

# Preventing the Sexual Exploitation of Children

The words **sexual exploitation** evoke a number of reactions and feelings. Perhaps one of the most devastating is silence – our inability or unwillingness as a society to speak about this horrific problem. That same silence may impact a child who has been sexually exploited. Children may be frightened or intimidated into not telling. They may feel they won't be believed or what happened is their fault. All of these feelings may cause them to hide their pain.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) is working to bring sexual exploitation to the forefront; raise awareness about this issue; and help combat its negative, long-term effects. NCMEC wants to help families and communities support the courageous child victims who come forward so they may begin healing and make more people aware of the problem so other children don't have to suffer in silence.

NCMEC wants people to know the sexual exploitation of one child results in multiple victims within that child's family and the effects may extend like tentacles into the community. Often people feel powerless to fight its insidious nature because the problem seems too huge and overwhelming. People may not want to confront the issue of who the perpetrator might be. They may not want to believe it could be a person in a position of trust or responsibility living in their own neighborhood.

But there are steps that need to be taken. When taken they could lead to a reduction in the incidence of sexual exploitation, an improvement in how we protect our children from this scourge, and caring and support for those children who have suffered at the hands of offenders. It's all about empowerment and giving children, parents, guardians, and communities the strength to overcome what they have lost, so they may live healthier and more productive lives.

## What Families May Do

- Listen to your children. Pay attention if they tell you they don't want to be with someone or go somewhere.
- Take the time to talk with your children. Encourage open communication and learn how to be an active listener.
- Notice when someone shows one or all of your children a great deal of attention or begins giving them gifts.
- Teach your children they have the right to say **NO** to any touch or actions by others that makes them feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused. Teach them to immediately tell you or another trusted adult if this happens. **Reassure them you're there to help and it is okay to tell you anything.**
- Be sensitive to any changes in your children's behavior or attitude.
- Look and listen to small cues and clues that something may be troubling your children because they may not always be comfortable disclosing disturbing events or feelings. Some children may not be able to tell, because they have been told — by a child molester or exploiter — bad things will happen if they tell what has occurred. Some children may be coerced into activity that they didn't at first understand to be inappropriate and/or don't know how to end. Children may be especially fearful of being punished, being embarrassed, or experiencing the loss of the love and respect of their family members and friends.
- If your children do confide in you about problems they may be having, strive to remain calm, noncritical, and nonjudgmental. Listen compassionately to their concern, and work **with them** to get the help they need to resolve the problem.
- Be sure to screen babysitters and caregivers. All states and territories have a public registry. Access to and available information about criminal offenses and records varies. Visit [www.nsopw.gov](http://www.nsopw.gov), your registry, or local law-enforcement agency for specific criteria. Check references with other families who have used the caregiver or babysitter. Once you have chosen the caregiver, drop in unexpectedly to see how your children are doing. Ask your children how the experience with the caregiver was, and carefully listen to the response.
- Provide oversight and supervision of your children's computer use. Know who they're communicating with online and where they may have access to computers. Establish rules and guidelines for computer use for your children.
- Be involved in your children's activities. As an active participant you'll have a better opportunity to observe how the adults in charge interact with your children.
- Work with your children's schools to institute sound and effective child-safety programs as part of their curriculum.
- Practice basic safety skills with your children and discuss their safety openly and honestly. There is no substitute for your attention and supervision. Being available and taking time to really know and listen to your children helps build feelings of safety and security.

## Is someone you know a **victim**?

Each time a child runs away his or her chance of being targeted increases. Also youth being controlled by a trafficker or pimp frequently do not reveal their victimization because of the severe control their trafficker has over them, both physically and psychologically. If something does not seem right, ask questions! Establishing an ongoing dialogue with children is critical to protecting them.

