

A Parent's Guide to Safe Harbor

SEXUALLY EXPLOITED YOUTH

A sexually exploited youth is someone age 24 or under who engaged in, agreed to engage in, or was coerced or manipulated into sexual conduct in return for the promise of anything of value, such as money, food, clothing, rent, or shelter. A youth also can be sexually exploited if he, she or they have engaged in exotic dancing, been filmed doing sexual acts, traded sex for drugs, or has been involved in a prostitution-related crime. A third party may or may not be involved.

Not only does sexual exploitation lead to immediate and long-term physical, mental, and emotional harm, but until recently Minnesota could charge and treat sexually exploited youth as criminals—juvenile delinquents engaging in acts of prostitution.

SAFE HARBOR LAW AND THE NO WRONG DOOR RESPONSE MODEL

Under Minnesota Safe Harbor, Minnesota youth who engage in prostitution will no longer be seen as criminals but instead as victims and survivors. The Safe Harbor Law treats these youth with dignity and respect, and directs them to appropriate supportive services, including shelter and housing.

In order to implement the Safe Harbor Law, Minnesota is following the No Wrong Door Response Model (NWD). The goal of No Wrong Door is that no matter where a youth is identified, whether through schools, advocacy groups, clinics, child protection, law enforcement, or other avenues, every professional will be able to identify exploitation and will know where to refer the youth for services.

HOW DOES A CHILD BECOME A VICTIM?

Traffickers/buyers and people looking to exploit youth (including family members, trusted adults, friends/boyfriends/girlfriends, or gangs) will prey on any vulnerability a youth might have. They will use psychological manipulation and often physical violence. The exploiter is often very good at psychological manipulation and aims to keep the victim loyal to them at all costs.

Often the exploiter will begin a caring relationship in order to build trust and loyalty to the trafficker. This can start in person directly with the youth, or they can use other youth to recruit the victim. Traffickers will also recruit victims online. They will often troll the internet looking for youth who are seeking love, acceptance, or even excitement.

Youth who are being sex trafficked or sexually exploited are not “bad kids.” They are victims of a crime. Even if they believe they had choices and do not identify as a victim, they have been, targeted, tricked, and traumatized.

KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE

6 Actions to Help Protect Your Children and Youth

1. Keep lines of communication open. Let your children know they can talk with you about anything, without judgment, even if they think it might be upsetting to you. Really listen to your children. Exploiters often rely on their victims to feel shame or guilt to keep them silent. Regularly check-in with your child about their daily experiences, their friends, what they are excited about, and what worries them. Trust your instincts and ask questions if something seems off. Youth are more vulnerable to exploiters when they do not have anyone to talk to, or their emotional needs are unmet.

2. Talk to your children about healthy relationships. Discuss healthy and unhealthy relationships with your children, including healthy boundaries. Model healthy relationships at home, especially between adults. Youth say they might not have gotten involved with an exploiter if they knew what a healthy relationship looked like. Spend time with your children, show them that the relationship you have with them is very important to you.

3. Take an active interest in their social media life. Be knowledgeable about internet and social media safety. Take as much interest in your child's online life as you do in their offline life. Exploiters use the internet to gain their victim's trust. Talk with your children about the websites they use, and the importance of not sharing personal information, and especially about not meeting anyone in person they have only met online, such as on a gaming site. Talk about the dangers of posting sexual images online, and of sexting (the sending or receiving of sexual images via text message), and that these images/texts never go away.

4. Know your children's friends. Be alert to friends who are much older, or who tend to isolate your child from other friends or family. Monitor which friends are likely to be a positive influence on your children and encourage them to look out for each other. If your child does not have any friends, help them connect with other youth. Get them involved in positive things of interest to them, the arts, sports, music, community service, and youth groups.

5. Talk honestly about sex. Talk about healthy sex, sexuality, and safe sex with an emphasis on healthy relationships. Teach them about consent, what it is and what it is not. Teach your children that they have the right to say no to sex or sexual activity even under pressure from someone. Youth should not learn about sex from social media and pornography. Exploited youth tell us that they needed adults to provide them with accurate and non-judgmental information about sex and sexuality when they were younger.

6. Educate your children about sexual exploitation and trafficking. Educate yourself and do not assume it cannot happen to your children. Talk to them about what sexual exploitation and trafficking is, that traffickers, exploiters, and "pimps" can be male or female, how they can look like "regular" people, and that they will look for youth's vulnerabilities to exploit. Teach them how this happens and what to do if someone approaches them online or in person. Have them tell you right away if someone has hurt them or attempted to hurt them.

WARNING SIGNS/ INDICATORS OF TRAFFICKING OR EXPLOITATION

Not any one sign signals exploitation or trafficking. When more than one sign below is present there may be cause for concern. Acting early can prevent exploitation from happening or from escalating.

- Sudden and unexplained changes in behavior, mood, or personality
- Evidence of someone trying to control or dominate your child in some way
- The sudden presence of an older boyfriend/girlfriend
- Branding marks, sometimes in the form of tattoos
- Being secretive about who they are talking to or meeting
- Becoming more and more isolated from their regular friends, and others they care about
- Unexplained money, new belongings, including cell phones, new hair styles, manicures/pedicures that you did not pay for
- Skipping school, coming home late, or staying out overnight with no explanation
- Running away

IF YOU SUSPECT SEXUAL EXPLOITATION CONTACT:

- Your local Law Enforcement and tell them you suspect sex trafficking
- Your Safe Harbor Regional Navigator – www.health.mn.gov/communities/safeharbor/response/navigation.html
- The Day One Hotline for Safe Harbor services in your area: 1-866-223-1111

Sources: Parents Protect, <https://www.parentsprotect.co.uk/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation.htm>;

Voices of Safe Harbor: Survivor & Youth Input for Minnesota's Model Protocol on Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Youth, www.hennepin.us/~media/hennepinus/your-government/projects-initiatives/documents/no-wrong%20door-voices.pdf?la=en;

Human Trafficking in Our Backyard, <http://inourbackyard.org/keep-kids-safe-ht/>

LOVE146, www.love146.org; Parents Protect, <https://www.parentsprotect.co.uk/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation.htm>