

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

SEX TRAFFICKING AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION
A TRAINING TOOL FOR SPECIAL EDUCATORS, ADMINISTRATORS AND SUPPORT STAFF

ASU Office of Sex Trafficking
Intervention Research
Arizona State University

ASU School of
Social Work
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Sex trafficking is a growing global problem that receives more attention every year. Researchers continue to build new knowledge about sex trafficking to equip community members with warning signs and tools to support victims. In Polaris's 2019 Data Report, 14,597 sex trafficking cases were reported to the National Tip Line in the United States with "at least 5,359 [individuals] under age 18" (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, n.d.). The average age of first sex trafficking victimization ranges from approximately 13 to 15.7 years old (Roe-Sepowitz & Bracy, 2020; Roe-Sepowitz, Gallagher, Steving & Lucchesi, 2020). Sex trafficking does not discriminate towards rural or urban communities, race, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status.

School personnel, such as teachers, bus drivers, nurses, counselors, principals, social workers, and psychologists are in positions to identify warning signs, like changes in behavior and clothing, to raise attention to potential underlying problems in students' care. Most adolescents spend more time at school than anywhere else. Millions of American teens spend 6-8 hours a day at school and in school related activities. Therefore, schools are an ideal place for school personnel to influence the health and safety of their students (NASW, 2013). Barriers that may prevent awareness to sex trafficking can be attributed to common assumptions such as: "sex trafficking does not happen in my neighborhood or my community," as well as discomfort in discussing this topic, confusing sex trafficking and teen dating violence, and difficulty in detecting warning signs.

One out of five sex trafficked individuals identified as being in a special education classroom at some point (STIR, 2022) due to various challenges, like a cognitive or physical disability, foreign national status, and/or moving schools multiple times. This indicates that youth receiving special education services are at incredible risk for being targeted by sex traffickers. This training tool is designed to provide introductory knowledge on the issue of sex trafficking, on special education students as a vulnerable population, and how to identify and respond to suspected and confirmed victims of sex trafficking on school campuses.



If you suspect Human Trafficking, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-3737-888

For more information about sex trafficking awareness for special education visit www.sextraffickingandspecialeducation.com



For students in special education specifically, barriers to identification of sex trafficking victimization can be attributed to common assumptions that these students have less social awareness, are not sexually active, and are not credible or accurate reporters of personal events.

Sex trafficking may be hard to detect because individuals are not always forthcoming about their victimization. Cases have been reported in multiple states about traffickers recruiting from schools as well as students recruiting other students for their trafficker. School personnel are mandated reporters. Treating sex trafficking as an issue of abuse or violence towards a student rather than a type of delinquent or attention-seeking behavior will help school personnel be more accepting in discussing sex trafficking with their students, parents, and colleagues. Like other forms of abuse, sex trafficking has long term and severe effects on individuals', families', and communities' health and well-being (National Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation, 2012).

School preparedness in responding to sex trafficking cases that are suspected or confirmed gives everyone confidence to do their part in protecting students. School preparedness can include (1) establishing a standardized response protocol and (2) strengthening school-based programs that create a safe environment for sex trafficking awareness and prevention to be discussed. Topics around school preparedness to prevent or identify sex trafficking should include healthy vs. unhealthy relationships, interpersonal violence, and how to establish personal boundaries in-person and online. For students receiving special education services, these topics need to be explicitly taught, practiced, and retaught until mastery with the content is shown.

WHAT IS SEX TRAFFICKING?

Sex Trafficking is defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 as a situation “in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age.”

FORCE	FRAUD	COERCION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kidnapping • Physical Violence • Sexual Assault • Drugging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tricking the victim into believing the trafficker loves her/him • Telling the victim she/he is going to be a model • Offering to provide basic needs without explaining the true intention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threats made against the victim or the victims family • Debt bondage • Blackmailing

Polaris (2019) reported the five most reported forms of force, fraud, and coercion by sex traffickers to be:

1. Inducing or exploiting a substance abuse issue
2. Physical abuse
3. Sexual abuse
4. Intimidation through displays and threats of using a weapon
5. Emotional abuse

Students receiving special education services are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking because they are innocent to the implications of others' false actions towards them. As their emotional and social skills are developing, they are navigating social roles to fit in with their peers. Students are continually engaged in seeking the approval of their peers, particularly through social media, which too often impacts their decisions and actions. Sex traffickers work to identify something of value to the victim or find something that child needs. Something of value could be a romantic relationship, food, a place to stay, clothes, drugs, a ride, or anything of importance to the victim.

