

## Exploring the Attachment Styles in Runaway Children Post COVID-19 Lockdown

Sarakshi Rastogi<sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Having to suffer due to not only the prevalent socio-economic issues present in society but also a destructive family environment, some children run away to escape their problems. The aim of this study is to find out some of the main reasons children in India run away from their homes or families and to understand the factors behind such decisions. A sample of 22 children was taken from the Udaan and DMRC Children's Home centers of the NGO 'Salaam Baalak Trust'. The participants included 10 boys and 12 girls, all between the ages of 7 and 17 years. Qualitative methodology was taken from a previous study (Choudhary, Kapoor & Wason, 2018) and was used to collect the data. The major emerging themes in this study were found to be hope for the future, emotional attachment especially towards siblings and caregivers at the shelters, peer influence, and attraction to life in cities. The study implied that there need to be awareness drives in the areas of negative peer influence and substance abuse as these are factors that can have lasting effects on street children. Another implication of the paper was that when given opportunities and a safe environment for growth, the children are able to thrive and develop psychosocially, so there should be thorough check-ins with the families of these children.

**Keywords:** *Runaway children, Hope, Attachment to siblings, and Peer influence*

Children are the most vulnerable in any society. They are severely impacted by social issues like poverty, unemployment, gender violence, and so on. India, being a developing country, is facing many of these problems, and these social issues, especially when combined, can create a hostile environment for a child. Children that are victims of such injustices sometimes run away to escape the circumstances at home. A runaway is generally defined as an individual under the age of eighteen who willingly leaves home or some other residence and hence the custody of their parents or guardians (Flowers, 2001).

The pandemic had a major impact on the lives of runaway children. All children, of all ages, and in all countries, are being affected, in particular by the socio-economic impacts and, in some cases, by mitigation measures that may inadvertently do more harm than good in the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF). Moreover, the harmful effects of this pandemic were not

<sup>1</sup>Ryan International School

\*Corresponding Author

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distributed equally. They were expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, in the poorest neighborhoods, and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations (UNICEF). The Jaipur railway child desk help officials claimed that while the number of cases in 2020-21 was fewer than the previous year, they are getting more runaway cases (Times of India, 2021). While some youths have been afraid of catching COVID-19 in general, the coronavirus threat hasn't deterred those who decided to run away because usually, they're more worried about being returned home (Kam K, 2022).

Evidence shows that a lot of children go to metropolitan cities to earn and support their families. In Zimbabwe, more than 35% of street children had left home to earn for their families. In India, the Department of Education stated that there were approximately 1,00,000 street children in New Delhi alone, who had come to the metropolis from neighboring states in search of work. These children worked in small industries and informal sectors that depend heavily on child labor (Kaiser, 2020). A lot of these children also run away from home due to family issues, which consisted of family conflict, abandonment by parents, domestic violence, orphaning, substance use at home, alcoholism at home, being thrown out, and being brought to the streets by family/relatives (Embleton, Lee, Gunn, Ayuku, & Braitstein, 2016). There is also abuse, which consisted of variables such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, and abuse/maltreatment and neglect (Embleton, Lee, Gunn, Ayuku, & Braitstein, 2016). Other studies show that families with runaway girls were characterized by a lack of emotional proximity, the establishment of controlled social relationships or unwillingness towards them, no control over events, interactions with conflicts among family members, and limited or strict rules. According to the Social Bond Theory developed by Hirschi, the weaker the bond between individuals, family members, and society, the more possible deviations and crimes (Bakhshian, F., & Moayed, 2017).

While the children might be able to get away from the conditions at home, which indubitably impacted their mental and physical health in countless ways, what they face in the real world can be a lot worse. Children running away from their abusive, violent, and poverty-stricken households use India's vast railway network to get to cities. (Railway Children India). They leave in search of better living conditions. Thousands of children arrive at the chaotic railway stations with nowhere to go. They end up living at the stations where they were stranded. Figures vary widely, but approximately 1,20,000 children arrive on Indian railway platforms annually. These stations are perfect for abusers looking to prey on desperate and vulnerable children (Railway Children India, 2013). Approximately 18 million children live on the streets of India (Times Now News, 2021). It is home to one of the largest populations of street children.

