



Child Sex Trafficking: Signs, Risk Factors, and Tips to Keep Kids Safe

If you're caring for a child who has experienced trauma or instability, you may worry about their vulnerability to exploitation. What may not be readily apparent in the frequent news stories about sex trafficking is how many of the youth who fall victim have a connection to out-of-home care.

As a caregiver, you play a vital role in providing the stability, understanding, and protection that can help keep children safe.

Understanding Child Sex Trafficking

Child sex trafficking is the exploitation of children through commercial sexual acts. According to the Federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act, this includes recruiting, harboring, transporting, or obtaining a child under 18 for commercial sexual purposes. What makes this particularly heartbreaking is that the average age of a trafficking victim is just 13 years old.

It may be easy to think that the problem of sex trafficking exists only in big cities or urban areas, but the fact is that this epidemic has filtered into suburban and rural communities, as well. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, Wisconsin continues to see significant trafficking activity.

While Milwaukee remains a known hub for sex trafficking, Wisconsin has documented cases of human trafficking in all 72 counties. Green Bay, Appleton, and Racine have experienced a rise in reported incidents in recent years.

More detailed reporting regarding statistics specific to Wisconsin can be found in the [2023 report by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families](#).

Creating Protection Through Connection

The most powerful tool you have to protect children is building strong, trusting relationships with them. When children feel truly connected and valued, they're less vulnerable to exploitation.

One Wisconsin family creates this balance of protection and connection by saying, "Our job as your parents is to keep you safe and happy. And safety always comes first."

Building Felt Safety

- Creating an environment where children feel genuinely safe takes intentional effort:



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- *Consistency and Reliability:* Maintain predictable routines and follow through on promises. Children who have experienced trauma need to know they can count on you.
- *Open Communication:* Create opportunities for honest conversations. Let children know they can talk to you about anything without fear of punishment or judgment.
- *Respect Their Voice:* Listen to children's concerns and validate their feelings, even when you don't fully understand their perspective.
- *Age-Appropriate Education:* Have ongoing conversations about healthy relationships, personal boundaries, and online safety. Avoid one-time "stranger danger" talks in favor of regular, developmentally appropriate discussions.

Addressing Digital Vulnerabilities

Given that online exploitation has increased dramatically, pay special attention to:

- Teaching children about privacy settings and the risks of sharing personal information online
- Having open discussions about what they're seeing and experiencing online
- Monitoring internet use while respecting age-appropriate privacy needs
- Helping them understand that people online may not be who they claim to be

Creating agreements about internet use and maintaining open dialogue about their digital experiences

Why Some Children Are More Vulnerable

It's important to understand that any child can become a victim of trafficking, but certain experiences and circumstances can increase vulnerability. Children in out-of-home care or those who have experienced family instability often face higher risks.

Common Risk Factors

Children who may be more susceptible to trafficking often experience:

- Feelings of low self-worth or not belonging
- History of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse
- Chronic running away or going missing
- Feeling unloved or unwanted by family or caregivers
- Family history of substance use disorder
- Lack of positive social support or stable relationships
- Loss of a parent or primary caregiver
- Economic instability or poverty

LGBTQ+ youth face particularly high risks, as they may experience rejection from family or struggle with identity issues that traffickers exploit.

According to the National Foster Youth Institute, 60% of all child sex trafficking victims have histories in the child welfare system. This doesn't mean children in care are destined to be victimized—rather, it

highlights the importance of providing extra support, stability, and connection for these vulnerable youth.

How Trafficking Happens

Understanding how children become victims can help you better protect those in your care.

Traffickers deliberately seek out youth who feel isolated, unloved, or searching for acceptance. They may:

- Promise things children desperately want: love, acceptance, money, or material items
- Use existing relationships—sometimes trafficking involves family members, romantic partners, or friends
- Target children during vulnerable times, such as after placement changes or family crises
- Use other young people already being exploited to recruit peers
- Gradually normalize exploitative situations through a process called "grooming"

What's particularly insidious is that traffickers create a false sense of debt—telling children they must "pay back" gifts, food, or shelter through commercial sexual acts.

Recognizing Warning Signs

As a caregiver, you're in a unique position to notice changes that might indicate a child is being exploited. Trust your instincts—if something feels wrong, it's worth investigating further.

Behavioral Changes to Watch For

Children being trafficked may display:

- Sudden changes in online activity, new social media profiles, or secretive phone/computer use
- Lying about their identity, age, or activities online
- Avoiding questions about where they've been or what they've been doing
- Allowing others to speak for them or seeming coached in their responses
- Constantly seeking approval from others, especially adults or older teens
- Acting fearful, anxious, or hostile when interacting with authority figures
- Withdrawing from you or rejecting help when they previously sought support
- Dramatic personality changes or regression in behavior

Physical Signs That May Indicate Concern

Be alert to:

- Unexplained money, gifts, or expensive items (new clothes, jewelry, electronics)
- Hotel key cards, prepaid credit cards, or multiple cell phones
- Large quantities of condoms, lubrication, or other sexual materials

- Notes with phone numbers, addresses, names, or dollar amounts
- Signs of physical abuse or trauma
- Presence at hotels, truck stops, or other locations unusual for their age
- Being with significantly older companions who seem controlling

Important Perspective

Remember that no single indicator confirms trafficking is occurring. However, multiple signs together, especially combined with high-risk factors, should prompt you to seek guidance from professionals. It's also crucial to understand that children being trafficked often don't see themselves as victims initially. They may defend their trafficker or resist help due to trauma bonding, fear, shame, or a genuine belief that the trafficker cares about them.

If You Suspect Trafficking

If you're concerned that a child may be experiencing trafficking, your response can make a crucial difference in their safety and recovery.

Immediate Steps

- Trust your instincts—if something feels wrong, seek guidance from professionals
- Don't investigate on your own—this could put the child in greater danger
- Contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888 or text 233733 (BEFREE) for immediate guidance
- Call 911 if a child is in immediate danger

Report to child protective services as required by your role and local mandated reporting laws

Remember Your Impact

Every day you provide safety, love, and stability to a child, you're building their resilience against exploitation. The relationship you're creating may be the protective factor that keeps them safe or helps them heal if they've already been harmed.

Your care matters more than you know.

Resources

Emergency Contact

- National Human Trafficking Hotline
 - 1-888-373-7888
 - Text 233733 (BEFREE)
- Local emergency: 911

Training From [the Champion Classrooms](#)

- [What to Do When You Think It Might Be Sex Trafficking: Sex Trafficking and Youth](#)

Additional Resources

- [National Human Trafficking Hotline: Wisconsin](#)
- [Building an Effective Response to Sex Trafficking in Wisconsin](#)
- [Wisconsin Child Sex Trafficking and Exploitation Indicator and Response Guide](#)
- [10 Things You Can Do Today to Help Fight Human Trafficking](#)
- [How Do I Know?](#)
- [National Policy Council Amplifies Guidance for Child Welfare Agencies in Preventing Human Trafficking in Foster Care](#)
- [Wisconsin Anti-Human Trafficking Initiatives](#)
- [An Opportunity for Awareness and Action: Sex Trafficking in Milwaukee](#)
- [iEmpathize](#)
- [Prevent Project](#)
- [Responding to Disclosures: Do's and Don'ts for Non-professionals and Volunteers](#)
- [Not a Number: Child Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Curriculum](#)