

Trauma-informed language to use when working with sex trafficked and/or commercially sexually exploited children/youth

When working with vulnerable youth it is important to be empathic and use empowering, trauma-informed language. Use the information below to guide your conversation with potentially sex trafficked or commercially sexually exploited children/youth.

General Language		
Don't Say	Instead Say	Why?
Child / teen prostitute	Trafficking survivor	Child and teen prostitutes don't exist – what exist are victims and survivors of trafficking and sexual exploitation. Referring to survivors as young prostitutes implies that a delinquent youth chose a criminal lifestyle, as opposed to the reality which is that a minor is a victim of a sex crime.
Victim	Survivor	No one wants to be a victim. Referring to someone as a survivor empowers them by recognizing their resiliency to overcome extreme hardship and trauma.
We rescue victims	Survivors need supportive providers as they leave their situations on their own terms and in a way that is safe for them.	People cannot be rescued – they can be empowered. Much like survivors of domestic violence, survivors of human trafficking need to be informed of what services are available to support them, and what exactly each service provides. If we force a "rescue" the person will return to the trafficker as soon as they are able.
Survival Sex	Sex Trafficking	Under U.S. federal law, when a minor engages a sex act with an adult in exchange for basic needs, like food or housing, this is a trafficking situation.
Tips for working directly with potentially sex trafficked or or commercially sexually exploited children/youth		
Don't Say	Instead Say	Why?
That's so awful, I can't/don't believe it!	I believe you and it's not your fault.	Well-meaning people might say they can't believe something happened not because they are expressing disbelief but because they are surprised or horrified. This conveys to survivors that 1) they are not believed and 2) their experience is so shameful they can't talk about it or shouldn't seek help.

You/they don't have to do that anymore.	What happened to you wasn't your fault.	Stating that someone doesn't need to do something anymore implies that the survivor consented to be trafficked.
I feel sorry for you.	What you're feeling is okay, and you have the right to express your feelings any way you feel is right.	Stating that you feel sorry for someone puts focus on you instead of the survivor. The survivor may feel uncomfortable opening up because they don't want to make the professional feel sad or burdened. It's important to make sure that a survivor feels that his/her feelings are validated.
You poor thing. Are you okay?	You are not alone.	Although it may seem that one is showing concern, it may feel patronizing to show pity. Show support to a survivor through both words and actions.
But s/he/ you is/are so smart!	You had to do X - did you know that's a skill? You could do Y! <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Even though your trafficker should never have forced you to cook drugs you learned chemistry. Did you know you could be a chemist and work on [XYZ]? Here is a program where you can learn more about chemistry and how you can use it in school and at work." 	Saying that a survivor is smart (or has another positive attribute) might seem like a compliment. It can be very frustrating for a survivor to hear nice things about them without support to use that asset to better their life. Instead of saying a compliment explain how the asset can be used to help the survivor in actionable terms.
You are safe now.	We will do everything we can to keep you safe.	Your definition of safe may vary from his/hers. You cannot guarantee that he/she will be safe and a broken promise can negatively affect your relationship.
We can fix your problems.	We are here because we want to help you. We will do our best to meet your needs.	You may not be able to do meet the needs of the survivor, so don't make promises you can't keep. You may report the crime and nothing may come of it. You may not have the capacity to provide services for all of the needs he/she identifies. It is important to be transparent about your role, what you can do and what you can't do.*
You are a victim,	The people who hurt you	It is not helpful to label the individual.

not a criminal.	violated your rights; you did not deserve what happened to you.	He/she may not identify as a victim. He/she may have been treated as or labeled as a criminal in the past, so this can be confusing. It is important to explain what happened to him/her in a rights-based manner.*
You can trust me.	Trust my actions, not my words.	Victims of trafficking have been lied to many times. It might be hard for them to know who can be trusted. To demonstrate that you can be trusted, be consistent, keep their information confidential, and be clear and honest about expectations and your capacity.*
We want to make sure what happened to you does not happen to anyone else.	Is there anyone you know who might need help?	Rather than cause a victim to feel responsible for the potential victimization of others, ask him or her if he knows other youth who may need services. Survivors should not be manipulated to provide information when he or she is unwilling to do so.*

*Adapted from the Cook County Task Force Train-the-Trainer manual.

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