



Missing In America Network

# A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

## CONSIDERING A FORENSIC EXAM FOR THEIR TEEN

### WHEN A RUNAWAY CHILD COMES HOME

Bringing a runaway child or teen home is a deeply emotional and complex moment. As a parent or guardian, you may be faced with difficult questions about what your child experienced while they were away. One of the most sensitive decisions is whether to pursue a forensic medical exam. This guide is intended to help you make an informed, compassionate decision with your child's well-being as the top priority.



### Support

You are not alone. Advocacy organizations, child protection teams, and forensic nurses are here to support both you and your child.

### Contact

**National Sexual Assault Hotline:**  
1-800-656-HOPE (4673)

**Arizona Sexual and Domestic Violence Helpline:**  
602-279-2900





# WHAT IS A FORENSIC EXAM?

A forensic exam (also called a SAFE exam) is a medical evaluation done by trained professionals to:

- Check for physical injuries
- Collect potential evidence of sexual abuse or assault
- Provide treatment for sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Offer emergency contraception, if needed
- Refer for counseling and follow-up care

In Arizona, teens age 12 and older have the legal right to refuse any part of the forensic exam. Each step is explained beforehand, and their comfort and consent are prioritized throughout the process. (Reference: Arizona Revised Statute § 13-1413)

If sexual assault is suspected, place all clothing your child was wearing in a brown paper bag, not plastic, to preserve possible evidence. Avoid washing clothing or undergarments before speaking with medical or forensic professionals.

## More Resources

### **A New Leaf – REACH Sexual Violence Services Center**

**24-Hour Helpline**  
(480) 733-3028

**Services:** Free, survivor-driven support including emotional safety planning, virtual support groups, and mobile advocacy.

### **Southern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault (SACASA)**

**24-Hour Crisis Line:**  
(520) 327-7273  
or (800) 400-1001

**Services:** Crisis services, advocacy, therapy, and education for individuals and families impacted by sexual trauma.

**Arizona Survivors Website:**  
Arizona Sexual and Domestic Violence Helpline.

<https://arizonasurvivors.org/get-a-forensic-exam/>

# WHEN TO CONSIDER A FORENSIC EXAM



## YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER A FORENSIC EXAM IF:

- Your child reports or shows signs of sexual abuse or exploitation
- There are visible injuries or signs of trauma
- Law enforcement or medical professionals recommend it

## THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- **Will the exam lead to criminal charges?**
  - Evidence collected during a forensic exam may support a criminal case, especially if the assault occurred recently (within 5 days is ideal).
  - If your child was harmed by someone who may still pose a threat, an exam can help build a case.
- **What if it was consensual?**
  - Even if your child says the activity was consensual, it's still important to assess whether they were manipulated, trafficked, or unable to legally consent based on age or circumstance.
- **Is a conviction likely?**
  - Not every case leads to charges or conviction. However, documenting evidence can still protect your child and others, now and in the future.
- **What about emotional impact?**
  - A forensic exam is done by trauma-informed professionals in a child-friendly environment. Every part of the exam is optional. Still, it can be emotionally difficult and should be handled with care and support.

## Alternatives

### Even if a forensic exam is not pursued, we strongly recommend:

- **STD/STI Testing:** Your child should be tested for infections regardless of whether abuse is confirmed.
- **Pregnancy and Drug Testing:** These tests can help identify important health needs and risks. Consider them in any case where abuse, substance exposure, or unprotected sexual activity may have occurred.
- **Mental Health Counseling:** Runaway youth often return with emotional trauma. Counseling can help them process what happened and begin to heal.
- **Safety Planning:** Work with professionals to help ensure your child remains safe and supported at home.



# YOU ARE NOT ALONE

The decision to proceed with a forensic exam should be based on your child's comfort, safety, and best interest—not just the likelihood of legal action. It is okay to ask questions, seek support, and take the time you need to make the right choice for your family.

We know the heartache and fear that comes when a child goes missing—and the relief and uncertainty that can follow when they return. You're not alone in trying to navigate what comes next. We created this guide to walk beside you in these difficult moments, offering clear information, compassion, and a reminder that there is hope, healing, and support available.

Every child deserves to feel safe, believed, and protected. And every parent deserves access to the tools needed to make informed, loving decisions. We stand with you and your family, and we are here to help however we can.

—The Missing In America Advocacy Team  
HELP@MissingInAmericaNetwork.org

## Recommended Reading

For teens and caregivers seeking educational materials and workbooks:

- [The Sexual Trauma Workbook for Teen Girls](#)
- [Healing the Bruises: A Teen Version](#)

These resources offer guidance on understanding, coping with, and recovering from sexual trauma. Both are available on Amazon.

***This resource was created to support families during one of the most difficult times, based on our past experiences. Please consult with medical and legal professionals when possible.***

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