

Weekly Hot Topic

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Calling All Heroes

In this article, you'll learn how traffickers use psychological manipulation to lure minors into prostitution, factors that increase susceptibility to trafficking, and how to help victims become survivors.

Spotlight: Withelma "T" Ortiz Walker Pettigrew—"T" for tenacious—is a survivor of commercial childhood sexual exploitation (CSEC) and advocate who testified before congress and was profiled in Glamour and Time magazine.

T was 10 years old when she met her trafficker, and was vulnerable to his romantic overtures, as she had already been shuffled in and out of 14 different foster homes. "After being repeatedly beaten, tortured, and manipulated, I became more afraid of him than any other person on the planet. So anytime I came in contact with law enforcement, I knew I had to protect him to protect myself."

In the previous article, you learned how important it is that members of the school community get involved to stop the commercial sexual exploitation of children. In this article, you'll learn how traffickers use psychological manipulation to lure minors into prostitution, factors that increase susceptibility to trafficking, and how to help victims become survivors.

Psychological Manipulation

Traffickers use a devious form of psychological manipulation to lure their victims called grooming. When grooming, a trafficker strategically intersperses episodes of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse and degradation with vows of love, affection, compliments, and material gifts. This mix of warmth and abuse skews the child's sense of the world. They're purposefully made to question reality, and are subtly isolated from any source of support, assistance, or escape. Once the trafficker is making money, they use surveillance, stalking, intimidation and threats, and pervasive psychological abuse to retain absolute control over the victim, often preventing them from reporting the abuse.

Risk Factors

Children from all ethnicities, income levels, neighborhoods, and schools are victimized by CSEC, but some children, through no fault of their own, are more susceptible to the grooming process. For example, girls are targeted more frequently than boys, in part because they're vulnerable to the most widely used grooming tactic—the Fraudulent Romantic Relationship. If a girl has a romantic personality and doesn't get much attention at home or school, they're lured with proclamations of love and devotion. If the girl is the victim of bullying or harassment at school, an extension of friendship and protection is welcomed whole-heartedly. The list below shows some risk factors that, in



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combination with the behavioral indicator tool provided in the previous article, may give you an objective way of identifying potential victims in your student body.

· Foster Care	· Undocumented
· LGBTIQ	· Risk-taking personality
· Disabled	· Abuse at home

Identifying Victims

Let's review the behavioral indicator tool from the last article. Do you have a student who:

Is frequently absent on Mondays and Fridays?

Can you identify a pattern, particularly when conventions or big sporting events are in town? Events that draw a lot of people, like the Super Bowl, Comic-Con, and the Sundance Film Festival, are big business for traffickers.

Does not go on field trips, either because they fail to bring in required documents or they tend to be absent?

Every student does this sometimes. Look for students who do not go most, or all, of the time. Traffickers restrict freedom of movement through surveillance. Field trips put the student outside of their control.

Has multiple cell phones?

Ring tones, cases, colors, and styles may help distinguish between phones. Mobile phones are used to connect victims with Johns, and are also used as a surveillance tool.

Responds vaguely when asked about weekend plans, hobbies, or extracurricular activities?

Ask indirectly, "Let's all take a minute to say one thing we're excited about doing this weekend." Direct questions like, "What are you doing this weekend, Sally," tend to elicit vague responses in most children.

You can also check for a lack of eye contact and signs of fear when giving untruthful responses.

Has a boyfriend or girlfriend who's much older than them and is always by their side?

Look for someone who consistently accompanies a student to and from school (drops off and picks up), or accompanies a student to recreational activities and is inappropriately older than the student. For example: an 11th grader that takes an 8th grader to parties, or a man in his late 20s who picks his "girlfriend" up from school.

Helping survivors

It's important to remember that every child is a victim when sold for sex. Minors are legally incapable of consent, and are manipulated carefully—traffickers invest time, effort, and money to trick their victims. Child victims are scared, confused, and have been repeatedly traumatized. They should be approached gently and thoughtfully. Lead the effort at your school to create policies and processes that dictate a regular analysis of risk in your student body, and train staff frequently so responses become automatic. Be sure to coordinate with your city or county's task force and get involved. For example, how do you report human trafficking? If a student needs a safe place to stay, are shelters available? Can schools offer a resource that meets an unmet need? Give the educational community a voice at the table when determining how to support survivors by asking your PTA to sit on a board or committee. I promise, it's fun—you get to sit next to real American heroes, just like yourself!

Information provided by The Team Platform