

Trauma Informed Care Series

Human Trafficking, Children, Youth, and Trauma

Many children and youth who have experienced human trafficking, have extensive trauma histories. This includes early traumatic events that may have contributed to an increased vulnerability to trafficking such as child sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect, traumatic loss and separation, exposure to family and community violence, as well as traumatic events while being trafficked (e.g., sexual violence, physical assault, witnessing violence against others). As a result of their experiences, youth who have experienced trafficking often have significant trauma-related symptoms including difficulties with attention and concentration, control of emotions and behaviors, healthy relationships, and self-esteem. Their trauma-related experiences also often precipitate children services involvement.

Children and youth disconnected from stable support networks such as those who have left home due to family conflict or other crises; youth experiencing homelessness or housing instability; children and youth in foster care; and unaccompanied minors, children, and youth displaced during natural disasters, etc.; are at an increased risk to be trafficked.

Children and youth may be trafficked by caregivers, intimate partners, or employers. Without proper intervention, the trauma of human trafficking can have a profound impact on children and youth and their long-term developmental success. It is imperative that children services professionals learn best practices to effectively serve children who have experienced human trafficking, involved with children services.

Defining Human Trafficking

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (22 USC § 7102) defines human trafficking as follows:

Sex trafficking - The recruiting, harboring, transporting, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for purpose of a commercial sex act, in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act hasn't obtained 18 years of age.

It is important to note that minors CANNOT consent to commercial sex. Any minor involved in a commercial sex act is a victim of human trafficking regardless of the use of force, fraud, or coercion.

Labor trafficking - The recruiting, harboring, transporting, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor services, through use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt, bondage, or slavery.

Force includes physical assault, sexual assault and/or confinement. **Fraud** is an act of deception with criminal intent. **Coercion** includes serious harm against any person or the abuse or threatened abuse of the legal process.

Myths about human trafficking¹

- **Human trafficking is always or usually a violent crime.** The most pervasive myth about human trafficking is that it often involves kidnapping or physically forcing someone into a situation. Most traffickers use psychological means such as, tricking, defrauding, manipulating or threatening victims into providing commercial sex or exploitative labor.
- **All human trafficking involves sex.** Worldwide, experts believe there are more situations of labor trafficking than of sex trafficking, but there is much wider awareness of sex trafficking in the U.S. than of labor trafficking.
- **Only women and girls can be victims and survivors of sex trafficking.** Victims of human trafficking can be of any gender identity. LGBTQIA+ boys and young men are seen as particularly vulnerable to trafficking.
- **People in active trafficking situations always want help getting out.** Every trafficking situation is unique. Fear, isolation, guilt, shame, misplaced loyalty, and expert manipulation are among the many factors that may keep a person from seeking help or identifying as a victim even if they are, in fact, being actively trafficked.

Potential Indicators

Recognizing key indicators of human trafficking is the first step in identifying victims and can help save a life. Here are some common indicators to help recognize human trafficking. These indicators are not a “check list” because every situation of human trafficking is nuanced and everyone’s response to being trafficked is unique.

Physical	Emotional	Behavioral
• Unexplained injuries	• Fearful	• Lack of autonomy
• Malnourished	• Depressed	• Running away
• Exhausted	• Anxious	• Substance abuse
• Unexplained clothing, jewelry, or money	• Hypervigilant	• Inappropriate relationships
• Multiple key cards	• Mood swings	• Changes in school attendance/performance
• Doesn’t have access to personal documents	• Outbursts of anger	• Aversion to physical touch
• Lack of access to medical or dental care	• Isolated/Withdrawn	• Rehearsed story when questioned
• Multiple social media accounts	• Hesitant to make independent decisions	• Doesn’t speak for self
• Frequent ailments (upset stomach, headache)	• Negative reaction to days out of school, low self-esteem	• Attachment to safe adults – teacher, bus driver