## Some signs and **vulnerabilities** to look for

- History of emotional, sexual, or other physical abuse. Children with such a background could fall prey to this form of victimization again.
- History of running away or current status as a runaway. Traffickers know runaways are in a vulnerable situation and target places such as shelters, malls, or bus stations frequented by such children.
- Signs of current physical abuse and/or sexually transmitted diseases. Such signs are indicators of victimization, potentially sex trafficking.
- Inexplicable appearance of expensive gifts, clothing, or other costly items. Traffickers often buy gifts for their victims as a way to build a relationship and earn trust.
- Presence of an older boy- or girlfriend. While they may seem "cool," older boyfriends are not always the caring men they appear to be.
- Drug addiction. Pimps frequently use drugs to lure and control their victims.
- Withdrawal or lack of interest in previous activities. Due to depression or being forced to spend time with their pimp, victims lose control of their personal lives.
- Gang involvement, especially among girls. Girls who are involved in gang activity can be forced into prostitution.

*"With the young girls, you promise them heaven, they'll follow you to hell," ... a pimp convicted of child sex trafficking.<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>6</sup>I. Urbina. "For Runaways, Sex Buys Survival." *The New York Times*. October 26, 2009, page 3.

## How to keep your child safer

One of the most important things you can do to protect your child is to create an environment in which he or she feels comfortable talking with you. Open **communication** is key. Share the dangers of sex trafficking with your children and encourage them to alert you when they feel uncomfortable in any situation.

Often trafficking victims have experienced victimization in the past, and many times this has been inflicted by individuals close to the victim. Do you trust the people with whom your child interacts? **Knowing** whom your children are with at all times is crucial to protecting their safety.

When your daughter or son is online, do you know which sites they are visiting and with whom they are communicating? Taking the time to **monitor** what your children do on the Internet is an important step in keeping your child safer.

If something does not seem right, **ask questions!** Establishing an ongoing dialogue with children is critical to protecting them.

If you suspect a case of commercial child sexual exploitation or sex trafficking of children, contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® at 1-800-843-5678 or visit [www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com)

or

the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) at 1-888-373-7888.

For additional information and resources about Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Human Trafficking, please visit the Innocence Lost National Initiative at <http://www.fbi.gov/innolost/innolost.htm>.

# The Prostitution of Children in America: A Guide for Parents and Guardians

## What is Child Sex Trafficking?

**Sex trafficking** is one of the most common types of **commercial sexual exploitation**, a global problem that could be happening right in your neighborhood. The commercial sex industry victimizes girls, boys, and transgendered youth. Victims could be anyone – your sister, neighbor, or nephew. Knowledge and awareness are key in keeping your loved ones safe.

According to federal law sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.<sup>1</sup> A person induced to perform such an act who is younger than 18 is a victim of child sex trafficking.

## How does a child become a victim?

Pimps and traffickers target vulnerable children and lure them into prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation using psychological manipulation, drugs, and/or violence. Any child may be vulnerable to such a person who promises to meet his or her emotional and physical needs. Often traffickers/pimps will create a seemingly loving and caring relationship with their victim in order to establish trust and allegiance. This manipulative relationship tries to ensure the youth will remain loyal to the exploiter even in the face of severe victimization. These relationships may begin online before progressing to a real-life encounter.

## Who are the pimps?

Pimps, also known as traffickers, can be anyone, including family members, friends, trusted adults, or “boyfriends,” who profits from the exchange of the sexual use of a minor by another.

## Victims are

**Targeted** – Pimps are predators who seek out vulnerable victims, particularly runaways or children experiencing trouble at home. They know these children have emotional and physical needs they perceive are not being met and use this to their advantage. Pimps find victims at a variety of venues such as in social-networking websites, shopping malls, and schools; on local streets; or at bus stations. While pimps often target children outside of their family, a family member may also prostitute a child.

**Tricked** – Pimps are willing to invest a great deal of time and effort in their victim to break down a victim’s natural resistance and suspicion – buying them gifts, providing a place to stay, promising a loving relationship – before revealing their true intent. Frequently victims do not realize the deceptive nature of their trafficker’s interest in them, viewing their pimp as a caretaker and/or boyfriend.

**Traumatized** – A pimp’s use of psychological manipulation (causing the child to truly believe the pimp loves and cares for his or her well-being) coupled with physical control (threats, violence, or drug addiction) can make a victim feel trapped and powerless to leave. This “trauma bond” is difficult to break and long-term treatment and counseling for victims is required.

Despite the seriousness of the problem, the incidence of commercial child sexual exploitation is difficult to measure. Empirical research has not conclusively defined the scope of the problem today. Below, however, are some significant findings from past studies.