Data put out by the home ministry in the Parliament showed that over 3.25 lakh children went missing in India between 2011 and 2014. It was reported that 55% of the missing children were girls and 45% of all of them have remained untraceable, which is worrying as that means they could have been killed or forced into begging or prostitution rackets (BG & Gadkar, 2015). A survey conducted from 2015 to 2019 showed an upward trend in the number of children missing in India, with the number in 2019 being approximately 73,138 (K M Pavithra, 2020). National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) elucidates missing children numbers in India in terms of one child going missing in the country every eight minutes.

Runaway adolescents try to navigate through the world alone leaving them extremely vulnerable to substance abuse and exploitation. A study showed that some of the most common reasons for substance abuse by street children were peer pressure, experimentation,

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or boosting self-confidence. Multiple Indian foundations stated that children start doing drugs for reasons that include curiosity, coping with stress, and personal factors (Sharma & Joshi, 2013). In addition, they are very likely to be victims of numerous crimes and even trafficking. The lack of food, clothing, shelter, and opportunities for skill development causes their health and overall well-being to deteriorate (it deteriorates further in the case of abused or malnourished children). Because of these adverse conditions, they may develop mental health problems that include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal tendencies (Noh, D., & Choi, S., 2020). At some point, they might even start engaging in criminal activities, for instance, stealing or the sale of drugs, to be able to financially sustain themselves.

Some data can be found on the numbers and conditions of children on streets and railway stations. Additionally, there is research to be found on the consequences of maltreatment on these children. Many studies have also explored the problems faced by runaway children after they leave to navigate the world alone. Still, there are insufficient papers looking into the causes and factors that are the root cause of such decisions. The objective of this paper is to find out what factors are responsible for the children to run away from their homes, and this study is crucial to understand the challenges and problems faced by this section of society. It is necessary to have a support system in place to ascertain the root of the problem and prevent such instances in the future so these children can have the life they deserve.

### **METHODOLOGY**

**Aim:** To ascertain the factors that influence children in India to run away from home.

**Research Design:** The study used qualitative methods, and data was collected through activities, interviews, and observations.

#### *Sample*

A total of 22 participants were selected for this study from Salaam Baalak Trust, an NGO in Delhi. 10 of these were boys, and the remaining 12 were girls, all belonging to the age group of 7 to 17 years old.

#### *Tools Used*

- **EMOTIONAL WHEEL:** A colorful wheel with different emotions on it was created for the activity. The participants were asked to spin the wheel and talk about the emotion that came up. They were asked when they felt the emotion with their family and what the general feeling at home was. It aimed to identify how the children felt when living with their families and to understand if those emotions might have caused them to run away.
- **DRAW YOUR IDOL IN YOUR FAMILY:** The participants were asked to draw a member of their family (or anyone else) who they looked up to and wanted to be like. It aimed to find out if there was anyone in the family to whom the children had an emotional attachment.
- **MOVIE CLIPPINGS AND SHORT FILMS:** The participants were shown some clips from Disney movies and other short videos such as Coco, Finding Nemo, Pingu, etc. The videos showed the protagonist struggling at home and then eventually running away. The activity aimed to see if the children could identify certain emotions and helped encourage them to speak up about their own stories of running away.

**Consent and Ethical Issues**

Informed consent was taken from Salaam Baalak Trust for the data collection on runaway children. The privacy of the participants was maintained, and no data was or would be revealed to a third party. No identifiers in terms of names, pictures, or anything else were disclosed either on paper or during the activities. The ethical guidelines of research, especially data collection, were followed with the children, and no one was forced to reveal any information if they didn't want to.

**Data Collection Procedure**

Qualitative activities were designed to keep the children engaged and interactive, while also learning about their thought processes, emotions, and stories. The activities were done in small groups of 5 so everyone could be comfortable. In the first activity, 'Emotional Wheel', the children were asked to spin a wheel, pick an emotion, and talk about experiences related to it and their family. Next, the children were asked to draw anyone in their family or otherwise, who they looked up to. This helped to understand if there was anyone in their family to whom they had an emotional attachment. In the last activity, the children were shown some animated clippings from movies and other short films such as Finding Nemo, Coco, and Pingu. They all showed the characters going through experiences related to running away from home and helped the children relate to the protagonists and talk about their own stories. The activities were all recorded and later transcribed. They were used to identify the various themes and subthemes of the collected data.