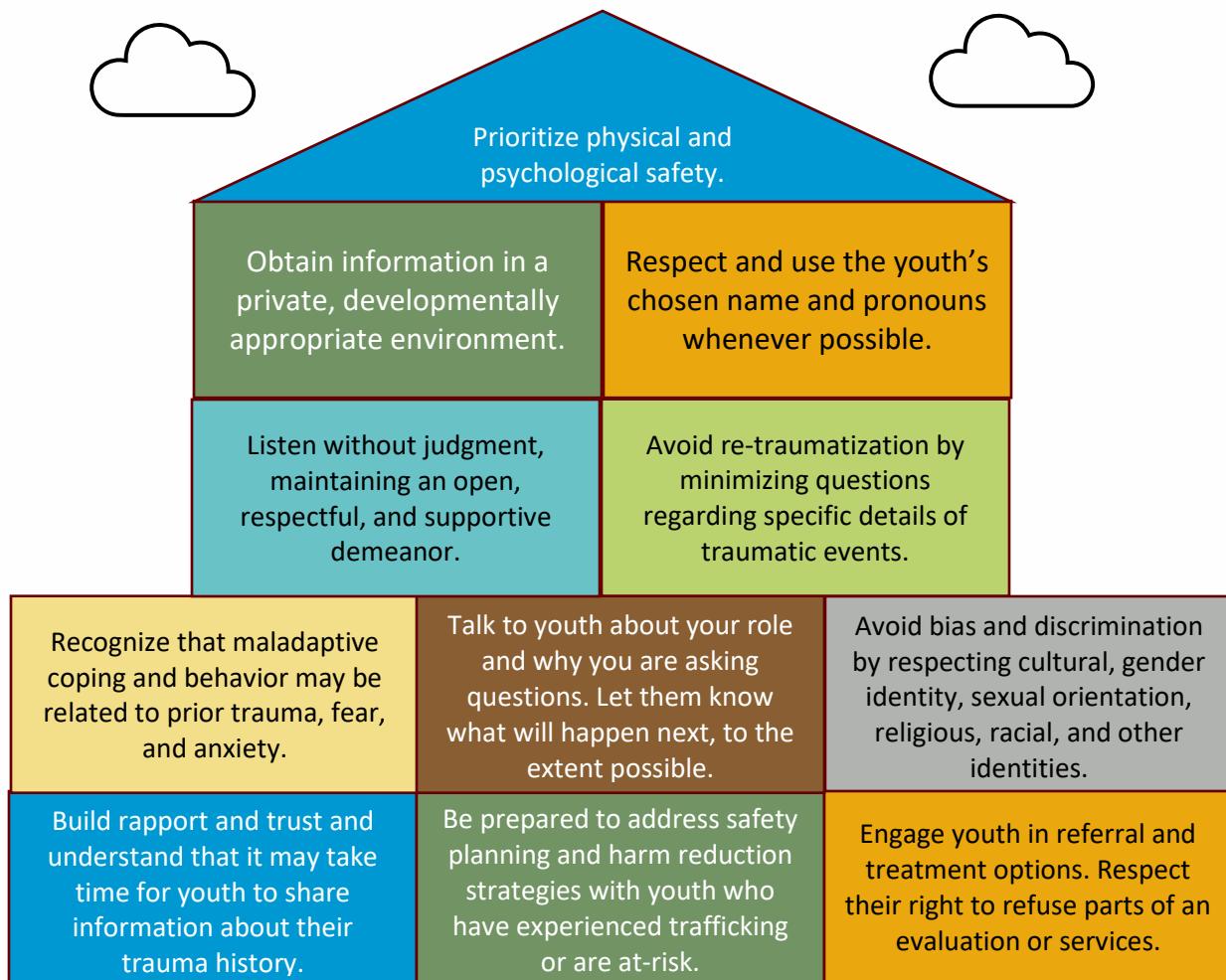
In most human trafficking situations, there are unlikely to be visible “signs” or “indicators” that trafficking is happening – unless you know something else about the situation – unless you

¹ [The Polaris Project](#). Named after the North Star, an historical symbol of freedom, Polaris is leading a survivor-centered, justice- and equity-driven movement to end human trafficking.

know the story. Without knowing the story, “signs” of human trafficking can lead to judgments formulated from unconscious bias or harmful stereotypes. They can also lead to situations where a person in a trafficking situation is actually put in a dangerous position by a well-meaning stranger.² It is important to learn the story of human trafficking – by learning how trafficking really happens and listening to victims and survivors.

What Children Services Professionals Can Do³

It is important to utilize relationship skills, strength-based language, and a trauma-informed approach in identifying and responding to the needs of each youth. For example:



² [The Polaris Project. Know the Story Not the Signs](#)

³ Child Trafficking Collaborative Group. (2024). Child Sex Trafficking: A Fact Sheet for Child Welfare Professionals. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

Human Trafficking Screening Tools

Screening tools can help agency staff to identify victims of human trafficking and help trafficking victims obtain the protection and services they need.

The Ohio Department of Youth Services Human Trafficking Screening Tool (ODYS HTST) is a non-proprietary resource intended to aid professionals in screening for high-risk indicators of sex and labor trafficking in youth. The screening instrument is available to view and download upon completion of this online training, which explores the legal definition of trafficking, the origins of the tool, strategies for effective interviewing, and a section-by-section review of the screening instrument.

