



TIPSHEET

How to Talk with Youth About Human Trafficking and Exploitation

Today's educators are in a unique position to talk with youth who may be vulnerable to human trafficking and exploitation. They see young people every day in their schools, learn about their lives, and can provide safe spaces for students who need help. Youth survivors of trafficking and exploitation have specialized needs and experiences, and the adults who work with them need to be trauma-informed and tuned in to recognize when something is wrong in students' lives and know how to talk with them.

This tipsheet complement's the [How to Talk to Youth about Human Trafficking and Exploitation](#) webinar, part of the [Human Trafficking and Child Exploitation Webinar Series](#) by the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. This resource offers strategies K-12 educators can use to talk with youth about human trafficking and exploitation.

Tips for Talking with Youth

- **Be clear.** Understand the information you want to share with students before engaging in conversations about trafficking and exploitation.
- **Involve students.** Peer-to-peer education can be highly effective when talking with youth about human trafficking and exploitation. Students can be involved in a variety of ways, including teaching peers about human trafficking and exploitation and ways to keep themselves safer. Some students create art projects or use performing arts (theater, dance, music, and spoken word) to

What Is Human Trafficking?

Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act; the crime hinges on the exploitation of another person. Causing someone under the age of 18 to engage in a commercial sex act, regardless of using force, fraud, or coercion is human trafficking under U.S. law. Human trafficking victims can be any age, race, gender identity, sex, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, and socioeconomic class.

What Is Exploitation?

Exploitation is treating a person unfairly to benefit from their work. It can involve the use of threats, manipulation, or force to get someone to do something they don't want to do for the benefit of another person.

educate others. Students can also engage in advocacy work to raise awareness and seek change in their communities and schools.

Practice Example: When considering how to involve youth, take a look at [#MyFreedomDay](#). It is a CNN-sponsored daylong event that is student driven and focused on raising awareness of modern slavery. Students around the world come together to bring attention to forms of modern slavery. In 2024, they focused on child labor trafficking. Students used interpretative dance, created skits, and told stories to help others learn about human trafficking.

- **Empower.** Use messages that empower students. Use language that focuses on highlighting their strengths and emphasizes they are in control of their own decisions, especially when presented with opportunities that may seem too good to be true.
- **Be trauma-informed.** Ensure messages and conversations are [trauma-informed](#); for example, avoid using terms like *victim* because the person may not think of themselves that way. It is best to avoid labeling language and to describe the behavior of the person instead (e.g., a person who is experiencing exploitation). Trauma-informed conversations are non-judgmental.
- **Talk about exploitation.** Discuss what it means to be taken advantage of—what that may look like and feel like. Provide examples of [exploitation](#), such as job offers that seem too good to be true or online romantic relationships that move too fast.
- **Emphasize [protective factors](#),** the strengths you see the students demonstrate (such as coming forward to talk with you) and the supports and resources you see them use. Encourage youth to recognize what they are good at, their strengths, future goals, and the value they bring to their friends and family.
- **Meet youth where they're at.** You are likely familiar with the types of language young people use in their everyday conversations. Use casual language that you're comfortable with and that youth will connect with to keep them engaged. "Textbook" language that youth do not relate to may make it harder for your message to catch their attention.
- **Listen.** If a young person tells you about an exploitative situation they may be experiencing, listen to them and let them know you care about what they are going through. Then connect them to an expert who can help. Let professionals who are trained in trauma response ask specific questions about their situation. Asking too many questions initially may inadvertently place some blame on the youth and make them less receptive to help.
- **Align words and body language.** Send verbal and nonverbal messages that tell the student you care about them and their safety and you are there to help. Hold an open, relaxed, and respectful posture; ensure the student has adequate

physical space; ensure your facial expressions are welcoming; and tell the student you care about them.

Practice Example: Have a conversation about what healthy relationships look like and be clear about the following points:

- **Open communication**—Feeling scared to talk with your partner about something is not okay.
- **Respect for privacy**—It is okay to not be with your partner all the time, and they do not need access to your personal belongings like your phone or money.
- **Violence is never okay**—Feeling unsafe around your partner is a warning sign.
- **Consent**—Engaging in any type of sexual behavior when both of you have agreed, are comfortable, and have the desire to do so is consensual. Changing your mind about wanting to be physical is perfectly fine, and a safe partner respects that.

Strategies for Social Media Safety

People who engage in human trafficking and exploitation target children and youth online by stalking social media sites and gaming platforms. Young people are not always aware of how [dangerous online environments](#) can be or how to keep themselves safe. Discuss these [safety tips](#) with the students you work with to help them protect themselves while they are online and using social media:

- **Maintain privacy.** Keep your personal information private (including where you live, work, go to school, or details about your personal life). Set your social media profiles to private so that only your friends in real life can get access, and don't accept friend requests from people you do not know in real life.
- **Ask for help.** If you share a personal photo or video and someone uses it to threaten or blackmail you, there are options. Talk to a trusted adult about how to protect yourself and get help.
- **Have a safety plan.** If you decide to meet someone in person who you met online, meet in a public setting, like a restaurant or coffee shop, and let a trusted friend know who, where, and when you are meeting.
- **Do your research.** If a job offer seems too good to be true, do your research by reading reviews about the company or reaching out to current and/or past employees to confirm information about the job.
- **Say something.** If someone is not who they seem to be, or you think you are being tricked into an exploitative situation, tell a trusted adult. Reporting the person could help stop them from potentially exploiting others.
- **Trust yourself.** If something feels wrong about a conversation you are having with someone online, stop the conversation and block the person.

