

# KEEPING YOUR CHILDREN SAFE FROM SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ONLINE PREDATORS

If you haven't already heard the terms Sex Trafficking and Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST) you will be hearing them soon. In fact, Texas has proclaimed January to be Human Trafficking Prevention Month. STARRY wants to educate parents and bring awareness to this important issue.

First, let's start off with defining Sex Trafficking. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline human trafficking is, "... the business of stealing freedom for profit. In some cases, traffickers trick, defraud or physically force victims into providing commercial sex. In others, victims are lied to, assaulted, threatened or manipulated into working under inhumane, illegal or otherwise unacceptable conditions. It is a multi-billion dollar criminal industry that denies freedom to 24.9 million people around the world." Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking is when a youth is coerced and manipulated into this industry. Minors are being trafficked every day right here in the United States.

STARRY's Director of Training and Program Development, Renee Cameron-Hernandez, MA, LMFT, LPC, recently spoke with the Community Engagement Officer of the Wilco Sheriff's Dept. The officer explained how traffickers are using every well-known social media app to traffic children. He specifically discussed how traffickers are using the very popular Tik Tok app where users can buy and sell emojis. Traffickers are getting children to sell them emojis that include nude pictures, and then the traffickers are selling those pictures to other users through the app. This is one of many examples of how children are being put at risk for exploitation. "Basically, any app that can be used to interact with someone else can be used for trafficking," Renee stated.



According to Shelby Chaddick, MA, LPC, STARRY's Round Rock Team Supervisor, other common apps are used as recruitment by sex traffickers. These include Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Kik, Meetme.com, Calculator %, and WhatsApp. Many police agencies are now releasing lists of common apps that put teenagers at a risk for sex trafficking. These dangers make communication about internet safety a priority for families, along with the need to potentially monitor your children's social media accounts.





## PREVELANCE

Due to the prevalence of online activity and the exposure children have to predators, it is essential parents are in the know about the risks. At STARRY, we are blessed to have several Professional Counselors who are passionate about preventing children from this type of abuse. We are dedicated to educating parents on how to protect their children. Our professionals have provided their answers to many common questions about sex trafficking and DMST. How prevalent is this issue? What are the statistics on how many kids are targeted and experience some form of sex trafficking?

- Approximately 79,000 youth and minors are victims of sex trafficking in Texas (Office of the Attorney General).
- In just one year over 80 victims have been identified in Williamson County.
- In 2016, there was an estimated 313,000 victims of human trafficking in Texas. (University of Texas at Austin)
- Texas ranked first for the number of new criminal human trafficking cases in 2018.

## AGES

Youth between the ages of 14 and 17 have the highest level of concern. On average, children are trafficked for 2 years before they were identified. In West Coast Children's study half of youth were under 14 the first time they were exploited, according to the Commercial Sexual Exploitation – Identification Tool (CSE-IT).





# COMMON MYTHS INCLUDE:



## **Children and adults who are trafficked can be clearly identified.**

Renee Cameron, MA, LPC, LMFT stated, "Trafficking looks like the movie Taken... that kids are kidnapped and forced into sex work. Most people do not realize that trafficking usually starts with a relationship and/or connection. People close to the child prey on their vulnerabilities and/or traffickers are really good at identifying a child's vulnerabilities and targeting them through relationship and support first. Shelby Chaddick, MA, LPC adds, "Sex trafficking is not just girls chained to a bed. Some of them walk freely, but are coerced into sexual exploitation lured by dreams of a better life."

## **Traffickers can be clearly identified.**

Traffickers come from all ethnic groups, career paths, ages and professions. Renee Cameron MA, LPC, LMFT states, "I have seen stories of traffickers being police officers, teachers, preachers, grandmothers, parents, and other children."

## **This is just modern day prostitution.**

According to Commercial Sexual Exploitation – Identification Tool (CSE-IT) sexual exploitation is not prostitution, a choice, and it is separate from survival sex, promiscuity, a moral failing of the child, or the child's identity (CSE-IT).