**RESULTS**

The research paper aimed to identify reasons and factors that might be the causes of children in India running away from home. Qualitative measures were extracted from a study (Choudhary, Kapoor & Wason, 2018) on a similar area of research to further re-test the hypothesis and see whether there is a difference that exists between the knowledge then and now. Then, the data were collected through several interactive activities conducted with children on the sample of 50 runaway children. There were a total of 22 participants in the study, residing in Salaam Baalak Trust, out of which 10 were boys and 12 were girls, all belonging to the age group of 7 years to 17 years. Three activities were carried out - Emotional Wheel, Draw Your Idol, and Movie Clippings - out of which several themes were extracted.

**Table 1: Thematic Analysis of the responses received from Runaway Children (N= 22)**

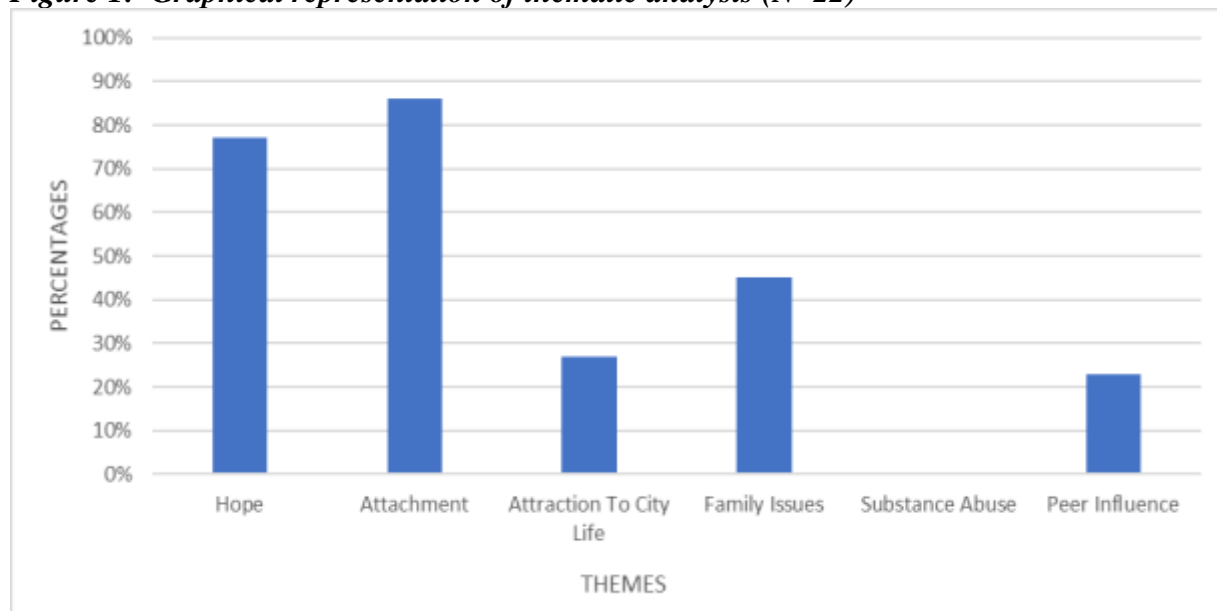
<b>Themes</b>	
<b>Hope</b>	
<b>Attachment</b>	
<b>To family members</b>	<i>To peers</i>
	<i>To staff/teachers at the shelter</i>
	<i>To siblings</i>
<b>Attraction to city life</b>	
<b>Peer influence</b>	
<b>Family Issues</b>	<i>Marital problems of parents</i>
	<i>Neglect</i>
	<i>Abuse</i>
<b>Substance abuse</b>	

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**Table 2: Frequency Distribution of themes identified in different genders (N=22)**