Practice Example: Watch and discuss the Blue Campaign’s animated video series: [Carter’s Story](#). It follows a young boy as he makes a new friend on an online gaming platform. The story shows what grooming can look like and how it can lead to online exploitation and human trafficking. In the story, Carter’s parents become aware of the situation and take the appropriate steps to report it to authorities.

Talking about Labor Trafficking and Exploitation

Child [labor trafficking and exploitation](#) are increasing across the United States. Educators and school staff can provide important information to students about their [workplace rights](#) and can be the first adults to be concerned about a youth being exploited in a work situation. Youth should be wary of offers for jobs in fields that are typically hard to break into, such as modeling and acting, or offers in remote locations, faraway states, or foreign cities. Traffickers may try to lure victims into isolation away from their friends and family. Talk with youth about red flags of false job promises, including the following:

- **Inconsistencies.** The payment and the job description do not match.
- **No requirements.** The employer does not request any information about your previous work experience.
- **Privacy issues.** An employer asks for a photo of you as part of the application process.
- **Too personal.** An employer asks a lot of personal questions about you that are not relevant to the potential job.
- **Payment.** The employer requests a substantial fee to cover the costs of uniforms or other expenses.
- **Secrecy.** An employer tells you not to tell anyone about the job or asks you to lie about your age.
- **Remember:** If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Practice Example: Read and discuss [Sergio’s Story](#), a graphic novel from the [Office for Victims of Crime](#); which features a 16-year-old male young person who is a foreign national and experiences familial labor trafficking.

Additional Resources

General Resources

- If you suspect labor or sex trafficking or child exploitation, report it. Follow your internal school process if there is one. Call the National Human Trafficking Hotline for guidance by dialing 1-888-373-7888. The [Hotline website](#) also has information about safety planning, general information about trafficking, statistics, human trafficking support service directors, and more. In many states, human trafficking and child exploitation require a report to Child Protective

Services. The U.S. Department of Labor should be contacted if you suspect a student might be a victim of labor trafficking or unfair labor practices.

- [U.S. Department of Education Human Trafficking](#) offers a dedicated webpage with helpful federal resources for administrators, teachers, specialized instructional support personnel, parents, caregivers, and students to combat trafficking.

Resources that Can Support Talking with Youth about Trafficking

- Blue Campaign’s [How to Talk to Youth About Human Trafficking](#) is a guide for youth caretakers and people working with youth.
- This Office for Victims of Crime website, [Child Victims and Witnesses Support Materials: Human Trafficking](#), offers graphic novels for child and youth victims of trafficking between the ages of 12 and 18 on how the justice system works, what their rights are, the roles of the different practitioners, and how they can cope with the difficult feelings they might have.
- [Tricked: Inside the World of Teen Sex Trafficking](#) offers comprehensive information about teen sex trafficking for K–12 educators and students in Grades 6–12. Short videos with a companion podcast and webcast were designed to help students spot the signs of sex trafficking and avoid dangerous situations. The website also includes an overview video for parents that provides “look-fors” to help keep their children out of trouble. The videos are not recommended for children under age 12 without prior screening and approval by an adult.

Resources for Educators

- [Sex Trafficking of Minors: What Schools Need to Know to Recognize and Respond to the Trafficking of Students](#) provides educators with an overview of minor sex trafficking and suggests steps that schools can take to respond, including training staff to recognize signs, developing protocols for responding to suspected or disclosed trafficking, and providing prevention curricula for students.
- [Educators and Human Trafficking: In-Depth Review](#) helps educators understand the various forms that sex and labor trafficking of young people can take, individual and social risk factors and school-specific indicators of trafficking. This document also includes a series of “safety check” questions to use when talking with students who may have been trafficked.
- The [Project STARFISH School Prevention Project](#) helps teachers and school administrators integrate awareness about sex trafficking into school activities and classrooms. Downloadable materials include lesson plans, classroom activities, case studies, brochures for parents, a peer leadership program starter kit, and materials for students in special education and English language learners.

Resources about Serving Youth Who Are Vulnerable

- [Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Strategies for Vulnerable Students Tip Sheet](#) provides strategies for building protective factors for students who are vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.
- [Staying Safe: Tips for LGBTQ for How to Protect Yourself and Your Community from Human Trafficking](#) helps LGBTQ youth understand if they or their friends are being trafficked, what puts youth at risk, how to protect themselves from exploitation, and where to find help.
- [Responding to Youth Homelessness: A Key Strategy for Preventing Human Trafficking](#) explores why youth who are runaway or homeless are particularly vulnerable to being trafficked and how providing low-barrier access to food and housing assistance reduces their risk. This resource provides information about common pathways into trafficking, along with recommendations for how schools, social service providers, the child welfare system, and law enforcement can work together to protect and intervene in trafficking situations.