HOW TO TALK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING

A FEW BASIC TOOLS TO PROTECT YOUR CHILDREN:

1). Know where your kids are at all times.
2). Know what your kids are doing online and teach them about internet safety.
3). Talk to your kids about sexual exploitation.
4). Know the warning signs of sexual abuse in younger children and teens, and recognize the warning signs of sexual exploitation.
5). Stay informed and up to date on the latest information.

WHAT IS SEX TRAFFICKING?

The Federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) defines the crime of human trafficking as:

A. The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act where such an act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age, or

B. The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subject to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.

Often times, when people first learn about sex trafficking, the first thing that comes to mind is how to protect their own children or grandchildren from becoming a victim. The purpose of this article is to give parents and grandparents some insight and tools to talk to their own children of various age groups and maturity levels about commercial sexual exploitation.

Dr. James Levine, Mayo Clinic physician and author of the book “The Blue Notebook,” casually explained once that most people are emotionally impacted by the topic not because of their own children, but rather their “un-kids” – a simple word that describes the thousands of children in our own community who may not be connected to us by blood or relation, but rather who represent the collective hope of future generations.

This article represents the views and opinions formed after many hours of discussion with experts in the field, trafficking survivors, law enforcement and people who have dedicated their lives to rescue, protect and serve vulnerable children.
One thing is certain. Nearly all teens have a cell phone, and most teens cannot function without their cellphone on hand. According to a report released in March, 2013 by Harvard University entitled “Teens and Technology 2013” 78% of teens now have a cell phone, and almost half (47%) of those own smartphones.

Cell phone tracking can help you locate your child’s lost cell phone, and can keep you notified of your child’s whereabouts at all times; especially in the event of an emergency. Most cell phone carriers have programs to assist parents with this task.

Parents or guardians have a right to know where their minor children are at all times, despite what your teen may argue.

Major wireless service providers such as AT&T, Verizon, and Sprint offer “Family Locator” packages that allow you to locate and track all the cell phones on your plan. In addition, if your child’s phone has GPS capabilities (like an IPhone, Droid or Blackberry) you can download a tracking app directly from the phone.

Predators and traffickers prey upon children who have the freedom to move around freely without suspicion. Children who are most vulnerable are those who do not have a parent or guardian looking for them.

Research points to direct parallels between socio-economic factors and risk for trafficking. Children who are raised in poverty or come from the foster care system are far more likely to fall victim to predators.

Even as kids today are essentially “growing up on the internet” they should be taught that, although familiar, the internet can be a dangerous space.

Your child must be taught never to give any personal information, answer questions such as birthdate or social security number, or fill out forms online.

Today’s parents are navigating unchartered parenting territory. The good news is that most dangers can be avoided if children and their parents learn about smart internet use.

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ONLINE BEHAVIOR IN KIDS AND TEENS

The latest Harvard Research shows that nine in ten (93%) teens have a computer or have access to one at home. Although it may be hard to believe, tech savvy kids as young as five are now actively engaging in social media.

Kids online are exploring various websites, emailing friends, chatting with friends through instant messenger and in chat rooms, sending each other pictures and videos, playing games together online, creating websites and web blogs, and searching YouTube for popular “viral” videos.

Be sure to place any computer your younger child uses in a common area, so you can monitor what is happening. Pre-teens should never be allowed on chat sites without supervision. For older teens, parents should have the right to ask about browsing history and have access to all passwords.

When discussing social networking safety with your teen, encourage him or her to always use discretion when posting any type of photo, location, status, and message.

Teens tend to over-share information. They post questionable photos, give their locations and share personal information such as their cell phone number and home address. What seems like harmless chatter between friends can end up pinpointing your child’s location and a pattern of regular behavior to a predator.

Learning how to use Instagram, Snap chat, Facebook and the latest trends are becoming part of good parenting today. Everyone can learn how to use social media – just ask your child or grandchild to teach you!

KNOW WHAT YOUR KIDS ARE DOING ONLINE

Another way to keep tabs on your kids is to follow them on their social media sites.

