



Missouri Department of
Social Services

Approaches to Supporting Youth Affected by Exploitation and Trafficking

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HARM REDUCTION APPROACHES

for Caregivers of Exploited Youth

Harm reduction acknowledges that change involves both internal and external processes. Caregivers are vital in addressing youths' basic needs and coordinating care systems. When youths' needs go unmet, they become more susceptible to exploitation. Therefore, caregivers directly influence the external changes required to fulfill these needs, particularly those previously addressed by exploitative situations.



It is not the caregiver's role to convince the youth that they are a victim of sexual exploitation.



Caregivers should recognize that a rescue mentality aiming for an immediate break from an abusive relationship is often ineffective for exploited youth.

IMMEDIATE NEEDS AND WELLBEING APPROACHES

Discuss expectations for the home, including first asking the youth about their own expectations and needs.

- Foster parents must recognize that adjusting to new family dynamics can be challenging for both caregivers and youth.
- Each placement requires understanding and adapting to different dynamics from both the caregiver's and the youth's perspectives.

Assist youth in defining their own basic needs.

- Recognize that meeting basic needs goes beyond what a youth needs to simply "get-by."
- Be flexible in meeting youth's needs/wants and teach them skills to get their needs met in a healthy and appropriate way.
- Take youth shopping and allow them to select their preferred personal hygiene products and snacks/meals to keep in the home.

IMMEDIATE NEEDS AND WELLBEING APPROACHES *(cont'd)*

Create and support access to age appropriate social/extracurricular activities.

- Ensure their exploitative past does not influence their involvement.

Consistently reach out to the youth during absences from the home, even if they do not respond.

- Inquire if they need food or offer to pick them up.
- Remind them they are welcome back.
 - This consistency demonstrates authentic concern and care.

SAFETY PLANNING APPROACHES

Acknowledge that leaving and returning to exploitative situations is common and should not hinder engagement.

- Understand that this cycle doesn't prevent healing for youth.
- Normalize feelings of anxiety and urges to leave home.
- Discuss these feelings realistically, expressing care and support while reassuring them that they always have a safe place to return to.

Create strategies for the youth's return after an absence.

- Involve the youth's team or support system in planning.
- Identify contacts for the youth and assess their basic needs.
- Focus on engaging and reintegrating the youth effectively.
- A warm welcome can influence the youth's sense of importance and value.

SAFETY PLANNING APPROACHES *(cont'd)*

Collaborate with youth to identify home triggers and create a support plan.

- Ask questions like, “What do you experience when feeling anxious or overwhelmed?”
- Develop actionable steps, such as taking a walk, visiting a favorite restaurant, or finding quiet space to help mitigate those moments.

Acknowledge the youth’s feelings of connection to their exploiter, validating their emotions and fostering safety and trust.

- Use this as a basis to discuss healthy relationships and help the youth define love.
- Identify the needs the exploiter fulfilled and explore how those needs can be better met at home.

ONGOING ENGAGEMENT APPROACHES

Be mindful of how you communicate with youth compared to others in the home.

- Exploited and foster youth may feel different; avoid reinforcing this.
- Focus on treating all youth equally.

Be flexible in engaging with youth, recognizing that trauma affects both developmental and emotional growth.

- Understand that a youth’s chronological age may not match their behavior or actions.

Address problematic behavior by holding youth accountable.

- Respond with a trauma-informed approach.
- Understand the underlying reasons for their actions, while recognizing that some actions are still inappropriate.

ONGOING ENGAGEMENT APPROACHES *(cont'd)*

Be confident in setting boundaries

- For instance, if a youth threatens not to come home if denied permission to attend a party, it's appropriate to deny the request while expressing concern.
- Consistency is key in these situations.

Offer and allow frequent opportunities for choice.

- Empower the youth to participate in their own decision-making experience

Have open and transparent conversations with the youth about boundaries and expectations.

- Discuss mutual expectations, allowing youth to share what they expect from caregivers and vice versa.

OTHER APPROACHES TO CONSIDER

Discuss expectations with relatives, focusing on differences from the youth's home of origin.

- For parents, address changes in expectations since removal or leaving home.
- Conversations should cover communication, rules, consequences, basic needs, and what the youth requires to feel at home.

Harm reduction strategies can make caregivers feel they are enabling negative behaviors in youth.

- Authoritarian parenting is ineffective for youth lacking healthy attachment to caregivers.
- Authoritarian responses may be perceived as a lack of love.
- For these youth, love is associated with consistency, follow-through, and acceptance after absence.

Use respectful language when interacting with youth affected by commercial sexual exploitation to avoid labels and misconceptions.

- Do not use terms that glorify exploitation or blame the youth.
- Instead of asking, "Is that your pimp?" say, "Is that your boyfriend/girlfriend? Tell me about them."

PHRASES & APPROACHES TO AVOID

Connecting an action or behavior to a monetary figure is reminiscent of the exploitive situation and can lead to triggering the youth.

