consider who you turn to when you have good news to share, a problem to solve or need help to manage stress.

Now consider who your youth goes to when they need help with daily life struggles. Does your youth have a trusted and supportive individual or group of individuals available to turn to?

Consider your style of building relationships with others: do you spend time with them? Share same interests? Honestly share your thoughts & feelings? How do you feel when you are with someone you trust?

- Learn from your youth what a trusting relationship means to them and who they turn to for support.
- Build self-esteem: Learn about and recognize your youth's special gifts, talents, and interests. Show your interest and support through your encouragement and involvement. Be a role model & mentor.
- Remain open and non-judgmental about your youth's birth parents, siblings & extended family.
- Ask open ended questions and listen: Ask about who and what is important to your youth. Respond to your youth's questions honestly.
- Allow your youth to have some choices & power over decisions – even if relatively simple. We all want some control in our lives.
- Have fun together– use humor!
- Be patient: a trusting connection will need time to develop.

## **Maintaining Consistent Communication**

Talk with your youth on a consistent basis to better understand what may trigger escalated behavior.

Discuss the feelings behind your youth's behavior and decision making.

Learn more about your youth's past AWOL behavior, if applicable:

- What were your youth's reasons for AWOLing in the past?
- What experiences did your youth have prior to the AWOL(s), while AWOL and after returning from being AWOL?
- What support if any, has your youth received to prevent further AWOL behavior? What worked & didn't work?

Some triggers for AWOL behavior may include:

- anger over a missed family visit (possibly more frequent since the pandemic)
- stress over school, friends (this has increased for some with return to on-campus school)
- missing a boy/girlfriend
- the need to take care of a loved one (also an increased concern for some since the pandemic)
- the need to be “normal”
- frustration over not being considered in decisions directly impacting them while in foster care.

### **Techniques to Prevent an AWOL**

Through relationship building and learning your youth’s behaviors, history & triggers, you will be better prepared to de-escalate a situation.

If your youth does become escalated, use the following techniques to help de-escalate the situation:

- Appear calm and in control: This will help to reduce your youth’s anxiety & escalated behavior.
- Avoid a battle: If your youth is in crisis, it’s not the time to try to change their mind or discipline them. Avoid engaging in a power struggle.
- Listen: Use active listening skills; reflect back their feelings. Acknowledge their anger.
- Allow for personal space: This includes keeping your distance, not attempting to touch your youth and avoiding a lot of eye contact.
- Calmly and firmly set limits: Lower your voice; communicate one idea at a time, with expectation that the limit will be followed.
- Ask what would help: Ask your youth what would help him/her feel better.

### **Be Prepared in the Event of an AWOL**

Have the following available:

- Aspiranet contact phone number in order to notify Aspiranet immediately day or night.
- Names, addresses and phone numbers of friends and their parents to inquire about youth’s whereabouts.
- If provided, name and phone numbers of youth’s birth family, in order to notify the family, as appropriate (and with prior approval from County Social Worker).
- Phone number of local Law Enforcement Agency to file a Missing Persons Report, as required.
- If applicable, Safety Plan for the youth (who to call in an emergency).

### **Intervention after AWOL**

It is not uncommon for resource parents to feel hurt or angry when a youth goes AWOL. This is understandable, particularly when you feel you have developed a trusting relationship with your youth.

Remember that AWOL behavior is a way of coping for youth. Although difficult, try not to take the AWOL personal. Following an AWOL, there is an opportunity to learn from your youth what they were experiencing before, during and after the AWOL.

Upon your youth’s return, discuss the incident & share your concerns and feelings while they were AWOL. A youth will be much more likely to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences if met with concern rather than an angry or punitive approach.

- Show your concern by asking if your youth is hungry, tired, injured, under the influence (or note the symptoms).
- Discuss what occurred while your youth was AWOL: express your concerns regarding activities that put your youth at risk; share that you are afraid for your youth’s safety.

- Discuss what event(s) led up to the decision to AWOL: What were the triggers? What were they running to or from? Discuss what could have been different to prevent the AWOL.
- Develop a plan to prevent future AWOLs: Discuss using a contract; talk about what you can do so your youth can come to you before going AWOL.
- Get on with normal daily life: Continue to build your relationship, trust, and consistent communication.
- As always, contact your Aspiranet Social Worker for support and assistance.

Please sign and return this page to your Aspiranet Social Worker for training credit.

My signature below indicates that I have completed the October 2021 “Tips for Responding to Children that AWOL” training.

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature Resource Parent #1*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

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*Print Name Resource Parent #1*

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*Signature Resource Parent #2*

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*Date*

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*Print Name Resource Parent #2*

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*Aspiranet Authorized Signature*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

Training credit: \_\_\_\_ minutes