You may learn a lot about your child from how he or she communicates with peers.

Teens should interact with only people they actually know. Allowing only people you know and trust as “friends” or “followers” is the best way to ensure safety when using social networking sites.

Unfortunately, some teens are motivated by sheer volume in the number of “followers” or “online friends,” and fail to think about the dangers associated with a stranger having access to personal information such as photos and location.
The internet can be the great equalizer in that it does not discriminate against race, gender, income, neighborhood or educational level. Yet at the same time all kids who are allowed the freedom to “play” on the internet are equally at risk online.

Younger children do not have the discretionary skills necessary to understand the difference between what is safe and what is dangerous online behavior without being taught by an adult.

 Teens love to post photos all the time. Posting questionable photos that may be deemed as fun or cute or sexy can end up in the wrong place quickly.

If you are following your child on social media, then you will see what pictures are being shared. Chances are, if your child knows you are watching, he or she will be less likely to post dangerous photos.

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TEACH CHILDREN TO TRUST THEIR INSTINCTS

With so much constant change in the internet space, the best way to equip children is to teach them to trust their own instincts. If something feels wrong, it probably is. If something seems too good to be true, it probably is.

Children learn right from wrong at a very young age, and the internet must be added to their toolbox of life choices.

TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN

Slavery is a common topic taught in school, and most kids believe that slavery ended with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, or three years later with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. Kids can relate to the concept of slaves having to work without pay and not having the freedom to escape the situation. This is a logical way to address the topic of commercial sexual exploitation. You can share the fact that there are more slaves today worldwide than at any other time in history.


“STRANGER DANGER”

Despite sensational media coverage, stranger abductions are extremely rare. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, only 115 children per year in this country are victims of “stereotypical” kidnappings, where a stranger takes a child to keep or harm him. Young children are less likely to be targeted by strangers than teenagers.

Nevertheless, it is important to talk to your children about strangers, and above all, teach them to once again trust their own instincts. Children should never be left alone with unknown adults, and kids should always travel in groups, where there is safety in numbers.

WHEN DO I START THE CONVERSATION?

Human sexuality is not openly discussed in many American households, yet the topic is glaringly present in all aspects of media seen by kids and teens on a daily basis. These are difficult waters for a child to navigate alone.

Most kids under the age of 10 are usually naïve about sexuality and have limited knowledge about sex, and even more limited understanding of rape or sexual exploitation.

Human growth and development at school likely occurs during the 5th grade, when students range from ages 9-11. In girls, puberty usually starts around 11 years of age and in boys, puberty begins around 12 years of age. The normal onset of puberty ranges in girls from 9-16, while in boys it is 12-15.

It is best to have these conversations with your children after puberty has begun.

Pre-pubescent children lack the physical and mental maturity to understand changes in the human body that prepare them for sexual reproduction.

It is important to understand that girls who mature early may begin sexual activity earlier than those who physically mature at a slower pace.

Where students may learn about reproductive health at school, it is up to the family to teach their kids to feel good about how their bodies look and feel. Parents can teach children at a very young age about physical touch and what is appropriate or inappropriate. Children should be taught what kind of touch is acceptable, what to do if someone tries to hurt them, and that it is okay to talk about anything that makes them “feel” uncomfortable.

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**WHAT IF....**

“What if?” questions are an opportunity to practice scenarios with your kids. Role playing is a powerful way to teach kids how to handle difficult situations.

Act out with your child various situations at different familiar locations—sports practice, walking to a friend’s house, outdoor festivals, Halloween, at the mall, movie theater, etc.

These “what would you do” conversations can take place at the dinner table or on the drive to school and may help ease apprehension about the topic.

You will probably hear, “Oh mom, seriously?” In the end, it is better to upset your teen so that he or she thinks twice when potentially faced with a difficult situation.

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**WHAT IF....**

“What would you do if a good looking older guy came up to you at the mall and said he thought you were pretty enough to be a model?”

“Would you give someone you just met your phone number?”