If sex is exchanged for anything of value with a minor, it is always sex trafficking.

Who Is At Risk Of Victimization?

Polaris (2019) found that the most common vulnerabilities individuals had when falling victim to a sex trafficker were substance use, running away/being homeless, relocating or migrating somewhere new, unstable housing, and mental health concerns. Individuals with cognitive delays are vulnerable to sex trafficking victimization because they may lack a clear understanding of boundaries with friendships and romantic relationships as well as the proper language to explain thoughts or feelings.

Vulnerabilities For Sex Trafficking

Any person experiencing one or more of these vulnerabilities is at a higher risk of sex trafficking victimization:

- History of receiving special education services
- Poverty
- Family instability
- Gang involvement
- History of abuse
- Substance use
- Trauma
- Child welfare involvement
- History of running away
- Sexual orientation
- Language barrier
- Lack understanding of healthy relationships

What Makes Students In Special Education More Vulnerable?

Students with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to victimization. A systemic stereotype exists that students in special education are often regarded as having less social awareness and viewed as not being sexually active. Sadly, many adults, caregivers, law enforcement, and society in general have the same perspective. These students are also regarded as not being credible or accurate reporters of personal events. Traffickers are more likely to exploit students with disabilities due to these systemic stereotypes and fulfill the students' needs for acceptance, inclusion, and romantic love. While students with cognitive impairments are at more risk, students with language impairments, emotional disabilities, mood disorders, and learning disabilities are also vulnerable. The following points identify factors that make students with disabilities increasingly vulnerable.

- Limited understanding of healthy romantic relationships/ healthy friendships
- Lack of personal safety skills
- Assumed not to be sexually active
- Lack of sufficient sexual education
- Desire romantic relationship and/or own family
- Difficulty with communication/speech
- Limited decision-making skills
- Lack of awareness of dangerous situations
- Lack of understanding the intentions of others
- Social isolation
- Limited circle of friends
- Easier to manipulate
- Trained to comply with adult directives
- Lack of stranger awareness

Protective Factors From Sex Trafficking

Just as there are factors that make a person more vulnerable to sex trafficking victimization, so too are there factors that serve as strong protective factors against sex trafficking victimization, especially for students in special education. These factors share elements of safety and stability that may reduce the vulnerability to sex trafficking recruitment.

- Family stability
- Social support network
- School/community connectedness
- Positive peer support
- Future goals
- Limited drug & alcohol exposure
- Understanding of healthy relationship boundaries
- Targeted lessons on sex trafficking and exploitation
- Ongoing opportunities to practice skills taught in lessons

How Individuals Are Recruited

“Although runaway and homeless youth are particularly vulnerable, there are also several examples of victims who were groomed and recruited while living at home and even attending school” (Polaris, 2021). A study examining juvenile sex trafficking in girls with intellectual disabilities found that “circumstances or behaviors most commonly linked to incidents [...] were running away, unsupervised Internet use, and getting into cars with strangers” (Reid, 2018). Traffickers typically pose as a friend or a potential romantic partner who offers meals and gifts, or just a sympathetic ear. In some cases, sex traffickers may use an already young victim to befriend and recruit others. Recruitment for sex trafficking happens in public spaces such as shopping areas, coffee shops, sporting events, and online. Sex traffickers utilize social media and gaming platforms because they can speak to multiple individuals at the same time and can develop relationships faster due to vulnerabilities portrayed through the individual's media presence (Polaris, 2019).

Individuals are recruited at places where it is normal for strangers to speak to others, such as:



Schools



Bus stops



Social gathering places (Malls, parks, coffee shops, etc.)



