



# Child Sex Trafficking: A Fact Sheet for Educational Professionals

Child sex trafficking (CST) is a severe form of child abuse and trauma that affects youth in many critically important ways. In particular, the impact of CST on development may interfere with learning and functioning in school. Professionals have a pivotal role to play in identifying youth who have been or are being trafficked, as well as vulnerable youth, and responding effectively to ensure their safety and support.

## 1

### What is Child Sex Trafficking?

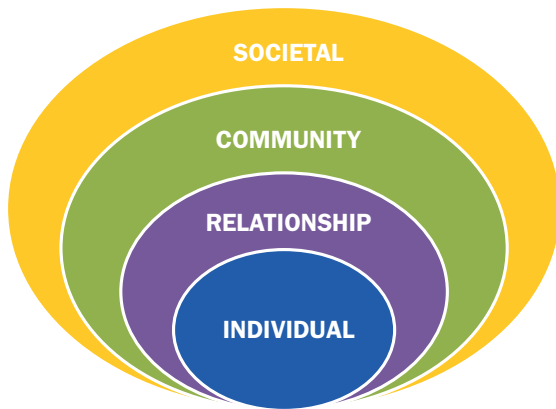
Child sex trafficking is defined as the giving or receiving of anything of value (e.g., money, shelter, food, clothing, drugs, etc.) to any person in exchange for a sex act with someone under age 18. Force, fraud, or coercion are not required, nor is it a requirement that a third party facilitates or benefits from the exchange, although these elements are often present. The following are examples of CST:

- A 13-year-old transgender student runs away from school with a 14-year-old peer. The friend posts an ad with pictures of the student on an adult services website to get money to cover the cost of hotel, food, and hormone treatment.
- A 7-year-old boy is sold by his parents for sex in exchange for drugs or money to buy drugs.
- A 16-year-old undocumented high school girl lives with her 23-year-old boyfriend after her parents are deported. He then tells her to engage in sex with other men for money, sometimes during school hours, to “contribute to their household.”

## 2

### Who is Vulnerable to Being Sex Trafficked?

Sex trafficking occurs among youth from all socioeconomic classes, races, ethnicities, and genders, in urban, suburban, and rural communities in the United States. However, some youth are at heightened risk due to a complex interplay of individual, relationship, community, and societal factors.



**Societal:** Sexualization of children, gender-based violence, strict gender roles, homophobia and transphobia, tolerance of the marginalization of others, lack of awareness of child trafficking, lack of resources for youth who have been exploited, social injustice, structural racism, and tolerance of community and relationship violence.

**Community:** Under-resourced schools and neighborhoods, community violence, community social norms, gang presence, commercial sex in the area, transient male populations in the area, poverty, and lack of employment opportunities.

**Relationship:** Friends/family involved in commercial sex, family dysfunction, intimate partner violence, caregiver loss or separation, poverty, and unemployment.

**Individual:** Abuse/neglect, systems involvement (child protection, juvenile justice), experiencing homelessness/having run away, LGBTQ+ identity, intellectual and/or developmental disability, truancy, unmonitored/risky internet and social media use, behavioral or mental health concerns, substance use, unaccompanied migration.



## 3

### Trauma and Child Sex Trafficking

Often, youth who have experienced sex trafficking have histories of multiple traumas and adversities in their lives. This includes early traumatic events that may have contributed to trafficking vulnerability, especially child sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect, traumatic loss and separation, and exposure to family and community violence as well as while being trafficked (e.g., sexual violence, physical assault, witnessing violence against others, etc.). As a result of their experiences, youth who have experienced sex trafficking often have significant trauma-related symptoms including difficulties with attention and concentration, control of emotions and behaviors, healthy relationships, and self-esteem.