“Is it ok for a stranger to take pictures of you?”

“Have you ever known someone at school that had an older boyfriend?”

“Have any of your friends ever talked about getting paid to go on dates?”

“Do you know what sexting is?”

“Has anyone ever sent you a picture that made you feel uncomfortable?”

“What would you do if someone sent you an inappropriate picture or asked you for one?”

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Another way to begin conversation with your teen is to ask questions. When you ask questions, you show that you care about your kids’ health and safety.

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According to national statistics, most children who are trafficked have a history of sexual abuse from earlier in their childhood. According to researchers at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, nationally 95% of prostituted teens were victims of earlier childhood sexual abuse. Noticing the warning signs of abuse can help these children receive the services they need so they are not further victimized.

Homeless, runaway/throwaway and foster children are the most vulnerable population of kids at risk for sex trafficking. According to researchers at Arizona State University’s Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention and Research, vulnerable girls may be recruited “into the life” by friends or over the internet. Pimps often act as a boyfriend. They might befriend a victim or require one of their current victims to befriend a new girl.

### YOUNGER CHILDREN
- Gradual or sudden changes in behavior
- Cruelty to others
- Cruelty to pets
- Recurring nightmares
- Disturbed sleep patterns
- Fear of the dark
- Regression behavior like bed wetting
- Unusual interest in/knowledge of sex
- Expressing affection in ways that are inappropriate for a child of that age
- Sexual Acting Out / Inappropriate Sexual play (with self, other children)
- Fear of a certain person/intense dislike of being left somewhere
- Change in behavior around a specific person
- Afraid to be left alone
- Loss of or lack of interest in friends, school sports or other activities
- Fear of participating in physical activities at school

### TEENS
- Extreme and/or unexplained anger
- Running away
- Low self-worth
- Self-destructive behavior/self-harm
- Self-mutilation/cutting
- Seductive behavior
- Promiscuous behavior
- Low self esteem
- Eating disorders
- Anxiety
- Mood swings
- Suicidal thoughts
- Suicide attempts
- Happening to a “Friend”
- Difficulty forming relationships
- Poor peer relationships
- Signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Sexually Transmitted disease

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Identifying victims is often difficult. They frequently change addresses and locations. Victims don't trust most adults and are particularly fearful of law enforcement. Too often, they don't even think of themselves as victims. However, some warning signs include:

- Highly controlled or restricted schedule, money or communications
- Unidentifiable source of income
- Unexplained absences of days at a time
- Unexplained source of new clothing and personal items
- Bruises or other physical signs of abuse
- A tattoo that the young person is reluctant to explain (for instance, being “branded” with an exploiter’s name on the neck, chest or arms)
- Isolation from family, friends or other social networks
- Secrecy or vagueness about whereabouts
- Gaps in life story or defensiveness in response to questions or concerns
- Paranoia or lack of trust
- Self-blame or feelings of humiliation or shame
- Disassociation or lack of connection to the outside world
- Malnourishment
- Untreated health and dental problems

The modern day pimp/trafficker may appear like a relatively normal guy to a vulnerable girl. Traffickers are master manipulators and use tactics to create a trauma bond between the victim and trafficker. The Polaris Project reports that “trafficked persons are not always hidden in dark rooms, away from the public eye. They are often transported from one place to another. They use public transportation. Since they suffer injury and harm, they require medical care at hospitals and domestic violence shelters.”

Please share what you have learned with your neighbors, family, co-workers and friends.

To learn even more, or if you would like a training to take place for an interested group, please contact TRUST – www.trustaz.org.

Download this document so you can forward it to your contacts by visiting http://www.trustaz.org/downloads/aw-trust-how-to-talk-to-your-children.pdf

TRUST is a grant funded project whose mission is to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts in Arizona and increase public awareness about the crisis as it relates to Arizona’s children. Please visit the TRUST website for a list of resources to learn more about the issue. www.trustaz.org

Angelyn Bayless, the author of this article, is a former fellow for TRUST and mother of teenaged children.

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