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Sex Trafficking is Everyone's Problem

By [Bill Woolf](#)

In recent years, there has been an increase in awareness of the unsettling existence and overwhelming prevalence of teen sex trafficking, a form of human trafficking present in our communities throughout the United States. Yet, the lingering question remains: what do I do about it? Many people still question what their role is in addressing the issue, either professionally or personally.

To review, teen sex trafficking is the act of inducing anyone under the age of eighteen-though I would make the point that we could extend this definition to include young adults as well-to engage in any sex act in exchange for anything of value. It should be noted that items of value are not limited to currency alone; the exchanged things could be clothing, shelter, food, drugs or any item that might entice a young person. A solution is needed since human trafficking as a whole is currently the second largest criminal enterprise in the world and is continuing to grow.¹ Therefore, I propose a three-pronged approach that can be adapted to be implemented anywhere-our places of work, our communities and our homes. At the core of this approach is the concept of JustAsk² that encourages people to speak up when they observe something suspicious. The three-pronged approach of Education, Prevention and Intervention is designed to build upon foundational knowledge through personal and professional implementation of programs and responses to potential trafficking scenarios.

Education is absolutely essential. The first step to protecting the teens within our communities is acknowledging that the problem exists. We cannot discuss how we solve a problem when the community as a whole does not recognize the problem. This can be accomplished through seeking out experts who are very familiar with how sex trafficking presents itself here in the United States. Communities or church groups may wish to host presentations or other events to attempt to raise awareness regarding the issue. The presentations, along with vetted materials, can serve to expand the awareness beyond simply understanding that there is a problem to educating the community to recognize methods of traffickers,³ vulnerabilities of youth and how to recognize warning signs. Warning signs vary from situation to situation and certain signs can be more prominent during the different stages of induction, scouting, manipulating and trapping. However, the consistent theme among the more specific signs is a sudden change in behavior that is otherwise unexplained by other life experiences.⁴ Most commonly, these changes will include withdrawal from family and friends or significant changes in peer group or, in extreme situations, isolation from everyone.

Some of the other warning signs include teenagers becoming increasingly secretive and not wanting to share their methods of communication with their parents, friends or others.⁵ Teenagers may also exhibit signs of anger or aggressiveness towards others, particularly authority figures such as parents, teachers or law enforcement if they come in contact with them. They may also seem to be generally negative in their outlook on life. People might notice that the teen has dramatically changed their style of dress, particularly becoming more provocative, especially with online picture postings. Eventually, one might possibly notice physical changes as well. The teen may appear perpetually tired and malnourished.⁶ The coloring in their skin could become pale and overall they might appear to be sick or weak. The community should also be alert to notice young people that seem to be hanging around abnormal locations like hotels or loitering around public transportation. There could also be signs of substance abuse as well as the development of premature smoking habits. While this is certainly not an exhaustive list, it does highlight many of the common signs and symptoms present among our youth population as they are drawn into the lifestyle of commercial sex.⁷

Once we recognize the warning signs, how do we properly respond to the victimized youth in a way that we can effectively intervene and get them out of the situation? The most effective, but commonly overlooked, answer is to "Just Ask." This consists of engaging the youth in conversation or showing them that they have a safe place where they will not be judged. It is important not to be confrontational, but rather to be clear that you are concerned and want to help. Most importantly though, when engaging a potential victim, be patient and persistent. They may not be ready to disclose what is going on, and building trust with that teen will have to come first before they are ready to reveal the reality of the life they are trapped in. Ask questions about their daily activities, their friends, or, more importantly, their boyfriend or girlfriend. The biggest challenge is remaining non-judgmental and being persistent.⁹ We should not assume that our local schools, youth ministries or other organizations are properly equipped to recognize and respond to these situations. We need to encourage these groups to educate themselves on the issue, as well as to develop best practice response protocols to be able to address this unique scenario if it presents itself.

We have discussed education and intervention, but it seems we left out the middle step of prevention. I have always said that I would prefer to have zero cases on my desk and be out of a job than to continue to have them piled up day after day. Is prevention realistic? Being the eternal optimist, which is in direct conflict with my law enforcement persona, I believe that we can, or at a minimum greatly reduce, the current numbers. Therefore, we have to develop effective prevention programs, as well as take personal responsibility in talking to our youth, whether our own children or those that we have some responsibility for, about the issue of teen sex trafficking.

Talking to youth about sex trafficking can seem somewhat overwhelming. I know the first time I spoke to a group of teenagers I couldn't sleep the night before, worried about using the right language, explaining it in a way that they can understand, not offending anyone, etc... While my first go-around certainly was not perfect, I learned a valuable lesson; honesty and directness are well received by the youth of today. They were shocked to learn about the realities of what was going on in their own communities, but then individually afterwards a few made their way up to the front to discuss troubling scenarios that were all too familiar in my work. They expressed their concern about the situation and how they did not know who to talk to or even if someone would understand. Letting them know that they would not be judged and just asking the right questions gave relief and prevented these youth from being tricked into a bad situation.

Because the process of manipulation used by the traffickers is slow and methodical, most teens don't even recognize what is going on. As parents, educators, youth ministers, mentors, or whatever your role may be, the first step is to gather the facts and then secondly sit down with the youth in your lives and have an open, honest and mature conversation with them. In my experience, they will appreciate your forthrightness and maturity in discussing the issue. I have found that this conversation does not necessarily have to be an independent sit-down, but rather can neatly be woven into ongoing discussions of healthy relationships, self-respect and sexual morality.

Teen sex trafficking is a reality that is potentially affecting our communities all across the United States.⁹ This issue can seem overwhelming at times, but if we take the three-pronged approach, we can effectively learn about the issue, spread awareness, develop prevention programs and effectively intervene when necessary. We can all make a difference in eliminating this terrible form of sexual exploitation of our children.

References:1. United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Administration for Children and Families, Human Trafficking Fact Sheet. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/otr/resource/fact-sheet-human-trafficking>

2. The JustAsk Prevention Campaign was started in northern Virginia in an effort to raise awareness and address the growing concern of teen sex trafficking in the area by leveraging a community intervention strategy. The project strives to engender a sense of caring in the community at all levels, be it a business owner who sees suspicious activity that may be related to trafficking, a parent concerned about a child's social media contacts, or a teen at school who notices a classmate who appears to need a friend-it's your move- "JUST ASK" when you see something amiss; act proactively to help those in our community (www.justaskva.org).

3. Three-phase process commonly understood and used in sex trafficking of scouting, manipulating, and trapping. See other article.

4. The National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking, Shared Hope International, May 2009.

5. Ibid.

6. "Child Sex Trafficking in America: A Guide for Parents and Guardians" National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. http://www.missingkids.com/Fact_Sheet_Parents_Guardians.pdf

7. For a more complete list of warning signs please visit www.justaskva.org

8. For more specific questions to ask relative to your relationship to a child please visit www.justaskva.org.

9. Ibid.

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