



Child Sex Trafficking in America:

A Guide for Parents & Guardians



What is Child Sex Trafficking?

Child sex trafficking (CST) is a form of child abuse that occurs when a child under 18 is advertised, solicited or exploited through a commercial sex act where sex is traded for money, food, shelter, drugs or anything else of value.

In 2021, NCMEC received more than **17,200 reports** of CST.

1 in 6 of the more than **25,000** missing children reported to NCMEC in 2021 who had run away were likely victims of CST.

Who Are the Victims?

CST victims could be anyone – your child, neighbor, or other family member. NCMEC has received reports of child sex trafficking from every U.S. state and victims have included:

- Boys, girls and transgender youth
- U.S. Citizens and children who have come to the U.S. from other countries
- Children from urban communities, suburbs, small towns, and tribal land

While any child can be targeted research has revealed that youth who lack strong support networks, have historical trauma, are experiencing homelessness, are being bullied or are marginalized by society are at a higher risk.

Who Are the Perpetrators?

Traffickers can be anyone who profits from the selling of a child for sexual abuse, including: friends, gangs, family members, foster parents, perceived trusted adults, or romantic partners. In some cases, there is no identified trafficker and it is the buyer who is directly exploiting the child's vulnerabilities. For instance, if a child runs away, a buyer may exploit the child's need for food and shelter by offering to provide that in exchange for sex.

Keeping your Child Safer

- Talk to your child. Open communication is key. It's never too early to start talking to your child and answering their questions in an age-appropriate way. In addition to focusing on CST, important related issues may include sexual health, healthy relationships, consent, and boundaries.
- Address the myths and misconceptions that glamorize the commercial sex industry. Movies, TV shows, and music are all "teachable moments" with opportunities to talk about these issues and learn about your child's thoughts and feelings.
- Build resiliency. Social media and gaming platforms are increasingly becoming the tool traffickers and other predators use to target, groom, and recruit victims. At some point your child will likely be confronted with inappropriate messages or could hear or see things online that they know are wrong. Help teens know how to handle these types of situations by making sure they are comfortable telling you about it and know how to make a report to NCMEC's CyberTipline. NCMEC has many available resources available at: [MissingKids.org/NetSmartz](https://www.missingkids.org/NetSmartz) to help your family practice internet safety.



CST victims could be **anyone** – your child, neighbor, or other family member.

Know the Red Flags

CST victims may not see themselves as victims or disclose their abuse because of fear, shame, or loyalty to their abuser(s). It is not a child's responsibility to ask for help. Familiarizing ourselves with signs of child sex trafficking can help us intervene if a child in our life is being trafficked and get them the support they deserve. A full list of red flags is available on NCMEC's website.

- Chronically runs away from home
- Unexplained absences from school
- Has secret cell phones or apps providing multiple cellphone numbers
- In possession of material goods inconsistent with the child's access to money
- Unexplained access to large amounts of cash, pre-paid credit cards, or hotel keys
- Close association with an overly controlling adult
- Significant changes in behavior, including their online activity




When children run away frequently or for long periods of time they are more at risk, so it is important to **gather support and resources** for your family. If your child runs away, **immediately** report it.




- Abruptly disconnects from family or friends
- Stops engaging in activities they previously enjoyed
- References online escort ads or uses language often associated with prostitution, such as "Trick," "The Life," "The Game"

If you are worried that a child in your life has become a victim of sex trafficking, please remember YOU are an important source of support. How you respond matters:

DO

-  **Be Patient**
-  **Listen**
-  **Reassure**

DON'T

-  **Assume**
-  **Blame**
-  **Interrogate**

If something doesn't seem right, ASK QUESTIONS! If you believe your child is a victim of child sex trafficking, NCMEC provides support for victims and their families. To learn more about these services email familysupport@ncmec.org for help or call 1-800-843-5678. NCMEC can help connect you to peer support and therapists who are trained to look for troubling behaviors and help families figure out how to focus, communicate and heal. NCMEC's resource, "**Reconnecting with Your Child: Building Relationships After Suspected Exploitation**" is available at [MissingKids.org/support](https://www.missingkids.org/support).