

A Educator Guide to Online Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking During COVID-19

What is Trafficking?

Child sex trafficking is a crime that occurs when a child under the age of 18 is bought or sold for sex. Children are also victims of sex trafficking when they exchange sex for basic needs such as food, shelter or pocket money. Under state and federal law, a minor can never consent to be sold for sex. In all instances, pimps, sex buyers, brothel keepers and their associates are exploiting the vulnerabilities of the child.

While any child could be bought or sold for sex, traffickers frequently target children from vulnerable and underserved populations. Such vulnerabilities include but are not limited to children in the foster care system and children from family backgrounds where they faced abuse and neglect. They can target homeless and runaway youth, but they can also target any child who feels friendless and alone and without a strong safety net or family to help support them as they reach puberty. There are a variety of ways somebody can be seen as “vulnerable” to becoming trafficked. Lack of education, money, and familial support are also large contributing factors to becoming vulnerable. Others include domestic violence, drug use, serious mental illness, sexual abuse, immigration status, gang affiliation, and language barriers.

What is Online Sexual Exploitation?

Online sexual exploitation commonly includes grooming, live streaming, consuming [child sexual abuse material](#), and coercing and blackmailing children for sexual purposes. Never before has it been easier for predators to hide their identity, connect directly with children, coerce children into sharing explicit images, and trade those images with others as part of a vast underground criminal network.

As schools have turned to online learning to prevent the spread of COVID-19, many homebound children have expanded access to technology and social media. With this increase in connectivity, the risk of online child exploitation also increases.

The Need To Protect Students

Students, particularly those who do not feel in control of their lives or have suffered past trauma, can feel triggered by a lack of clear structures, boundaries, and routines. Though students may resist school, it provides consistency and structure that they may lack elsewhere. For victims of sex trafficking, school is sometimes the only time away from their trafficker. With school closures and the transition to remote for the foreseeable future, students will be spending more time away from positive support systems and can become more susceptible to negative influences.

Often communities look to schools to keep children safe and provide the best support possible, especially in times of crises. Now, it may be trickier for teachers to be involved in the emotional and behavioral



well being of students, but is your responsibility to remain alert to the potential indicators of abuse and exploitation. We recognize that many teachers are now teaching remotely and seeking to protect and support their students. Here are some suggestions for how to maintain relationships and continue to check in with youth during this time when they are more vulnerable to negative online influences:

1. If students are permitted on school grounds to pick up remote learning materials or meals, speak with them, even if it's just for a short time. Particularly check on students who have had:
 - Known or suspected sexual, physical, emotional abuse, and/or trauma
 - Known or suspected unstable, abusive, or neglectful home environments
 - History of truancy
 - Developmental/learning disabilities
 - Low self-esteem, highly sensitive to peer ridicule
 - Low level of school engagement, abilities are markedly under grade level
 - Gang affiliations
 - Undocumented or immigrant youth
2. In times of disease crises, there are many pressures that may compel youth to enter situations that can put them at risk for exploitation and historically, there is usually an increase in demand during such times. Particularly check in on students who:
 - Are or have been in foster care
 - Have endured housing instability
 - Have parents who have lost their jobs, or have lost their jobs themselves
 - Reduced access to healthcare
3. As schools rely on e-learning, use software that includes video chatting capabilities, if possible. Be alert if you notice your student says or does anything suspicious such as:
 - Notice any changes in behavior and/or appearance, and changes in emotional expression.
 - Be aware if a student is frequently unsupervised or left alone and ask where their caregivers are.
 - Be aware of forced, coached, or coerced speech patterns (encouragement and rehearsal of false reports) from students. They may not be allowed to talk to anyone alone or without supervision
 - Stories may have plot holes or may not add up when you further pressure a student to talk about it.
 - If you are video chatting for your virtual classroom, make note and report anything about your student or their surroundings that may be a sign of harm or neglect. This can look like
 - Student is excessively withdrawn, fearful, or anxious about doing something wrong
 - Student is always watchful and "on alert," as if waiting for something bad to happen
 - Student has untreated illnesses and physical injuries
 - Caregiver or adult expressing most emotions in the form of anger and has difficulty conveying other emotions.
 - Check in with students who are not attending your remote sessions or completing remote work and determine why this is occurring. Is there a lack of access to the technology required for online learning or are other factors pulling students away from their instruction? Though some states are implementing flexible rules, it is still unclear how students, especially those from low income schools, will continue instruction. Our best advice right now is to document as much as you can for further use after the pandemic.

Victim Reporting

If you believe a student is the victim of child sexual exploitation:

- If there is immediate danger, contact your local emergency services
- Contact your local law enforcement agency.
- Contact your local FBI field office or submit a tip online at tips.fbi.gov.
- File a report with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 1-800-843-5678 or online at www.cybertipline.org.

When reporting, make note of:

- Name and/or user name of the subject.
- Dates and times of incidents
- Email addresses and phone numbers used by the subject.
- Websites used by the subject.
- Description of those involved - include tattoos, physical identifiers, physical abuse, etc..
- Try to keep all original documentation, emails, text messages, and logs of communication with the subject. Do not delete anything before law enforcement is able to review it.
- Tell law enforcement everything about the online encounters—we understand it may be embarrassing for the parent or child, but providing all relevant information is necessary to find the offender, stop the abuse, and bring him/her to justice.

Most educators are also mandated reporters. Follow the procedures set by your school district for mandated reporting.

Helpful Resources

[NCMEC \(National Center for Missing and Exploited Children\)](#) - 1-800-THE-LOST

NCMEC's CyberTipline is the nation's centralized reporting system for the online exploitation of children.

[National Human Trafficking Hotline](#) - (888) 373-7888 or text 233733

Also offers an online chat. All are available 24/7 in English and Spanish, or in 200 additional languages through an on-call interpreter.

National Association of School Psychologists -

[Helping Children Cope with Changes Resulting from COVID-19](#)

The National Association of School Psychologists Families has provided tips to help families across the country adapting to the evolving changes in daily life caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Center for Disease Control and Prevention - [Helping Children Cope with Emergencies](#)

CDC resources to help children cope in emergencies and identify factors that influence the emotional impact on children. What you can do to help children cope with a disaster: before, during, and after.

[The Office on Trafficking in Persons \(OTIP\)](#)

OTIP has posted resources, support, and services to ensure that children and adults who have experienced trafficking and their families get the support and care they need to live safe and healthy lives.

For more tools and information, check out the [resources](#) page on our site. To learn more about how to empower youth to become advocates against trafficking in their communities, visit PACT's [Youth Against Child Trafficking \(Y-ACT\)](#) program page on our site.