

## Protecting God's Children for Adults

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# Human Trafficking: What Would You Do in These Scenarios?

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Human trafficking is a reprehensible crime, and during times of crisis, it thrives as a business when traffickers adapt quickly to opportunities that arise as a result of the crisis. For instance, when schools and daycares close, parents are forced to work from home or leave kids in less than ideal environments for supervision during work hours. This often leads to an increase in screen time with less supervision as parents attempt to juggle employment requirements while being full-time caregivers.

An environment such as this can create new opportunities for traffickers as they have increasingly been recruiting their victims online. Factor in the isolation that comes from school closings and sequestration from society, and traffickers will prey upon children's need for companionship and guidance to manipulate them. The U.S. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) reported a 98.66 percent increase in online enticement reports between January and September 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, and reports to their CyberTipline doubled to 1.6 million.<sup>1</sup>



During a recent presentation this author conducted, someone posed the question, "If there are nearly 46 million adults and children languishing in modern slavery across the globe, what significant impact can I, as an individual, make to mitigate the exploitation of these poor souls?" My response mimics the recommendations that law enforcement tell us when they are asked the same question: "Be a good witness. Notice, record with your cell phone, and recall the details of what you are seeing."<sup>2</sup> If you are witnessing something concerning unfold in front of you, call 911 or local law enforcement. Do not attempt to intervene yourself, for your own safety and the safety of the possible victims. Traffickers view the people they exploit as financial assets, and they are not usually willing to forfeit their "property" or "investment" without a fight. This awareness is not to scare anyone, but it is meant to spread the truth and provide a way for adults and vulnerable youth to look for red flags and bear in mind the reality of human trafficking while still enjoying life.

What would you do under these circumstances?

- If you are traveling to see friends and/or family, or taking a vacation by road trip, you might stop at a truck or rest stop and notice scantily-clothed youth moving from one truck cab to another, and remaining for 20 minutes (or more, or less—the timing isn't the important factor here) in each one. This could be a runaway, and/or a victim of trafficking. In either case, some type of safe intervention is needed. Be alert to the possible trafficker or his/her designated money collector who will be supervising activities in close proximity.

- Perhaps you stop at a hotel for an overnight stay while on a business trip or a road trip. There you notice a constant stream of men entering hotel rooms at the end of a hallway away from your room, who all spend no more than 45 minutes in each room.
- Or perhaps you are enjoying your favorite spa treatment when you observe that 5 young girls are being made up by the beauticians to look older (as in, 21 years old), and they are being closely supervised by an older female who is clearly unrelated to any of them. Your efforts to engage the young girls in a conversation are rebuffed by the older female, which is concerning behavior.
- Or perhaps your neighbor's live-in nanny never seems to leave the house and is too frightened to talk to you.
- Or when a person is always accompanied by someone who appears controlling or threatening (perhaps the youth appears meek, and always wears baggy clothing). You might see bruising. The youth may need to ask for permission to do things like use the restroom. They may or may not refer to the person as their boyfriend or girlfriend.

**In each of the above scenarios, call local law enforcement, or even 911.** With any situation such as those listed above, even if you're unsure, it's always better to err on the side of caution and let law enforcement make decisions about the next steps. Every adult should be educated about the warning signs of this illegal enterprise of human trafficking, and if at any time you have a suspicion or concern that human trafficking might be occurring, it must be reported.

For some citizens though, there is an erroneous assumption that these victims, even the children, choose the trafficking activities, i.e., to be "prostitutes" as a means of gaining something, such as earning large sums of money. Contrary to public opinion, the price a buyer pays for "commercial sex acts with a minor" is paid directly to the trafficker, and rarely seen by the victim. Most importantly for us to understand, it isn't fair to say that children can rationally or willfully choose to be "prostitutes." By federal law, youth under the age of 18 cannot give true consent to their own exploitation or commercial sex acts. In fact, most state laws forbid the use of the label "prostitute" for children rescued from trafficking because that implies that the trafficked youth are criminals and perpetuates a terrible stigma. The power differential between a trafficker and a minor is such that a youth's refusal to perform commercial sex acts can result in serious consequences inflicted by the traffickers. These consequences can involve physical torture, but more commonly rely on psychological torture. Keep in mind that the law does not require that force, fraud, or coercion be proven to convict a trafficker of a crime when a minor is involved.

Most of us will not witness human trafficking occurring in real time since traffickers attempt to avoid detection at all costs—but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be on the lookout. Whenever making a report to law enforcement or the National Human Trafficking Hotline, it is crucial to provide as much information as possible to assist in the identification and investigation of all the players in a trafficking ring. You know that phone you carry around everywhere? If you can do so in a safe manner that does not put you or others in danger, consider obtaining photos of license plate numbers, type of vehicles, addresses, and pictures of the victims and traffickers are the most helpful, and can assist to provide the necessary evidence to prosecute cases when memories are insufficient and unreliable.

There is a commonly accepted S.O.S. hand signal that trafficked victims use to communicate to others that they are being held against their will and want help getting out.<sup>3</sup> This hand signal involves the victim folding their thumb onto their palm and then closing their four fingers over the thumb indicating

that they (the thumb) are being held against their will. This hand signal has been shown on social media and should be taught to people of all ages so that this gesture is recognized for the distress call that it is. This would be another instance where a 911 call is warranted with as much detailed information as possible.

The many possible scenarios are difficult to anticipate, and the traffickers have learned to quickly adapt to any efforts to apprehend them. Take the time now to record the **National Human Trafficking Hotline (888-373-7888)** into your phone so that you can make that call when the need arises. They operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and you can call anonymously. Translation services are available in over 200 languages. The most common call to the hotline is from a community member who is suspicious about a situation.<sup>4</sup> When deciding whether to make that call or not, err on the side of caution to protect the vulnerable. And always remember that you may save several lives in the process.

As individuals, we each have a responsibility to do whatever we can to interrupt the exploitation of others and especially children, and fighting human trafficking is one way we can do this. If you think that you or your actions are too miniscule to make an impact, try being in the same room as a mosquito. Even one person can make a significant impact on identifying, reporting and limiting the exploitation of children, youth and the vulnerable. Just imagine the impact we can all make when working together.

#### References

1 Retrieved from the U.S. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children website: <https://connect.missingkids.org> , on June 17, 2021.

2 Conversation with FBI agent on the Anti-Human Trafficking Team at the FBI office in the Dallas/Fort Worth office, November 19, 2021.

3 Retrieved from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/end-human-trafficking/202111/one-small-gesture-one-giant-act-against-human-trafficking>

4 Retrieved from the Polaris Project's website: <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/states> on June 17, 2021.

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