Themes	Girls	Boys	Percentage
Hope	9	8	77%
Attachment	10	9	86%
Attraction to city life	2	4	27%
Family issues	4	6	45%
Substance abuse	0	1	0.05%
Peer influence	2	3	23%

**Figure 1: Graphical representation of thematic analysis (N=22)**



### **Theme 1: Hope**

The first theme that could be identified was hope. Respondents displayed hope for the future, and they had expectations and dreams for a better life and several had ambitions to work towards it. Youth in the dependency system don't have much to be optimistic about, but hopefully, the discovery of strengths and hope in these children will guide future research to ascertain actions that can be taken to enhance those strengths and even prevent runaway behavior (Dumain, 2010). On the basis of activities conducted, especially *Draw Your Idol*, the participants revealed having career goals in fields such as engineering, medical, police, and sports. One boy of 16 years said, "Diploma karna hai, aur fir business." (I want to pursue a diploma degree and then eventually, business). Many of the children discovered various interests like kickboxing and music since they started living at the shelter. Despite having faced endless hardships throughout their lives, they showed optimism for a better future and the wish to be independent and successful. In fact, 17 out of the 22 (77%) participants were hopeful about their future.

### **Theme 2: Attachment**

Emotional attachment is the connection or bond you have with your loved ones. According to John Bowlby, behaviors of attachment had possibly been reinforced through natural selection and enhanced a child's chances of survival. "Attachment behavioral system" is the system that guides our patterns and habits of forming and maintaining relationships (Fraley, 2010). 86% of the children showed some emotional attachment towards at least one person in their lives. It existed from the participant's side toward family members, peers, teachers at

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the shelter, and especially siblings. In the Emotional Wheel, a few participants mentioned feeling comfortable with at least one family member. An 8-year-old boy said he felt happy when his mother visited him at the shelter. Another participant said, “*Sirf apni mummy ke saath khushi milti thi.*” (I only felt happy with my mother). In the other activity, a boy mentioned wanting to become a tourist guide like him someday. A lot of them seemed to be inspired by their teachers at the shelter and drew them when asked who they look up to the most. The relationships a child experiences every day and the environments in which they play out are the building blocks of the brain. By participating in learning experiences with their caregivers, babies shape their brains to function in the particular physical, social, and linguistic environments of those who care for them. During the formative period, it is critical for caregivers to create a climate of care, keeping healthy brain growth in mind. So, young children are able to develop and function well when provided care in safe, interesting, and intimate environments where they establish and maintain secure relationships with knowledgeable caregivers who are responsive to their needs and interests (Lally, 2006; J. R., & Mangione, P., 2017). Several participants showed some attachment to peers. A boy said he wanted to open his own hardware shop and said he was inspired by a friend who was into hardware and learned everything just by watching him. A study (Laible, D. J., Carlo, G., & Raffaelli, M., 2000) showed that adolescents who were high on peer but low on parent attachment were better adjusted than those high on parent but low on peer attachment, suggesting that peer attachment may be relatively more influential on adolescent adjustment than parent attachment. However, one of the most prevalent themes present in the paper was attachment to siblings who they either ran away with or visit even now. Compensating siblings hypothesis asserts that siblings may develop a closer relationship when they experience a relative lack of parental care (Boer, Goedhart & Treffers, 1992). When asked who they got inspiration from, two different participants drew their sisters, who taught them cooking, and said they wanted to become chefs. Another participant was influenced by her siblings and said she wants to become selfless and helpful like them someday. One boy, 16 years old, mentioned that he has only visited his home to meet his younger brother since he ran away. One small girl of 8 years old said her mother had mental health issues and she couldn't take care of her and her siblings, so she and her older sister ran away and lived at the shelter for several months. They were both very attached to their brother at home who also had health problems. Eventually, they went back to stay with him, but after he passed away, the younger one returned to the shelter because she had no reason to stay home anymore. Results of a study (Ponti, L., & Smorti, M., 2019) showed that attachment to both the mother as well as the father was linked to the quality of sibling relationships, and parental attachment to both parents and sibling relationships affected the level of perceived life satisfaction during emerging adulthood. Another study (Shepherd, D., Goedeke, S., Landon, J., Taylor, S., & Williams, J., 2021) indicated that retrospectively-rated sibling attachment seemed to be a stronger predictor of later-life well-being than paternal attachment. Hence, sibling bonds seem to be as relevant as the ones with parents or any other family members. This is a central theme throughout the paper. The participants were observed to have a good relationship with their siblings, and most of them still stay in touch. Findings indicated the necessity of early-life attachment figures on future well-being and were in accordance with the general propositions of attachment theory, arguing that experiences with attachment figures during childhood heavily shape an individual's developmental trajectory and their internal working models about the self, others, and the world (Shepherd, D., Goedeke, S., Landon, J., Taylor, S., & Williams, J., 2021).

