

Protect Your Children against Trafficking—Resources for Parents

Potential signs of trafficking

If your child, or a child you know, suddenly shows any of the following red flags, it could be a sign of human trafficking:

- Showing up with belongings or items they would not normally be able to afford on their own (e.g., new clothes, cell phone, etc.) or unexplained sums of money
- Being secretive about who they are spending time with
- Sleeping a lot in school or during the day
- Talking about working late shifts or being unable to take breaks or leave their “jobs”
- Talking about how they cannot leave a work situation out of fear, due to debt, etc.
- Increased isolation from a previous friend group
- Spending more time with an older boyfriend/girlfriend, a controlling romantic relationship or with a new, riskier friend group
- Unexplained changes in behavior or attitude (increased mood swings, aggressive behavior, etc.) or new onset of anxiety or depression
- Running away from home, not coming home overnight
- New or increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Unexplained change in interest in activities they would regularly enjoy or attend (e.g., team sports, attending school-related events, etc.)
- Withdrawing
- Self-harm
- Eating disorders
- Sudden change in grades or engagement in school
- Unexplained aches and pains
- Sexually transmitted infections

What should you do if you suspect trafficking?

If you see something, do something.

Call 9-1-1. It’s better to call and be wrong than not to call when you should have.

File a report with Child Protective Services. Dane County: M-F, 7:45am-4:30 pm 608-261-KIDS/608-261-5437. Non-business hours; 608-255-6067.

Call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888. You can also text them at 233733.

For victim assistance, call Project Respect at 283-6435

Helping Human Trafficking Victims

<https://www.centerforpreventionofabuse.org/i-need-help-for-someone-else/helping-human-trafficking-victims-2/>

How Do I Report Suspected Human Trafficking?

<https://youth.gov/youth-topics/how-do-i-report-suspected-incidence-human-trafficking>

What every parent should know about preventing child trafficking

<https://www.childrensmercy.org/parent-ish/2020/12/preventing-human-trafficking/>

How does trafficking happen?

It starts with grooming. Grooming is befriending and establishing an emotional connection for the purposes of exploiting that connection. Grooming makes a child dependent on their trafficker and makes it possible for a trafficker to manipulate a child or teen into cooperating in their own exploitation. This makes it less likely the victim will leave the trafficker or that they will disclose what is happening.

Trafficking happens quickly. According to the Missouri Highway Patrol, it only takes 8 days from the time a child meets a trafficker online to when they meet in person. The grooming process is incredibly fast.

Traffickers identify victims' vulnerabilities and needs and respond to those needs with gifts, economic and emotional support or even the promise of love. This is why traffickers can often look like a romantic partner even to friends and family.

Traffickers isolate their victims from friends and family in order to control the situation without interference from concerned people in the child's life.

Traffickers gain information and materials from victims that can be used to blackmail them, such as illicit photos or immigration status.

Traffickers maintain control through threats, drugs or alcohol, blackmail and demands for sex, labor or forced criminality as payment.

Children and teens can be trafficked online. Tweens and teens are often recruited by traffickers through online dating apps, video games, social media and other online platforms. The child thinks they are entering into a romantic relationship, but they are actually being groomed by a trafficker.

Children and teens can be trafficked by family members. Children being trafficked by a family member are usually trafficked for drug money or in exchange for drugs. Trafficking in this case is part of a cycle of trauma and abuse, the trafficker usually having experienced significant trauma in their own lives.

Who is being trafficked?

Kids of all ages. Any child can be trafficked.

Kids of all genders. The majority of trafficking survivors who report to health care settings are girls. However, boys, gender-nonconforming children and transgender children are also being trafficked and their cases are underreported. We know a high demand exists in the child trafficking market for boys, gender-nonconforming children and transgender children. Yet, in our society, boys, gender-nonconforming kids and transgender kids are much less likely to disclose that they have been victims of trafficking.

Kids who seem typical. Some child trafficking victims live with their parents or guardians, attend school, are appropriately dressed and present as any other child their age. Often, victims cannot be identified by sight.

Kids with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Children with a history of trauma are more at risk for being victims of trafficking. ACEs include but are not limited to: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect or maltreatment, witnessing violence, growing up in a family with substance use disorders or inadequately treated mental health issues, poverty, food insecurity, homelessness, personal or familial involvement in the justice system or foster care system and LGBTQ+ identity.

Who is trafficking children?

Most often, traffickers and buyers are middle-aged men of every race, socioeconomic class, profession and walk of life. Traffickers do not look like the creepy, reclusive predators we see in the media. They look like our neighbors, relatives and co-workers.

How can parents keep kids safe from trafficking?

- **Build and maintain healthy relationships with your children.** Spend quality time together and check in often. Many victims of trafficking are vulnerable because they are lonely, depressed and isolated. Healthy parental attachments reduce those vulnerabilities.
- **Talk to children early and often about healthy relationships and healthy sexual development.** Use resources like the [Teen Safety Card](https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/hanging-out-or-hooking-up-teen-safety-card/) (<https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/hanging-out-or-hooking-up-teen-safety-card/>) from Futures Without Violence or the dating violence prevention site [com](https://thatsnotcool.com/?ref=logo) <https://thatsnotcool.com/?ref=logo> to start the conversation. If you are still not comfortable having these conversations, enlist a trained health care provider, counselor or therapist.

- **Be vigilant about online safety.** Traffickers are on every popular app kids love. Know exactly what your child is doing online and give them guidelines for what types of information are OK and not OK to post, who to chat with (known friends only) and who to block. Make sure you and your children turn off location services when posting on social media. Do not post photos that show what school they go to or what neighborhood you live in. Do not post photos of kids in swimwear, underwear or in the bath. Consider whether to use their name online and make sure social media accounts are private.
- **Keep educating yourself about trafficking.** Visit [StopTraffickingProject.com](https://www.stoptraffickingproject.com) for plenty of resources for adults and kids.

Additional resources from Operation Underground Railroad

What is Child Grooming?

<https://www.ourrescue.org/blog/what-you-need-to-know-about-child-grooming>

What every Parent Needs to Understand about Online Enticement and Exploitation

<https://www.ourrescue.org/blog/what-every-parent-needs-to-understand-about-online-enticement-and-exploitation>

How to Practice Online Safety While Using TikTok

<https://www.ourrescue.org/blog/how-to-practice-online-safety-while-using-tiktok>

How to Spot Red Flags in Social Media

<https://www.ourrescue.org/blog/how-to-spot-red-flags-in-social-media-profiles>

How to Protect Your Child from Online Enticement

<https://www.ourrescue.org/blog/how-to-protect-your-children-from-online-enticement> May 05, 2022

FBI Warns of Increase in Sextortion Schemes Targeting Young Boys

<https://www.ourrescue.org/blog/fbi-detroit-warns-of-increase-in-sex-tortion-schemes-targeting-young-boys-heres-what-you-can-do>

How to Protect Your Kids Online

<https://www.ourrescue.org/blog/5-essential-online-safety-resources>

Your Role in Combatting Child Sexual Abuse Material

<https://www.ourrescue.org/blog/your-role-in-combatting-child-sexual-abuse-material>

What Does Human Trafficking Look Like

<https://www.ourrescue.org/blog/what-human-trafficking-looks-like>