

ENGAGING YOUTH SURVIVORS OF SEX TRAFFICKING ¹



IOFA and Courtney's House | Fact Sheet 2018

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Establishing physical, emotional, and psychological safety is critical in building a successful relationship with trafficked and exploited children and youth. If you suspect a child or youth has been trafficked or exploited, these tips can help build rapport and provide a safe, comfortable environment for youth while gathering necessary information.

NOTE: Carefully examine your motives in gathering information about a sex trafficking situation before engaging in the conversation. 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 to interview children and youth for the details of their experience.

Before Starting the Conversation

- Make sure the youth's basic needs are met (food, safety, clothing, medical care, providing time to sleep, etc.);
- Homelessness (one report found that 40% of homeless 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;
- Clearly identify yourself and your role; and
- Explain the limits of confidentiality and mandatory reporting.

Providing a Safe and Comfortable Environment

- 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 individual;
- Make available tissues, regular breaks, and a place where the youth can regain their composure if the conversation causes distress. If a youth is distressed stop the conversation immediately and help the youth to de-escalate; Clearly identify yourself and your role;
- Never discuss sensitive subjects with a 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; and
- Be relaxed, use empathic listening, maintain normal, comfortable eye contact, add physical distance, and use an approachable tone, demeanor, and body language.

DO:

- Start by believing the youth
- Normalize their feelings
- Be very aware of your body language and facial expressions
- 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!

¹ Sex trafficking is the "recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act" for remuneration in the form of money, food, shelter, or another valued entity. Evidence of force, fraud, or coercion is not a necessary for youth under the age of 18. Youth under the age of 18 who trade a sex act for something of value is automatically considered a victim of a crime under the U.S. Federal Trafficking of Victims Protection Act of 2000.

Using Appropriate 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 youth as an interpreter;
- Do not immediately identify the client as a “victim” or a “survivor”. Youth sex trafficking survivors often do not recognize that they are victims of a crime;
- Use simple, non-technical language; and
- Use terms and language that the survivor uses, unless they may be considered offensive.

Using Active Listening Skills

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

Gathering Information about Trafficking Experiences

- Scrutinize your own motives in gathering such information;
- Clarify the purpose of the conversation;
- Understand that the youth may disclose information that is graphic, violent, and/or sexual in nature. Ensure that you can hear this information without projecting shock or disgust. If not, find another staff who is better able to speak to the youth.
- Ask open-ended questions;
- Reassure the youth that there are no right or wrong answers;
- Validate the youth’s responses;
- Don’t ask repetitive questions; and
- Understand that the youth may not be ready to tell you everything at one time.

Why Youth May Not Disclose

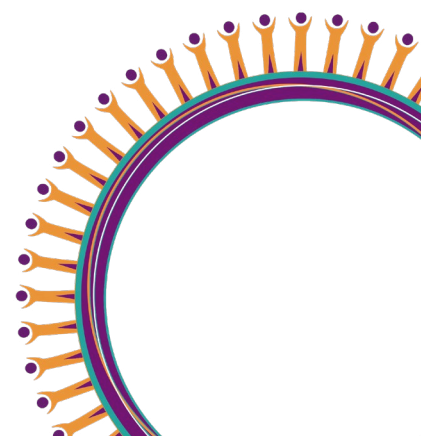
- Some youth may be concerned about being ‘outed’ to family/friends/employers;
- Youth may blame themselves or fear others blaming them.
- Fear of being forced to stop working;
- Fear of people’s reactions and judgments; and
- Lack of resources available at point of disclosure.

Concluding the Conversation

Close the conversation in a way that assures the youth that they have done well and can continue to discuss the subject with you in the future, if desired. It may be difficult in the initial conversation to obtain enough information to determine conclusively if the person is in fact a survivor of trafficking. Ongoing engagement and rapport-building is important in case management with youth survivors.

DON'T:

- 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 promised you cannot keep
- Use guilt to manipulate them into making a decision that you think is right.



Adapted from the IOFA/New York State OCFS Handbook “Responding to Commercially Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Youth”

This project was supported by Grant No. 2016-TA-AX-K045, awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.