Social media



WARNING SIGNS/INDICATORS OF SEX TRAFFICKING

What To Look For

- Tattoos that look like branding or are indicative of the life (dollar signs, money bags, "Trust and Loyalty", etc.)
- Student is isolating more than usual
- Sudden possession of expensive clothing, purses, or electronics
- Unexplained absences
- Sudden academic decline
- New/old signs of physical abuse
- Presence or reference to an older boyfriend/girlfriend
- Kicked out of parents' home
- Knowledge/use of terminology that is unique to the sub-culture of sex trafficking

Common Terminology (Shared Hope International, 2016)

- **The game or the life:** The subculture of prostitution, complete with rules, a hierarchy of authority, and language. Referring to the act of pimping as 'the game' gives the illusion that it can be a fun and easy way to make money, when the reality is much harsher. Women and girls will say they've been "in the life" if they've been involved in prostitution for a while.
- **Daddy:** The term traffickers often require victims to call them.
- **Trick or date:** The exchange when prostitution takes place, or the activity of prostitution. A victim is said to be "with a date" or "dating."
- **Track or blade:** An area of town known for prostitution activity. This can be the area around a group of strip clubs and pornography stores, or a particular stretch of street.
- **Bottom girl or bottom bitch:** A female appointed by the trafficker/pimp to supervise other victims and report rule violations. Operating as his "right hand," the Bottom may help instruct victims, collect money, book hotel rooms, post ads, or inflict punishments on other victims.
- **John (aka Buyer or Trick):** An individual who pays for or trades something of value for sexual acts.
- **Mate Crimes:** a form of crime in which a perpetrator befriends a vulnerable person with the intention of then exploiting the person.
- **Tricky Friends:** Similar to mate crimes; a term used to educate persons with learning or cognitive disabilities about how to identify healthy versus harmful relationships and to define a person who acts like a friend but does or says things that harm or exploit the individual.
- **Cuckooing:** a practice where people take over a person's home and use the property to facilitate exploitation.

Warning Signs Classmates Can Look Out For

Tell a teacher or a trusted adult if you notice your friend or classmate:

- Is dating an older person
- Has a romantic partner that is buying her/him expensive items
- Has an odd tattoo
- Is more isolated and/or avoiding friends/family
- Started doing drugs and/or drinking alcohol
- Has a fake ID
- Has a hotel key card
- Has new/old cuts and bruises

See something, say something!

Understanding The Mindset Of A Victim

Self-disclosing victimization can be really tough. Being sympathetic towards victims who may not disclose can encompass both physical and psychological reasons they may not seek help, cannot seek help, or leave a trafficking situation (Polaris, n.d.). The following barriers are potential reasons which prevent a person from seeking help (Polaris, n.d.):

- Trafficker uses violence or makes threats of violence like beating, rape, sexual assault, or torture to keep the victim in fear and obedience
- Trafficker may threaten the individual or people they know, like friends or family
- Individuals may feel shame
- Individuals may self-blame
- Trafficker may keep the victim in debt bondage
- Language and social barriers
- Belief that no one will help

Traumatic experiences, like being sex trafficked, negatively impacts a developing brain to diminish self-esteem, and increase anger and sexuality (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014). If a student suddenly begins to lash out, exhibit signs of depression, or express sexually inappropriate behaviors, they may have experienced sexual victimization (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014).





Teacher Awareness and Education: A 101 training for school personnel who are likely to see potential red flags include school counselors, bus drivers, special education teachers, attendance recorders, and school nurses. From the training, it is important to ensure school personnel are learning about trauma-informed practices to prevent stigma, fear, shame, and potential embarrassment from occurring and to ensure the students feel safe to reach out and get support. A teacher should never question a student directly in front of other students, instead they should speak to a school counselor or social worker to investigate the issue.