## What Educational Professionals Need to Know About Trafficking and Youth Who are Trafficked

Education professionals have a critical role to play in identifying students who are experiencing trafficking or students who are more vulnerable, as well as providing effective support to survivors in the educational environment. These professionals should be aware that:

- **Trafficking and sexual exploitation activities may originate from school or occur on school grounds**, including recruitment by peers or third-party traffickers, and even commercial sex acts. On rare occasions, school staff may be aware of and involved in the trafficking of students.
- **Students of all gender identities** may participate in the recruitment and exploitation of others for many reasons, including coercion by a trafficker or as a way of reducing their own exposure to violence.
- **Many first experiences of trafficking**, especially in familial trafficking, occur at ages much younger than high school.
- **Prior to experiencing trafficking**, many youth have periods of low school attendance and academic difficulties, often as a result of placement changes, neglect, or trauma-related difficulties with attention and concentration. These impacts may contribute to discomfort and disconnection in the school environment and may result in efforts to cope (e.g. substance use, truancy) that further contribute to trafficking vulnerability.
- **While experiencing trafficking**, many youth continue to attend school. Students may miss or be tardy because of lack of sleep, court appearances, lack of safe transportation, shame, bullying, relocation, and threats from traffickers. They may undergo noticeable changes in academic interest, concentration, or performance; in peer group or peer-to-peer interactions; or in appearance. The opposite may also occur, youth may show no obvious changes in any of these areas.
- **Following identification and intervention**, it can be difficult for youth to successfully engage with school. Not only have youth who have experienced trafficking likely fallen behind academically, they oftentimes feel out of place with their peers and struggle to integrate socially.
- **Without adequate supports, youth who have experienced trafficking may continue to face barriers** to achievement, graduation, economic mobility, and employment opportunities even when they try to engage in school. If left unaddressed, these factors may in turn contribute to a risk of trafficking re-victimization.
- **Youth may experience a range of adversities and have many associated unmet needs.** These include mental health, medical, physical, educational, legal, and economic impacts, including traumatic stress symptoms, depression, anxiety, substance use, suicide and self-injury, unplanned or forced pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, malnutrition, incarceration, school drop-out, and unemployment.



## 5

## What Educational Professionals Can Do

To improve recognition and response to CST in schools and communities, educational professionals should:

- **Be vigilant and learn the risk factors and possible signs of CST.** Pay attention to red flags like physical, emotional and behavioral changes in youth. For instance, poor nutrition, poor sleep hygiene, physical injury, could be indicators of child sex trafficking. However, the absence of these indicators does not preclude trafficking. Alert other professionals when risks are noted (<http://www.missingkids.org/theissues/trafficking>).
- **Consider that youth who have experienced trafficking may be dealing with many factors that will impact their academic performance** including being involved with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.
- **Know the school's or district's protocol for responding to CST.** If the school does not have one, promote its development.
- **Know mandated reporting requirements regarding concerns about CST.** Many states now include CST in their mandated reporting child abuse code (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/>).
- **Question with care.** Youth may be reluctant to provide full or accurate information to professionals, often out of concern for their own safety or to protect the trafficker and other relationships seen as critical to their survival. A survivor of sex trafficking recalled, "I've been harmed before by people I thought I could trust." Obtaining a full disclosure from a student is not the goal and is not a prerequisite for providing the student with supports or making a report to child protective services. Respond to suspected CST in the same way as known CST: report to authorities, create a safety plan, and offer services. Maintain a calm, nonjudgmental, supportive attitude through words and body language: e.g., "I am here to help you" and "I care about your safety."
- **Promote increased awareness of CST** in the education workforce, including familiarity with community resources, anti-trafficking organizations, service systems, and hotline numbers.
- **Plan for and make appropriate accommodations** to support youth and address barriers to education associated with trafficking such as transportation to and from school to avoid high trafficking areas, on-site mental health services and supports, make-up classes, tutoring if the student must miss school for court, or partial credit for completed work.
- **Develop a CST awareness and prevention program** for and among students, and incorporate information about trafficking and healthy/unhealthy relationships into health education. Engage youth leaders in the effort to increase awareness and prevention of trafficking

### To get connected to help, report a tip, find services, and learn more about CST, after visit

- National Center for Missing & Exploited Children: <http://www.missingkids.org/home> (24-hour hotline: 1-800-THE-LOST)
- Polaris Project: <https://polarisproject.org>
- National Human Trafficking Hotline: [1-888-373-7888/text 233733](tel:1-888-373-7888)

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