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## Teen Sex Trafficking - KNOW! To Educate Them to Protect Them



*The following Know! Tip discusses the sex trafficking of children. There is no graphic content or description below, but it could still be difficult for some readers. If you suspect human trafficking might be occurring near you or need help, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888, TTY 711, text 233-733, or [chat with the hotline at humantraffickinghotline.org/chat](https://www.humantraffickinghotline.org/chat).*

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says more than 300,000 of our nation's young people are considered at-risk for sexual exploitation annually. An estimated 150,000 U.S. born children are formerly recruited into sex trafficking each year, with 14 being the average age of recruitment.

In the previous tip, [Teen Sex Trafficking – What Parents Need to KNOW!](#), we defined teen sex trafficking, discussed the wide range of young people who are at risk, and talked about the fact that traffickers prey upon the vulnerabilities and naiveties of children.

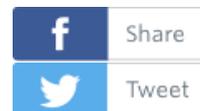
In talking with our children on this subject, they should be made aware of the clever and highly manipulative ways in which sex traffickers operate. It is the recruitment, grooming, and seasoning of a victim.

**Recruitment:** A trafficker typically befriends the victim and gains their trust. They may even pretend to be the victim's romantic love interest. They tend to shower the young person with gifts and an overabundance of compliments.



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Talking regularly with youth about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs reduces their risk of using in the first place.

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**Grooming:** The trafficker slowly begins to isolate the victim from friends and family. The trafficker may supply the victim with drugs and alcohol and starts controlling how the victim dresses, behaves, and spends personal time. At this stage, the victim is encouraged to participate in sexual activities that involve modeling, stripping, and pornography.

**Seasoning:** This is the final phase, where the victim experiences emotional, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. Depending on the situation, there may be confinement, forced sexual education, re-naming or re-programming of the victim, and removal from familiarity. Through manipulation, the victim feels increasingly dependent on the trafficker. At this point, the trafficker typically has some leverage that keeps the victim from running away or seeking help, including threats made against the victim's loved ones.

It is important for children to know that a "trafficker" may be male or female, of any age, and could even be a classmate recruiting on behalf of a trafficker. Popular recruitment areas include parks and playgrounds, schools, walking to and from bus stops, shopping malls, gas stations, truck stops, and online including through social media.

We must also make it clear that a young person manipulated into sex trafficking is never the one at fault. They are a victim—not in need of punishment, but in need of help.

In addition to TALKING about teen sex trafficking, we can further protect our children by taking these steps:

1. **Set a high standard of love within your home.** The way you define and express your love to them will set the foundation for their self-image, confidence, and expectations in future relationships.
2. **Be the person they can turn to.** One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18 years old, according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Your children must hear it from you that if anyone exhibits inappropriate sexual behavior toward them in any way (including past occurrences), they can and should come to you.
3. **Warn them about the dangers of social media.** We assume our children know not to send naked photos, share personal information online, or agree to meet up with anyone they meet on the internet, but children need to be reminded. It is also essential that children be made aware the difference between an online "friend" and an established friendship.
4. **Pay attention to your children.** Know your child's whereabouts online and in the real world. Find ways to get to know their friends and their friends' parents. Be aware of friendships/relationships that seem to isolate your child from other friends and family. Notice if your child has new clothes, makeup, electronics, or other items, and ask how they acquired them.

You also have the opportunity to help other children, especially as families travel this summer (or anytime). Keep an eye out for potential sex trafficking victims, and if you witness or suspect something, to please report it immediately.

Hotels, bars, truck stops, buses, the streets, political or sporting events, and even “front businesses” such as nail salons, are all common places where victims of trafficking are likely to be spotted.

Red flags to watch out for include:

- Controlling or abusive “boyfriend” or older female.
- Signs of physical abuse, such as burn marks, bruises, or cuts.
- Tattoos burned or branded onto a child’s body, particularly when coupled with the youth’s reluctance to explain the tattoo (ex. barcode or money symbol).
- Multiple young people present with an unrelated male or female.
- Living out of suitcases, at motels, or in a car.
- Referring to traveling to other cities or states. Or, the young person isn’t from the current location. The child may also lack knowledge of his or her travel plans, destinations, and/or his or her current location.
- Items or an appearance that doesn’t fit a young person’s current situation. For instance, look for a child who appears homeless but has money, electronics, new clothes or shoes, and who has his or her hair and nails done.
- References to traveling job opportunities (including modeling, singing and/or dancing in a music group, or magazine sales crew).

Physically intervening in certain situations may put a child in further danger. If you sense immediate danger for a child, call 911 without hesitation. It is better to err on the side of caution. Otherwise, reach out to the **National Human Trafficking Hotline** to report a detailed tip or get help: 1-888-373-7888, TTY: 711, Text: 233733, or [Chat](#). It’s confidential 24/7.

Sources: [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children: Child Sex Trafficking. O.U.R. Stories: Protecting Children from Sex Trafficking. REST: 6 Ways Parents Can Protect Their Children from Sex Trafficking. April 2013. Shared Hope International: Report Trafficking. United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking, Annual Report 2019.](#)