



RED FLAGS OF YOUTH SEX TRAFFICKING



Understanding the indicators or “red flags” of youth sex trafficking is essential in identifying victims so that they may receive the services that they need and deserve. This is especially vital for professionals working with youth as they may unknowingly be working with victims and survivors in need of comprehensive and trauma-informed services.

It is important to note that the presence of one or more red flags does not necessarily indicate youth sex trafficking on its own, but may be indicative of other issues, such as sexual assault or abuse. Often, youth do not see themselves as victims, or may blame themselves for being in a sex trafficking situation. Using a trauma-informed approach can help develop rapport with youth to determine the reality of their experiences. Please note that there are various types of control in youth sex trafficking and each incident of youth sex trafficking is unique, as is the youth himself/herself. The indicators included here are common, but not comprehensive. All, many, or none of the following indicators may be exhibited by a youth who is a victim of youth sex trafficking.

1 BEHAVIORAL RED FLAGS

- Leaves home frequently and/or for significant periods of time or has a history of running away from child welfare placements
- Uses slang trafficking terms such as “The Life” or “The Game”
- Has contact with strangers on the internet or sexual risk taking on social media or websites
- Has a significantly older romantic and/or sexual partner and may refer to this person as “Daddy”
- Spends a lot of time with a person or older adult who controls the youth’s capacity to speak freely, schedule, communications with friends and family, and/or money
- Displays a pattern of staying in the homes of friends or lives in housing provided by an older person
- Youth outfits may be more revealing, or a change in clothes to exhibit certain colors may exhibit gang involvement
- Displays large amounts of money, a cell phone, hotel keys or others items the youth normally does not have resources to afford and cannot account for
- Has suspicious tattoos or burn marks (branding)
- If foreign born, is vague or unwilling to disclose information about how or why they immigrated to the US
- Lies about age, carries a fake form of identification, or does not have access to their identification or passport
- Retells the same story in the same way many times or retells the same story as other youth
- Is frequently absent from school
- Gets into cars with unknown adults
- When asked about whereabouts, s/he is secretive, vague, or becomes defensive
- Exhibits overt sexualized behavior
- Significantly reduces contact with family, friends, or other support networks
- Parent(s) exhibit overt control over older youth’s behaviors by speaking for youth, controlling all communication with youth and blaming the youth, not allowing to have friends

2 PSYCHOLOGICAL AND HEALTH RELATED RED FLAGS

- Chronic use of alcohol and/or drugs or other extreme forms of self-medicating
- Exhibits evidence of sexual abuse and/or engages in sexual activity before the age of 13
- Has heightened sense of fear or distrust of authority
- Has extreme anxiety surrounding consequences for seemingly minor infractions (for example, being late or not answering a phone call)
- Has had multiple sexually transmitted infections and/or urinary tract infections, or has other untreated injuries and/or illnesses
- Explanations for injuries are inconsistent with their severity
- Has a heightened sense of fear and displays an anxious, fearful, depressed, submissive, hyper vigilant, paranoid, and nervous behavior

Identifying “red flags” is the first step in determining if a youth may be a victim or survivor of sex trafficking. Based on these observations, professionals can determine if the youth should be assessed for sex trafficking by an agency that specializes in forensic interviewing, such as a local Child Advocacy Center. Youth should be provided with immediate needs, such as shelter, food, and safety. For referral services in your area, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888. If a youth is in immediate danger, please call 9-1-1.

To learn about red flags associated with specific forms of control of youth sex trafficking, such as “Pimp Control,” “Gang Control,” and “Familial Control,” please visit the International Organization for Adolescents (IOFA) webpage for more information: www.iofa.org.

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