



TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE TO USE WHEN WORKING WITH SURVIVORS OF YOUTH SEX TRAFFICKING



When working with vulnerable youth it is important to be empathic and use empowering trauma-informed language. Language and terms should mirror the youth's language. The information below can be used as a guide for conversations within your agency while working with youth potentially trafficked for sex.

AGENCY GENERAL LANGUAGE – When working with other professionals within your organization, it's important to model language that empowers the youth receiving services.

DON'T SAY	INSTEAD SAY	WHY?
Child/Teen Prostitute	Survivor of Trafficking	Child and teen prostitutes don't exist - what exists are survivors of trafficking and sexual exploitation. Referring to survivors as prostitutes implies that a youth chooses a criminal lifestyle, as opposed to the reality 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.

LANGUAGE TIPS FOR WORKING DIRECTLY WITH POTENTIALLY SEX TRAFFICKED OR COMMERCIALY SEXUALLY EXPLOITED CHILDREN/YOUTH – When working directly with youth, it's important to use trauma-informed language. Focus on safety, transparency, support, collaboration, respect, and empowerment in the words you use. Use gender neutral pronouns unless the youth has told you the pronouns they use.

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 a 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 their 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 you are so smart!	You had to do X - did you know that's a skill? You could do Y!	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 safety may vary from theirs. You cannot guarantee that they 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 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 the need they identify. It is important to be transparent about your role, what you can do and what you can't do.*
You are a victim, not a criminal.	The people who hurt you violated your rights; you did not deserve what happened to you.	It is not helpful to label the individual. They may not identify as a victim. They may have been treated or labeled as a criminal in the past, so this can be confusing. It is important to explain what happened to them in a rights-based manner.*
You can trust me.	Trust my actions, not my words.	Survivors 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 survivor to feel responsible for the potential victimization of others, ask them if they know other youth who may need services. Survivors should not be manipulated to provide information when they are unwilling to do so.*

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

FRAMEWORKS TO HOLD WHILE WORKING WITH SURVIVORS

Anti-Oppressive

- Consideration of how people's identities, experiences, and the way they move through the world are impacted by systems of oppression
- Acknowledgment of how our own privilege and power might impact the survivor relationship

Harm-Reduction

- Respecting survivor choices; meeting patients where they are
- Supporting survivors' agency in decision making while exploring consequences of behavior and offering strategies to increase safety

Informed Consent

- Communication of the potential risks and benefits of an appointment, procedure, etc.
- Consent is requested in every component of treatment - ongoing, fluid
- Uplift the power of no

Trauma-Informed

- Understanding widespread impact of trauma (individual, community, and system level)
- No "right way" to experience trauma
- Focus on safety, transparency, support, collaboration, and empowerment

Survivor-Centered

- Survivor's wishes, needs, safety, and well-being take priority in all matters and procedures
- Survivors are the experts; focus on empowerment
- Survivors determine what healing looks like



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