**What Every Parent Should Know about Child Trafficking**

**What is child trafficking?**

Child trafficking refers to the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing or soliciting of a minor for the purpose of involuntary labor, commercial sex or forced criminal activity. The most prevalent type of child trafficking in the United States is sex trafficking.

**Sex trafficking** of children involves the sexual exploitation of minors, including forcing or coercing children to engage in commercial sex acts such as prostitution or the production of pornography. Sex trafficking victims are more likely to enter the health care system than victims of other types of trafficking.

**Labor trafficking** of youth is using force, fraud or coercion for the purposes of subjecting minors to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery. The most common victims are older children and teens who are being forced to work without pay. Oftentimes, victims are foreign nationals and their parent or guardian may also be a victim of labor trafficking.

**Forced criminality** of minors occurs when young people are forced to commit crimes such as robbery, panhandling or producing and transporting illicit drugs. Trafficked individuals who are forced to commit crimes are commonly mistaken for criminals—rather than being identified as victims.

**Myths about child trafficking:**

* **Myth:** Kids are trafficked by being snatched off the street.

**Fact:** There are almost no cases of trafficking victims identified by Children’s Mercy have been trafficked as a result of being randomly kidnapped by someone they had never met. Victims are often either trafficked by a family member, friend or by someone they met online.

* **Myth:** Foreign nationals are the only kids being trafficked.

**Fact:** The most prevalent human trafficking victims are U.S. citizens under age 18 for sex trafficking.

* **Myth:** Trafficking means smuggling people across borders.

**Fact:** Many trafficking cases take place within communities and with no movement across borders.

**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.**On average, 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.

**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.

**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 ACEs**. Children with a history of trauma are more at risk for being victims of trafficking. [**ACEs**](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html) 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.

**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.
* **Talk to children early and often about healthy relationships and healthy sexual development**. Use resources from The Child Advocacy Center and we can help 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 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
* **Know the signs that trafficking may be occurring.**
  + Withdrawing
  + New onset of anxiety or depression
  + Self-harm
  + Eating disorders
  + Sudden change in grades or engagement in school
  + New friend group or controlling romantic relationship
  + New expensive gifts or unexplained sums of money
  + Unexplained aches and pains
  + Sexually transmitted infections
* **Who can parents contact if they are concerned a child is being trafficked?**
* **Local or State Police.**
* **The Southern Tier Child Advocacy Center’s Safe Harbour Coordinator**
  + 716-372-8532
* **Cattaraugus County Connecting Communities in Action Safe Harbour Program**
  + 1-888-945-3970
* **Contact the Human Trafficking Hotline.**
  + Call (888) 373-7888 or Text ‘HELP’ OR ‘INFO’ to 233733



Olson, H., & Whitfield, R. (2020, December 17). What Every Parent Should Know About Child Trafficking. Children's Mercy Kansas City. Retrieved January 4, 2024, from https://www.childrensmercy.org/parent-ish/2020/12/preventing-human-trafficking/