## COMMON MYTHS CONT.

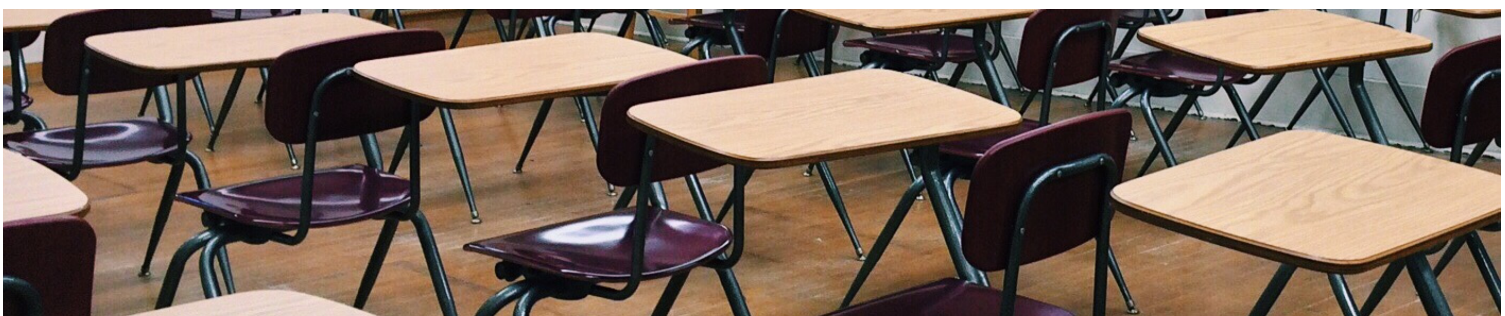
**My son is safe, trafficking only happens to females.** Trafficking happens to males and females but is highly under-identified with males. Researchers tell us that, "Human trafficking is a pressing public health concern which transcends all races, social classes, demographics, and gender. No population is exempt from the ever-present threat of traffickers. Human traffickers are motivated by greed, driven by quota, devoid of respect for human rights, preying upon the vulnerable, and damaging the psychological and physical well-being of their victims" (Tammy J. Toney-Butler; Olivia Mittel, 2019).



**Trafficking only happens in big cities.** Trafficking happens in urban and rural areas. My child is safe because we have a two-parent home, trafficking only happens to kids with single parents and divorced homes. Trafficking happens to children with differing familial make-ups (single parent homes, two parent homes, etc.)

**My child is most at risk on the weekends.** In a recent Coalition meeting a staff member from Cease Texas looked through websites cyber patrolled by their organization, and found that at 1:00 p.m. on a Thursday, there were over 100,000 active trafficking ads just in Williamson County. He also said the most active times for trafficking through the internet is lunch time on Thursdays and Fridays.

**My child is safe because we are financially stable.** Trafficking happens to children in families of all income levels.





# HOW DOES THIS HAPPEN?

Love146, an informational website on trafficking, explains how vulnerabilities include: adolescence, history of abuse or neglect, questioning sexuality, homelessness, struggling with addiction, long periods of parental absence, victim of bullying, exposure to gang activity, member of a marginalized population (Love 146) – I would say the two biggest vulnerabilities are lack of support/rejection from parents and history of sexual abuse. Children that are or have been involved in the child welfare system are also at greater risk. Ashley Sleaper, LMSW- STARRY's Community Education Specialist says, "Traffickers identify children with vulnerabilities then exploit those vulnerabilities. Traffickers find victims in public places like schools, bus stops, and other public spaces."



Traffickers find victims in public places like schools, bus stops, train stations, malls, online, etc. According to one victim, "At the airport when they picked me up, Kristan told me I was beautiful. That was the first time someone told me I was beautiful without expecting anything in return." Another victim stated, "I was his property, like a car or a house. It looks beautiful, you show it off and you're proud if it but you don't love it. Not the way you love a human being."

Sadly, for some victims they have never known another way of life.

