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Office of Protection of Children

P.O. Box 479 • Dubuque, Iowa 52004-0479
Phone (563) 556-2580 FAX (563) 556-5464
www.dbqarch.org

Steps to Preventing Teen Sex Trafficking

By [Bill Woolf](#)

Benjamin Franklin said, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” These wise words are still applicable today, especially when referring to the dehumanizing exploitation of our children through human trafficking. We think the teens in our communities are safe and that human trafficking could never touch our specific homes, but unfortunately, I have often faced the look of disbelief on the faces of parents as I break the news that their son or daughter has become a victim of human trafficking. “How could this have happened?” “Human trafficking doesn’t exist in our community!” “What do I do now?” Parents and community members alike often feel helpless when faced with the reality that someone they know may be involved in human trafficking.

This article presents some key human trafficking prevention and response strategies for members of our community.

The first step to prevention is recognizing that human trafficking does actually occur in communities across the United States. In previous articles I have cited it is estimated that approximately 100,000 U.S. children are induced or lured into the commercial sex industry every year—domestically, within the United States. This number is obliterated by a new study released by the University of San Diego. In this study, researchers focused on a subset of sex trafficking referred to as “gang controlled sex trafficking.” The results of the study estimate that within San Diego County (California) alone, there are 8,830 - 11,773 victims per year. If these are the numbers for only one county in one state, how large is the number nationwide? How many victims are in your community? Many still believe teen sex trafficking is something that only happens overseas, but sex trafficking is no longer only a foreign or international issue, or just happening to “run-aways.”

The first step to protecting teens in our community: Acknowledge the problem exists.

It is imperative for adults to understand their role in identifying potential trafficking scenarios and how to respond appropriately. You should ask yourself the following questions:

- Have you seen unexplained changes in a teen’s mood or behavior?
- Has the teen been unusually withdrawn from his or her usual activities?



- Has a teen you know changed friends or is he or she spending time with “suspicious” individuals?
- Has a teen you know recently developed a negative attitude toward family, school, friends and/or authorities?
- Has a teen you know shown signs of substance abuse or presented new mental health concerns?
- Has a teen you know had unexplained injuries?
- Do you notice the teen staying out later than usual?
- Has his or her significant other threatened to hurt the teen if they try to leave?

After reading these questions, what is the appropriate action to take if a teen's situation happens to come to mind? First and foremost, do not be confrontational, blame or judge the teen; rather, be persistent and be clear that you are concerned and want to help.

As adults, we have to understand that teenagers who are lured into this lifestyle are victims, and should not be shamed or punished for “making bad decisions.” Here are some potential conversation starters:

“Help me understand why you’re not doing your homework?”

“What are you doing when you skip school?”

“Tell me more about your boyfriend.” “How does he make money?” “What are his future plans?”

A victim of teen sex trafficking explained, “I wish someone had asked me more about my boyfriend—if they had pushed me to talk about him. I needed someone to call me out and help me see what I already knew, but was too scared to admit on my own.”

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