In direct response to the Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force's Recommendation #4, "To develop a standardized screening process for victims of human trafficking to be used by state agencies providing direct services," this document provides each state agency's identified training officer(s) with a *simple, straightforward, and easy to adapt* guide to train staff on how to administer the standardized screening tool for identifying victims. The purpose of the tool is to identify potential victims of human trafficking for referral to appropriate victim services.

Both screening tools are available at [Human Trafficking Screening Tools](#)

RESOURCES

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

Ohioans who are experiencing a mental health or addiction crisis and their family members can call, chat, or text 988 to reach a trained counselor who can offer help and support.

Ohio Mental Health and Addiction Services

- Crisis Text Line – Text 4Hope to 741 741 for free, confidential conversation
[Crisis Text Line | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services \(ohio.gov\)](#)
- Ohio Careline (1-800-720-9616) for free, confidential connection to licensed provider.
[Ohio CareLine | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services](#)
- OhioMHAS Learn and Find Help for a variety of resources on support, prevention, treatment, and recovery.
[Learn and Find Help | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services \(ohio.gov\)](#)
- Resources
[Resources | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services \(ohio.gov\)](#)

Ohio's Local Anti-Trafficking Coalitions

Local Coalitions can help with awareness, education, and identifying and responding to human trafficking at the local level. If you are interested in getting involved in anti-trafficking response efforts, contact your [local coalition](#). Everyone has a role to play in combating human trafficking in Ohio.

National Human Trafficking Hotline

For immediate assistance, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at **1-888-373-7888**. You can reach the Hotline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in more than 200 languages. All calls are confidential and answered live by highly trained Anti-Trafficking Hotline Advocates. You can also contact the hotline via the web at: [Home | National Human Trafficking Hotline](#)

Attorney General's Human Trafficking Commission

Since taking office in January 2019, Attorney General Dave Yost has made the fight against human trafficking a top priority. He created the [Human Trafficking Initiative](#) with the goal of ending labor and sex trafficking in Ohio. The initiative works to build awareness, empower Ohioans to take action in their communities, strengthen victim services throughout the state and ensure that traffickers and “johns” are brought to justice.

The Ohio Attorney General's [Human Trafficking Victim Services Directory](#) is a new resource designed to connect trafficking victims and survivors throughout the state with much-needed Ohio-specific resources, including emergency shelters, emergency services, psychological support, legal support and more. The directory consists of a searchable database of organizations and programs that offer emergency, transitional or long-term services to trafficking victims and survivors.

Governor's Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force

The Governor's Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force was created by Executive Order in March 2012. Governor DeWine signed a new Executive Order in 2021 to reauthorize and expand the Task Force. The Task Force was formed to marshal the resources of the State of Ohio to coordinate efforts to identify victims, create a coordinated law enforcement system to investigate and prosecute human trafficking crimes, and to provide the services and treatment necessary for victims to regain control of their lives.

Fifteen state agencies are members of the task force and work to identify the gaps and opportunities within Ohio's systems to build a more comprehensive and coordinated response to human trafficking.

To learn more about the Governor's Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force, you can visit [Anti-Human Trafficking | Office of Criminal Justice Services \(ohio.gov\)](#) to view agency reports, download and print off free resources, and identify ways to become involved.”

Children's Bureau, Office of the Administration for Children and Families

The Children's Bureau, an agency within the Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, seeks to improve the safety, permanency, and well-being of children through leadership, support for necessary services, and productive partnerships with states, tribes, and communities.

The Bulletin for Professionals: [Human Trafficking and Child Welfare-A Guide for Caseworkers](#) explores how caseworkers can identify and support children at risk, for or who have experienced, human trafficking. It provides background information about the issue, identification and support strategies, and tools and resources that can assist caseworkers.

The Bulletin for Professionals: [Human Trafficking and Child Welfare-A Guide for Agencies](#) is intended for child welfare agency leadership and explores how child welfare agencies can support children at risk for, or who have experienced, human trafficking. It provides background information about the issue, including its scope and relevant legislation and initiatives, and strategies that agencies can implement to address the trafficking of children. State and local policy and program examples are also provided.

The Wellness Project

[The Wellness Project](#) is a collection of resources to support and enhance your wellness and resilience. The purpose of this website is to discover a variety of ways for supporting helping professionals, so they can show up as the “best version of themselves.” It includes a holistic system of wellness activities such as reading, listening, watching, cooking, connecting, moving, breathing, and resting.

Goals are to give our workforce tools to practice self-care, build resilience, enhance caregiving, and ultimately improve the services and supports we provide.