



## Traumatic Stress Among Refugee Children: Responding to Abuse, Exploitation, and Trafficking

This information guide, presented by Switchboard, defines and summarizes risk factors and indicators of child abuse, exploitation, and trafficking, both for general populations and specifically for newcomer children and youth. The guide also describes newcomer service providers' role in supporting clients who are children or youth potentially facing these issues.

### Recognizing Child Abuse, Exploitation, and Trafficking

While abuse, exploitation, and trafficking are defined separately, they often overlap; for example, child trafficking is also a form of child abuse. These definitions hold that all people under the age of 18 are considered children.

#### Abuse

Child abuse includes physical, sexual, and emotional and psychological abuse, as well as neglect. **Physical abuse** refers to non-accidental physical injury (ranging from minor bruises to more severe injury or death).

**Child Sexual abuse** is any form of sexual activity perpetrated by an adult against a child (or perpetrated by another child who has power over the child). Sexual abuse can include both touching and non-touching behaviors. Non-touching behaviors can include sexual harassment, looking at the child's naked body, or exposing the child to pornography.

**Emotional or psychological abuse** is a pattern of behavior where the perpetrator insults, humiliates, berates, threatens, or generally instills fear, thereby impairing a child's sense of self-worth.

**Neglect** occurs when a caregiver fails to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical care, or

supervision for a child. Note that the absence of resources due to poverty does not constitute neglect.

## Exploitation

Child exploitation is using a child for economic gain, power, status, sexual gratification, or some other advantage.

## Trafficking

While many forms of human trafficking (including forced begging and organ removal) exist, U.S. federal law recognizes two types of trafficking: **sex trafficking** and **labor trafficking**. Some situations may fit into both categories.

**To qualify as trafficking, three components must be met: an action, a means, and a purpose (A-M-P).**

Under this A-M-P model:

- A trafficker does one or more of the following **actions**: recruits, harbors, entices, transports, patronizes or solicits sex;
- Using one or more of the following **means**: force, fraud, coercion;
- For the **purpose of exploitation** in one or more of the following forms: slavery, forced labor, sexual exploitation.<sup>1</sup>

When at least one condition from each of these categories is met, the circumstance is legally defined as human trafficking. While this narrow definition means that some survivors of exploitation will not qualify for legal assistance, social service providers may use broader definitions that enable a larger number of survivors to seek social services.

Note that trafficking is **not** the same as smuggling. **Smuggling** refers to the **consensual** transportation of a person across international borders in a closed business relationship. Smuggling can, however, turn into trafficking if the trafficker introduces new terms of exploitation after transporting a person to a new country, such as demanding more money than the agreed-upon sum and refusing to surrender the newcomer's passport until the new sum has been worked off.

## Understanding Child Sex Trafficking

Child sex trafficking refers to the commercial sexual exploitation of any person less than 18 years of age.

Because a child cannot legally consent to commercial sex until they're 18 years old, means (force, fraud, or coercion) are not needed to categorize sexual exploitation as child sex trafficking.

## Understanding Child Labor Trafficking

Child labor trafficking refers to trafficking for the purpose of labor exploitation of any person less than 18 years of age. Child labor trafficking may present itself in a variety of ways. Children may be forced, tricked, or coerced to work in agricultural fields, manufacturing plants or factories, or via domestic servitude. They may be coerced into engaging in illicit or criminal activities, such as selling drugs or committing theft. Victims are often told they "owe" this labor and that they are working to pay off a debt or to "earn" the provision of basic needs. These exploitative practices violate U.S. labor laws that provide a framework for children's participation in the workforce and require connecting with human service professionals to further examine the situation.



### Labor Exploitation or Trafficking?

The difference between labor exploitation and labor trafficking is often subtle. As a provider, you typically will not make this distinction yourself. Rather, you will need to recognize signs of exploitation so you can refer newcomers to legal professionals who specialize in understanding the legal threshold for trafficking and can help survivors of exploitation and trafficking get appropriate help, including federal benefits associated with trafficking victimization.

For more on child labor trafficking, including resources for providers serving newcomer youth, see [Switchboard's blog post](#) or Framework's [webinar on Labor Trafficking of U.S. Minors](#).

## Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Online child sexual abuse and exploitation is when one person manipulates a child to get them to do something sexual online. It can include the following:

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<sup>1</sup> International law additionally includes organ removal as one of the purposes of exploitation that constitutes human trafficking, though this consideration is not currently part of U.S. federal law.

- Sexually explicit conversations (which may or may not proceed to meeting offline and having sexual contact)
- Collecting, sharing, or producing child abuse images (formerly referred to as “child pornography”)
- Exposure to unwanted sexual material such as explicit pictures, videos, or pop-up windows
- Building relationships for future face-to-face meetings and victimization
- “Sextortion,” wherein a perpetrator encourages or pressures a child to send a sexual image and then blackmails them into sending further sexual images or video, typically by threatening to share the images with others (either with those known personally to the child or more broadly online)

See the [Crimes Against Children Research Center's Technology/Internet Victimization](#) page for more.