Student Awareness and Education

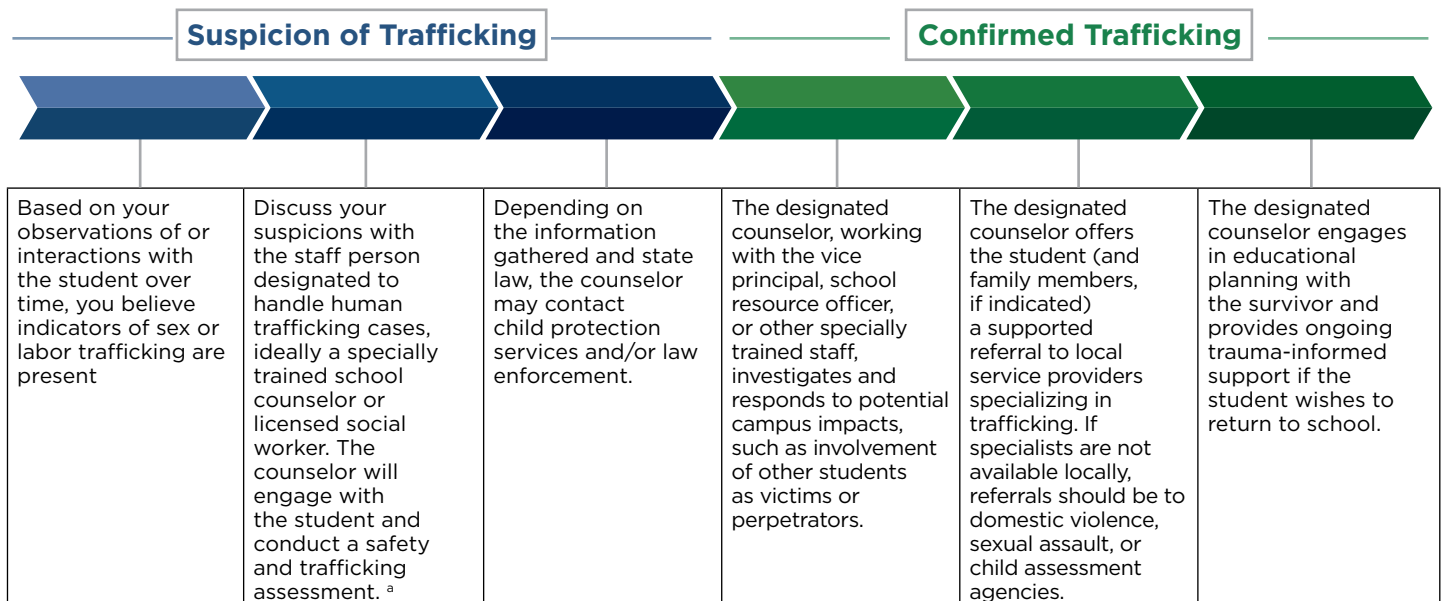
- Teach the difference between boyfriend, trafficker, and person buying sex
- Teach targeted lessons on
 - Exploitation and how to escape exploitation
 - Sexual and romantic relationships
 - Rights and responsibilities related to sexual behaviors
 - The right to say “no”
 - What to do in the event of inappropriate sexual behaviors
 - Self defense
 - Safe people, safe places and how to report
- When teaching these lessons,
 - Break them down into small segments, focusing on one skill at a time
 - Present and practice skills daily in multiple ways including scenarios, activities, role plays, and videos
 - Use repetition
 - Continue working on skills until students demonstrate mastery
- Involve parents in the teaching plan
- See projectstarfish.education for free lesson plans, case studies, and professional certification training available

SCHOOLS’ NEXT STEPS IN PREVENTING AND IDENTIFYING SEX TRAFFICKING

As school personnel are mandated reporters, this includes sex trafficking as well. Schools “should (a) increase staff awareness and educate staff on the nature of sex trafficking and which youth are most vulnerable to it, (b) increase student awareness of the risks and realities of sex trafficking, and (c) develop district or school-wide policies and protocols for identifying and supporting trafficking victims.”

(<https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/human-trafficking-americas-schools/school-policies-protocols-to-combat-trafficking>)

School Policies and Protocol: Equipping school personnel with a plan of who to contact if a teacher is suspicious of a student being sex trafficked is crucial to ensure that the student will continue to be supported and not forgotten. The main goal of a protocol is to ensure school personnel understand the necessary steps in responding to cases where students may be suspected of sex trafficking and ensure any mandated reporting requirements are met. The following table is an example protocol of steps to take if a teacher is suspicious a student is being sex trafficked.