Be careful of behavioral based incentives. These only serve to replicate the same dynamics a youth has experienced with exploiters and purchasers.

Avoid approaches that categorically punish the youth for leaving.

Youth may leave for reasons beyond their control - such as at the threat of an exploiter - and they should not be additionally punished for that behavior.

- “If you leave, we’ll close your bed and you can’t come back”
- “You don’t have to be here” / “Go ahead and leave if you want”
- “I don’t have to be doing this for you”
- “You have to stay”
- “You’ll get arrested/caught up in something if you leave”
- “There’s no where else to go”
- “We can’t help you if you choose to be in the life/prostitute yourself”
- “Your boy/girlfriend doesn’t love you”
- “Why do you keep doing this to yourself?”
- “You should be grateful to have this placement/home”
- “There’s the door. You can leave.”
- “I better get reimbursed for purchasing these items for you otherwise I’m taking them back”
- “I’m going to put you out if you...”
- “If you care so much about your family and they care so much about you, why aren’t you with them?”
- “You aren’t coming in this house until I let you in”
- “Because I said so”



**SCAN TO
VIEW MORE
EXAMPLES**

LANGUAGE MATTERS

From the Polaris Project Blog

Language can negatively impact victims by hindering their ability to identify that they are in a trafficking situation.

Human trafficking often starts with a trusted individual manipulating the victim, rather than a stranger kidnapping them. Many survivors may not recognize themselves as victims needing help, which can lead to unawareness of available support services.

Language can shape public perception of how human trafficking happens.

Using phrases like “break chains” with harmful imagery can distort human trafficking realities, misrepresenting survivors’ experiences. This narrative may hinder victims from self-identifying and trigger trauma responses, reminding them of their dehumanization.

Language can perpetuate saviorism.

Trafficking survivors require support, not rescue, as they transition from their situations. Terms like “rescue” perpetuate a savior narrative that prioritizes others over the survivors themselves.

Language can place blame on victims and survivors.

Language influences perceptions of human trafficking and blame. The framing of narratives can inadvertently place blame on survivors; for instance, saying “he sold sex” versus “he was sold for sex” alters the interpretation of the situation.

Language can neglect to recognize the inherent strength of survivors.

Language evolves, and adapting can be challenging. It’s crucial to listen to and center survivors’ experiences to aid in their healing and to change the systems that allow human trafficking to occur.



**SCAN TO LEARN
MORE ABOUT THE
POLARIS PROJECT**

RECONNECTING WITH YOUR CHILD

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)

WHAT IS OKAY FOR ME TO SAY?

I'm glad you're here. I'm happy to see you. I'm ready to listen.

WHAT DOES MY CHILD NEED?

Ask your child how you can help them with their feelings related to trauma, which may manifest as confusion, anger, or worry. Be patient and supportive, and provide choices during conversations to encourage openness.

HOW DO I GET MY CHILD TO TALK ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED?

Avoid 'why' questions which may sound like blame. You want to know what happened and help your child now. Finding out 'why' can wait.

HOW DO I FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENED?

When talking to your child, avoid repeated questioning and allow them to have control. While it's natural to feel anger and difficulty hearing details, try to conceal those emotions. Remind your child that the situation is not their fault and provide protection and comfort whenever possible.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT FROM MY CHILD?

If your child seems different and you notice changes, they may be expressing trauma through behaviors instead of words. Children who have experienced sexual exploitation often show sudden emotions, confusion, or physical responses like a racing heart. Identifying triggers can help you understand what upsets them and predict future reactions. Look for changes and consult professionals for support in communication and focus.

WHAT DO I DO WHEN MY CHILD NEEDS SPECIALIZED HELP?

A child who has experienced exploitation may exhibit increased anger, frustration, depression, anxiety, or substance use. They might also express self-harm or aggression. It's crucial to monitor behavioral changes and seek professional help when needed. Find a provider you trust and inquire about their experience with sexually exploited children.

WHAT IF MY CHILD REFUSES TO OPEN UP OR ACCEPT THE HELP THAT'S BEING OFFERED?

With time and compassion, your child may change their mind. Be the person that never gives up on your child. NCMEC can help you make a plan for connection and communication with your child. Call 1-800-843-5678 to reach NCMEC's Family Advocacy Division.

NCMEC'S DOS & DON'TS

DO

- Adapt
- Ask 'what'
- Be patient
- Learn
- Listen
- Move Forward
- Reassure
- Rely on Others
- Think

DON'T

- Ask 'why'
- Assume
- Blame
- Get Stuck
- Interrogate
- Punish first
- Push for Answers
- Soldier on Alone
- Stay in the Past



**SCAN FOR MORE
NCMEC
RESOURCES**

REPORT A CONCERN

Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline
800-392-3738

Human Trafficking Hotline
888-373-7888



Missouri Department of
Social Services

dss.mo.gov