### **Theme 3: Attraction to city life**

Some children run away from home searching for independence and better opportunities in cities. Additional divisional railway manager Kusuma Hariprasad, Bengaluru, stated, “They wanted to see film stars, meet cricket heroes and visit the attractions in Bengaluru. One wanted to see the (freshwater tunnel) aquarium we have at the station. A few came looking for jobs.” (Kumari, B., Mavad, A., DHNS, 2022). After the movie clippings activities, a few young boys mentioned running away at the prospect of starting a new life in a big city such as Delhi or Kolkata. One boy mentioned the Lal Kila or the Red Fort as his primary source of inspiration to run away, as he had heard of the monument and had wanted to see it for himself. He ended up living outside the fort for a while as people bought him food. In fact, 27% of the participants revealed ‘attraction to city life’ to be one of the major reasons they ran away. This demonstrates that these children associate city life with success, prosperity, and comfort. They believe that running away to a city would solve all their problems and that they would be securing a better and simpler future for themselves.

### **Theme 4: Family issues**

One of the causes of running away most prominent in this study was family issues. About 45% of the participants in this study talked about some kind of family issue at home. Many of the participants feel that they have been neglected by their families and have been feeling lonely and misunderstood. Some of them were also witnesses to abuse in the family or victims of it. Home entrapment and family factors have been identified as complementary factors for running away from home. Familial conflict, alcohol and substance abuse, parental strictness, neglect, and abuse of other forms were present in the home environment of many runaway children in the USA (Kaiser, 2020). A 15-year-old boy said, “*Ghar mein dukh lagta tha jab papa mummy ko maarte the.*” (I felt sad at home when my father hit my mother). Another boy, of 16 years, said he faced several forms of intense abuse at the hands of his father as the father blamed him for his mother’s death. He ran away from home several times, just like his older sister, and kept going back, but one day he left for good and was rescued by the shelter. He only visits rarely to see his younger brother. One girl said her stepfather encouraged her mother to leave her and her siblings, and the children had to run away from the abandoned home to find food and a new shelter for themselves.

### **Theme 5: Substance abuse**

A high prevalence of drug use and even intravenous use among street and working children is a matter of concern, and the most common drugs used by these children in India are tobacco and alcohol (Tripathi, & Lal, 1999). Runaway youth appear to be at a great risk of substance abuse, perhaps because of limited parental and societal controls to prevent such behavior (Selbach, J. A., 2000; Young, Godfrey, Mathews, & Adams, 1983). Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, and Iverson (1997) discovered that the increasing length of time a child is homeless has a positive correlation with the risk of being prey to substance abuse. Wright and Weber (1987) said that substance abuse along with alcohol is one of the biggest public health concerns in the runaway and other homeless populations due to the ready availability of these substances on the streets (Selbach, J.A., 2000). A small boy of 8 years stated that when he was living on the streets, he heard of a Gurudwara and started staying there because he got food. “*Uske baad nashe ka pata nahi tha toh nasha bhi karne laga.*” (I didn’t know anything and started doing drugs). The children are vulnerable on the streets and are often taken advantage of or become victims of addictions such as drugs, alcohol and so on.