## Statistics

- Pimps prey on victims as young as 12 to 14 years old.<sup>2</sup>
- One study estimates as many as 325,000 children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico are at risk each year for becoming victims of sexual exploitation.<sup>3</sup>
- A history of physical and sexual abuse is often common among victims.<sup>4</sup>
- One study estimates 30% of shelter youth and 70% of street youth are victims of commercial sexual exploitation. They may engage or be coerced into prostitution for “survival sex” to meet daily needs for food, shelter, or drugs.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 [United States of America]. Public Law 106-386 [H.R. 3244]. 28 October 2000. Section 103(9).

<sup>2</sup>National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: America’s Prostituted Children. Washington, D.C.: Shared Hope International, 2009, page 30.

<sup>3</sup>R. Estes and N. Weiner. *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico*. University of Pennsylvania, 2001, page 144.

<sup>4</sup>National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking, op. cit., n 2., page 31.

<sup>5</sup>Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, op. cit., n. 3, page 131. J. Greene, S. Ennett, and C. Ringwalt. (1999) “Prevalence and correlates of survival sex among runaway and homeless youth.” *American Journal of Public Health*. 89(9) page 1406.

## What Schools May Do

- Make sure teachers, volunteers, and anyone else with access to children is properly screened and trained.
- Implement and enforce a policy for reporting child sexual exploitation and handling disclosures from children.
- Establish protocols and screening for school computer use. Provide training for students, parents, guardians, and teachers regarding the acceptable use of computers.
- Choose or develop child-safety programs for the school that are based on accepted educational theories; are appropriate for the children's ages and levels of education and development; are designed to offer concepts that will help children build self-confidence in order to better handle and protect themselves in all types of situations; use multiple program components repeated several years in a row; and use qualified presenters who include role-playing, behavioral rehearsal, feedback, and active participation in presentations.
- Assess your environmental structure and take every possible step to help make it safer for children. Make certain children are properly supervised both in the classroom and around the campus.
- Make certain campus security is in place so all visitors are screened through the office and unusual incidents/visitors are handled.
- Provide programs and roles for parents and guardians to make them part of their children's safety and security at school and while going to and from school.

## What Communities May Do

- Notify the public of the sex-offender registry and community-notification requirements. Schedule town meetings and community seminars to help raise awareness about these policies and issues.
- Support local law-enforcement efforts to establish neighborhood crime-watch programs. Report suspicious persons/activities to local law enforcement.
- Support aggressive prosecution of offenders who victimize children within local communities and have an action plan and protocol in place to alert the community and assuage their fears when a high-profile arrest is made.
- Mobilize community groups and child-serving organizations to help make your community more "child safe." Determine if available services and programs are adequate to address the needs of your community.
- Assess local law-enforcement technology resources, and advocate for systems and other technology available to quickly disseminate information about abducted and missing children. Implement and support America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response (AMBER) Alert in the community through a voluntary partnership with law-enforcement agencies, broadcasters, and transportation agencies to rapidly disseminate images and information to the public in serious child-abduction cases. Although these programs will not prevent sexual exploitation, they allow for a rapid and effective mobilization if a child is abducted.
- Advocate use of Code Adam in local retail stores to rapidly locate lost children by using standard protocols and procedures. An immediate response to a lost child minimizes the possibility that child will be taken from the store.
- Institute free child-identification programs in the community to help ensure all parents and guardians have a recent, clear, and readily available photograph of their children.
- Advocate for meaningful legislative change with elected officials.

It is only through unified and diligent preparation and persistent prevention efforts that the sexual exploitation of children may be effectively addressed. For information regarding NCMEC's resources to help prevent the sexual exploitation of children, visit [www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com) or call 1-800-843-5678.

*Information reprinted respectively from NCMEC's Know the Rules... General Tips for Parents and Guardians to Help Keep Their Children Safer, Just in Case... Guidelines in case your child might someday be the victim of sexual exploitation, KIDS AND COMPANY: TOGETHER FOR SAFETY, and Guidelines for Programs to Reduce Child Victimization: A Resource for Communities When Choosing a Program to Teach Personal Safety to Children.*

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