Note. By National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (n.d.). School policies and protocols to combat trafficking [Table]. Safesupportivelearning.Ed.Gov. <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/human-trafficking-americas-schools/school-policies-protocols-to-combat-trafficking>

During the suspicion stage of the protocol, schools are encouraged to use the following table as a stepping stone in clarifying expectations, responsibilities, and steps that are personalized to each school.

BE PREPARED	
Use the following questions to gather the contact numbers and policy information to be prepared for if and when you need to take action on behalf of a sex trafficking victim.	
What is my school/district's policy about reporting sex trafficking?	
Who do I speak to regarding training for identifying sex trafficking victims? What is their contact information?	
What is the contact information for the following people?	School Resource Officer: School Social Worker: School Child Psychologist:

Note. By Arizona State University's Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research [Table]. www.sextraffickingandspecialeducation.com

TRANSPORTATION STAFF

Bus drivers and transportation staff play an additional role in preventing sex trafficking as they are an extra set of eyes and ears for the school. Transportation staff see the environment where students are picked up and dropped off. They can observe other people who are at the bus stop who may not have a known direct connection to the students.

When bus drivers or transportation staff notice signs of possible sex trafficking, they need to follow the school's established protocol to report their observations as soon as possible.

RED FLAGS TO WATCH FOR

- **Changes in student behavior**
 - Does the student have multiple absences?
 - Is there a new/unknown person at the bus stop with the student for pick up and drop off?
 - Is the student dating or talking about dating an older boyfriend or girlfriend?
- **Changes in students mood**
 - Does the student seem to be more angry, irritated, or emotional?
 - Is the student displaying unusual clingy behavior?
 - Is the student isolating or keeping to themselves more than usual?
- **Changes in the students physical appearance**
 - Does the student unexpectedly have expensive items, like clothes, jewelry, backpack, cell phone in their possession?
 - Does the student have old or new signs of abuse?
 - Does the student have any unusual tattoos?
- **Signs of control**
 - Does the student make comments about exchanging sex for any good or service?
 - Does the student make comments about meeting a quota or having a pimp/trafficker?



WHAT CAN I DO? MAKE THE CALL

If you suspect someone may be a victim of sex trafficking, contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-3737-888 or text 233733 (Text "HELP" or "INFO") to provide information you may have. The National Hotline can pass along the tip data to local supports and resources. Determine if there is a local tip line available in your community to speed the process along. If someone is in immediate danger, call 9-1-1.

Educate Yourself

- Search for your state's local Human Trafficking Taskforce
- Refer to National websites such as:
- <https://polarisproject.org/> - a nonprofit, data-driven social justice movement that reports on sex and labor trafficking data in the United States.
- <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/> - Through the Human Trafficking Hotline, Polaris speaks to victims and helps connect them to resources and to get help.

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Establish a classroom of trust, understanding, and safety. Teach students about online and social media safety. Provide lesson plans and support self-esteem. Free lesson plans and case studies can be accessed online at projectstarfish.education.

The ASU Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research developed a website specifically for educators and parents of special education students. For more information about how to provide education and awareness on the issue of sex trafficking to special education students, visit www.sextraffickingandspecialeducation.com.





SAFETY TIPS

Tiktok Safety Center <https://www.tiktok.com/safety/en/>

Facebook Safety Center <https://www.facebook.com/safety>

Instagram Safety Center <https://help.instagram.com/285881641526716>

Snapchat Safety Center <https://www.snap.com/en-US/safety/safety-center>

Whatsapp Safety Center <https://www.whatsapp.com/safety>

Discord Safety Center <https://discord.com/safety>

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Authors:

Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, MSW, PhD, ASU STIR

Veronica Duffield, BS, ASU STIR

Kimberly Peaslee, M.Ed, Special Education by Design

Carrietta L. Gaudio, EdD, BCBA, Creek Behavioral, LLC

Kristen Bracy, MA, MSW, ASU STIR

ASU Office of Sex Trafficking
Intervention Research
Arizona State University

For more information, please contact:

Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research

Phone (602) 496-0093 | Dominique.Roe@asu.edu

<http://www.sextraffickinghelp.com>

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