### Theme 6: Peer influence

Marketing researchers looking into how various behavioral practices entered the cultural zeitgeist of children and adolescents have found that there is a strong, positive association between youth's and the behaviors of their peers (Prinstein, M. J., & Dodge, K. A. (Eds.), 2008). Sometimes the decisions and choices of children are impacted by their peers' actions. Peer pressure (36%), along with abuse (82%) and neglect (62%), were identified as some of the major contributing factors to children running away from home in data collected by the United Nations (Kaiser, E., 2020). One of the participants mentioned having a friend who convinced him to run away from home on the premise of getting well-paying jobs in the city and living together. This boy was already frustrated at his family for not moving to the city, and this combined with peer pressure caused him to run away from home. He expressed regret and wished to go back someday. At least 23% of the children in the study were influenced by their peers in some way or another.

The previous study (Choudhary, Kapoor & Wason, 2018) was taken up before the COVID-19 pandemic. It discovered various prevalent themes in runaway children that led to running away from homes such as hope, emotional attachment, and peer influence, which were similar to the findings in the present paper. The children still displayed faith and were optimistic for the future, and the actions of peers even now seemed to play a huge role in their overall development. However, some of the novel findings that emerged in this study were attachment to siblings, attraction to city life and tourist spots, abuse in the family, and substance abuse. 27% of the participants in this study mentioned 'attraction to cities' as a major influential factor, and 45% had several issues in their family. However, it was found that the children had developed good relationships with their teachers, caregivers, and peers at the shelter, and the attachment was replaced and fulfilled. The pandemic has also affected the lives of these children in numerous ways. In a study (India Today, 2022), one-fourth of parents (24 percent) feel that there is an increase in either scolding or punishment of their children post covid. In an indirect inquiry on child abuse, parents observed changes in their children's behavior in terms of 'fear of being left alone with a given person' (27 percent), 'sudden emotional or behavioral change' (27 percent), and 'abandonment of previous play habits' (29 percent). In fact, some of the new reported reasons for running away were very different from the ones documented pre-covid. Officials said that children have different reasons for running away from homes and some of them were as trivial as the fact that they were stopped from playing outside during lockdown or were asked not to spend too much time on social media (Times of India, 2021). In contrast, to the findings of the present research work, the reasons were similar to the study conducted pre covid. Hence, this provides sufficient evidence to have interventions for solving the aforementioned issues.

The root of most of the troubles in the lives and well-being of the children were the disrupted family environments. It was observed that when in a good environment with loving and emotionally available caregivers, peers, etc. they were able to excel. There can be more thorough check-ins with the families of these children. They should also be provided with psychosocial education so the parents can understand the impact of their neglectful behavior on the children. More psychologists can work on doing the same. This is why attachment and healthy bonds with caregivers at the shelter can help the children develop psychosocially. The absence of love and care from family can be replaced to some extent if the children are given a different fulfilling environment to grow in. As it was found in the study, peer attachment is a crucial factor in the maturing and growing phase of any child's life. So, it is the responsibility of the institutions to give them a nudge in the right direction as they could have either lasting positive or negative impacts on children. There should be



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awareness workshops and drives on the harmful effects of peer influence; how it can badly influence children towards destructive choices such as running away, substance abuse, etc. Major policy reform is required for this section of the society in the fields of education, family, well-being, psychological welfare, and delinquency, to name a few.

### CONCLUSION

This study aimed to find some of the causes behind children running away from home and as well as to understand their grievances and conundrums. Reasons such as attraction to city life, peer influence, family issues including abuse, marital problems of parents, neglect, and so on emerged in the three activities conducted. The children felt anger, loneliness, hopelessness, stress, and sadness while living at home, emotions which prompted them to leave. It was observed that the children were able to thrive in the supportive and hopeful environment of the shelter, and emotional attachment to siblings was a prominent theme in the paper. Most of the participants had found inspiration and could look forward to a better future. When provided with constant encouragement and opportunities, these children are able to excel. If efforts are made to help these children find comfortable and loving surroundings with caregivers and peers, they can develop mentally and socially and have better lives.

### Limitations

Although multiple new discoveries came up in this study, the sample size was small and could not possibly cover some of the other, less prevalent causes of children running away from home in India. There are insufficient studies about runaway children in India, making it difficult to determine a clear set of objectives for this study. Since it is impossible to keep a track of the number of children on streets and railway stations, there was a lack of accurate data figures.

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The author declared no conflict of interest.

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