*"for me, prostitution wasn't an option or choice. it was a way of life, a generation thing. my mother was my first trafficker."*

- human traffic survivor

# HOW SHOULD PARENTS KEEP KIDS SAFE?

According to the Texas Governor's Website, some red flags can be:

- Changes in school attendance, habits, friend groups, vocabulary, demeanor, and attitude
- Sudden appearance of luxury items- for example manicures, designer clothes, and purses
- Truancy from school
- Sexually provocative clothing
- Tattoos or branding
- Refillable gift cards
- Multiple phones or social media accounts
- Lying about existence of social media accounts
- Provocative pictures posted online or stored on phones
- Unexplained injuries
- Social interaction being strictly controlled by someone else
- Isolation from family, friends, and community

## WHAT SHOULD HOW CAN PARENTS TALK TO THEIR KIDS ABOUT THIS SUBJECT?

**Do** – be non-judgmental, watch body language, label behavior (not youth), discuss healthy relationships, and discuss consent.

**Don't** – Dispute facts, question motives, react with disgust or shock, expect full disclosure, and expect youth to recognize victim status.

Ashely Sleeper, LMSW recommends, "Have an honest, age appropriate conversation with your children about what trafficking is and how it happens. Don't wait for your child to bring it up. Also, acknowledge the discomfort (if there is any) in having this kind of conversation with your child. Normalize the experience so that if they ever have to talk to you about hard things they will know feeling uncomfortable isn't weird."



Renee Cameron Hernandez, MA, LPC, LMFT states, “I think the best strategies for keeping children safe is building trust and listening to everything they are trying to tell you. You want to set up a relationship with a child where they feel heard in even the little things. So that they are safe and comfortable to tell you the “big” stuff” when it happens.



## WHAT SHOULD KIDS AND TEENS WATCH OUT FOR?

### **Trafficker control tactics:**

- Using increasingly violent sexual exploitation
- Transporting child to unfamiliar location
- Abandoning the child with other victims to provide instruction
- Inflicting beatings, threats, and humiliation
- Encouraging drug and/or alcohol dependency
- Making the victim think he or she will be arrested if they leave the situation
- Inflicting psychological abuse and using manipulation to create dependency.
- Using shame and self-blame against the victim

## HOW DO I KNOW IF MY CHILD IS BEING TARGETED?

According to Love146, common warning signs can be – negative influential peer relationships, secretive about who they are talking to, youth suddenly has a lot of new stuff, new older boyfriend/girlfriend, responding to job offers or modeling/acting jobs, becoming more and more isolated from others, risky online behavior, risky sexual behavior, chronic running away, controlling/abusive dating relationships, signs of physical abuse, or loss of interest in age appropriate activities.

Warning signs for online behavior can be: needing to take calls in private, hiding screen when you come into the room, becoming increasingly secretive, spending increasing time online, not talking openly about online activities, vague talk of a new friend with no details, or patterns of leaving home for periods of time.

# WHAT CAN I DO IF I THINK MY CHILD HAS ALREADY BEEN TARGETED?



## Call one of the following resources:

National trafficking hotline 1(888)3737-888  
National Sexual Assault Hotline 1-800-656-4673  
National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233  
National Runaway Safeline 1-800-786-2929  
GLBT National Youth Talkline 1-800-246-7743  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services  
Administration 1-800-662-4357  
Suicide Prevention Hotline 1-800-273-8255  
Department of Public Safety (DPS)  
Central Texas Region 512-997-4126  
Office of Attorney General Human Trafficking/  
Organized Crime Section 512-463-1646  
Child Protective Services- 1-800-252-5400

Jessica Kilpatrick, MA, LPC-S recommends that you, "Be there for your child and listen to them. You may be angry and frustrated that this has happened, but remember that your child is the victim and they need you to be strong for them and supportive of them. Blaming your child will only enhance and further their traumatization."

Instead, parents can try to use a victim-centered approach. According to researchers, Tammy J. Toney-Butler; Olivia Mittel, "A victim-centered approach is paramount in the delivery of care to a victim of human trafficking. Defined as the precise focus of attention, catering to the needs of the victim to ensure delivery of care in a compassionate, culturally sensitive, linguistically appropriate, non-judgmental, and caring manner. A victim's wishes, safety, and well-being are considerations." They say that the heart of a victim-centered approach ensures that your child does not suffer re-victimization or re-traumatization.

## To learn more, visit:

<https://love146.org/notanumber/>

<https://www.ceasenetwork.org/>

<https://gov.texas.gov/organization/cjd/child-sex-trafficking-protect>

