

Engaging Potential Survivors of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) or Minor Sex Trafficking

Establishing physical, emotional, and psychological safety is critical in building a successful relationship with trafficked and exploited youth. If you suspect a youth has been trafficked or exploited, these tips can help build rapport with youth and to start a conversation:¹

Before you start the conversation

- Make sure the youth's basic needs are met (food, clothing, medical care, allowing the person to sleep, etc.);
- Keep in mind the role trauma can play in a survivor's life. Always use a trauma-informed approach when working with potential survivors of trafficking.
- When possible, allow the survivor to choose which staff person they speak with;
- Explain who you are and what your role is in order to clear up possible misconceptions.²

Providing a safe and comfortable atmosphere

- Ask the youth for permission to talk to them, for permission to speak alone, for permission to sit down next to them, etc. If permission is not granted, do not continue with that step;
- When given permission, try to speak with youth alone, in a private space, where you will not be overheard or interrupted. Be sure the space is non-threatening and comfortable for the youth;
- Make available tissues, regular breaks, and a place where the youth can regain his or her composure if the conversation causes distress (if a youth is distressed stop the conversation immediately and help the youth to de-escalate);
- Never discuss sensitive subjects with the potential survivor within sight of a potential trafficker. If the survivor arrives with a person (including a friend, family member, or interpreter) who exhibits controlling behavior, this person may be a trafficker;
- Be relaxed, use empathic listening, maintain good eye contact, add physical distance, and use an approachable tone, demeanor and body language;

Language

- If there is any doubt whether the youth understands you, secure the services of an interpreter. Do not use family members or friends of the client as an interpreter;
- Do not immediately identify the client as a "victim". Survivors often do not recognize that they are victims of a crime;
- Use simple, non-technical language;
- Use terms and language that the survivor uses, unless they may be considered offensive.

Listening - Use Active Listening Skills

- Receiving: Listen to the message communicated to you
- Decoding: Decipher what has been communicated
- Recording: Think about and process the message
- Responding: Provide feedback to the youth using language that reflect what the youth uses

¹ Macy, Rebecca and Laurie Graham (2012). Identifying Domestic and International Sex-Trafficking Victims During Human Service Provision. *Trauma Violence Abuse*, 13-59.

² Polaris Project (2011). Comprehensive Human Trafficking Assessment. *National Human Trafficking Resource Center and Polaris Project*.



international organization for adolescents



Gathering Information

- Ask yourself: why am I about to ask this? Is this information relevant in doing my job? Is the information I am about to say relevant to the survivors needs to feel heard and supported? Am I asking questions because of my own curiosity (thinking of my own needs)?
- Inform the youth that you are asking questions to offer help so the purpose of the conversation is clear;
- Be reassuring that the youth is in control of the conversation. Don't press for details if they are not offered. The conversation should not be an interrogation;
- Ask open-ended questions;
- Reassure client that there are no right or wrong answers, and that the conversation can be paused and resumed at his or her discretion;
- Don't challenge a youth's responses. Instead, convey that you believe what you are being told;
- Don't ask repetitive questions;

Fear of Disclosing

- Understand that the youth may not be ready to tell you everything at one time. The youth may disclose a small amount of information at a time;
- Being 'outed' to family/friends/other employers if violence is reported
- Victim blaming
- People trying to convince them to leave/stop working
- Fear of people's reactions
- Lack of resources available at point of disclosure
- Understand that the youth may disclose information that is graphic, violent, and/or sexual in nature. If you are unable to hear this information without projecting shock or disgust do not start the conversation. Instead, find another staff who is better able to speak to the youth;

Ending the Conversation

- Close the conversation in a way that assures the client that he or she has done well and that they can continue to discuss the subject with you in the future, if desired. It may be very difficult in the initial conversation to obtain enough information to determine conclusively if the person is in fact a survivor of trafficking. Additional engagement may be necessary.

NOTE: Do not ask potential survivors about their experience(s) unless the questions relate directly to your service provision or providing a referral. Allow professionals trained in forensic interviewing, such as those at your local Child Advocacy Center, to interview children for the details of their experience.

| <u>Do</u> | <u>Do Not</u> |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Start by believing the youth● Normalize their feelings● Be very aware of your non-verbals/body language● Acknowledge that sometimes the options available seem bad● Offer access to law enforcement● Support their decisions● Acknowledge that they have the right to make their own decisions and life choices● Offer services that are available and accessible● Validate, validate, validate! | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Show shock, disgust, pity● Blame the youth● Give advice● Try to rescue the youth● Feel sorry for the youth● Lecture or try to take control● Make them feel responsible for other people's safety● Make promises you cannot keep● Use guilt to make them into making a decision that you think is right. |