## Service Providers' Role

Case managers are not investigators. Your role is to:

- Be aware of the risk factors
- Recognize common indicators of abuse, exploitation, or trafficking
- Report to the proper authorities if there is a reasonable suspicion
- Be a supportive presence if a child discloses
- Provide resources as needed

## Newcomer Risk Factors

Newcomer children and youth have environmental risk factors that can increase the risk of abuse, exploitation, and trafficking. These include:

- Caregiver stress, which can act as a catalyst for violence
- Poverty, which can create conditions where people enter more risky situations to earn money to meet basic needs
- Social isolation, which can increase barriers to asking for help or support
- Marginalization and discrimination, which can cause people to be targeted
- Unfamiliarity with U.S. laws such that newcomers may not know their rights or feel empowered to exercise them
- Past traumatic experiences, which can contribute to mental health symptoms and create conditions where people may engage in risky behavior

## Cultural Practices, Physical Abuse, and Physical Discipline

Differing cultural norms between the U.S. and newcomers' home countries can lead to miscommunications between newcomers and service providers.

To differentiate between **cultural practices** (such as ritual scarification) and **physical abuse**, you should:

- **Educate yourself about common cultural and religious practices** in the communities you serve.
- **Ask non-judgmental questions** and listen with an open mind. Speak with the child, their caregiver, and experts in the culture who are outside the family group.
- **Ask about the child's feelings.** Do they feel harmed by the practice? Is there a way to mitigate any harm while remaining culturally responsive?
- **Consult trusted, non-offending parents or caregivers**, as children may not yet have the maturity to fully comprehend and analyze the nature of physical abuse.

Various cultures also hold differing perspectives on what constitutes **physical discipline versus physical abuse** and what is considered **neglect**. Corporal punishment, [defined by the Department of Justice as “the intentional infliction of pain with the intent of changing unacceptable behavior.”](#) is legal in the U.S.; the difference between corporal punishment and physical abuse is poorly defined.

**Proactively educate clients** about state laws regarding child abuse and neglect while also being non-judgmental about differing perspectives. Ensure clients understand the consequences of violating U.S. laws, even if they disagree with these laws, so they can make informed choices for themselves and their family.

When appropriate, bring up negative aspects of corporal punishment and gauge clients' interest in learning alternative disciplinary techniques.

## Potential Signs of Abuse and Neglect

Potential signs of abuse include:

- Unexplained injuries or injuries with a pattern
- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Running away from home
- Behavioral changes, including withdrawn or aggressive behavior, or reverting to earlier developmental stages (such as bedwetting, thumb-sucking, etc.)
- Age-inappropriate behavior, including unusual sexual knowledge or behavior
- Unexplained somatic complaints such as recurring stomachaches or headaches
- Self-report

Signs of neglect include:

- Unaddressed medical or dental problems
- Extended periods without caregiver supervision
- Chronic hunger
- Self-report

Signs of abuse and neglect may vary based on the child's gender, age, cultural background, and developmental stage. These signs can manifest in various forms, including physical, emotional, psychological (including behavioral), or social aspects.

## Potential Signs of Trafficking and Exploitation

Identifying children who are victims of trafficking and exploitation can be difficult since they are often intentionally isolated and made to fear reporting, but some signs include:

- Living away from relatives and having little contact with family or friends
- Living somewhere inappropriate, such as at a work address, or in unhygienic or overcrowded conditions
- Being unsure about or unable to say where they live or with whom
- Moving between addresses frequently
- Having their movements controlled or watched
- Saying that someone else is preventing access to their documents or identification
- Saying that they are paying back loans, are in debt, or need money to repay someone
- Saying that their family is in danger if they do not pay someone
- Not being registered in or attending school
- Having their communication controlled by others
- Extreme fearfulness

## Reporting

Many direct service staff working with vulnerable children are **mandated reporters**. Each state has different rules regarding what must be reported, how it should be reported, and within what time frame. It is essential to learn your state laws around mandated reporting. Your organization may also have internal policies or procedures around reporting.

**Confirm your mandated reporter status before working with newcomer youth clients**, as it is essential that you disclose to them and their caregivers your mandated reporter status. Note that many states' mandatory reporting laws are undergoing revision. [Confirm your state's most current legislation](#) before working with youth clients.

If you are a mandated reporter and you have a reasonable suspicion that a child may be experiencing, has experienced, or is experiencing abuse, exploitation, or trafficking, you **must** report to the authorities. Report exactly what the child or youth said, using quotes whenever possible. Use objective language and avoid interpreting or summarizing statements.

If a situation is life-threatening, **call 911 immediately**.

Document that you made the report, including the report reference number on the report.

Before disclosing the report to a caregiver, consider the child's safety. While transparent communication with a caregiver is a good practice when working with newcomer youth, the child's best interest is the priority. For more information on mandated reporting, see [Switchboard's guide](#) and [archived webinar](#).

## Child- and Survivor-Centered Response Approach

Use a child- and survivor-centered approach to respond non-judgmentally to whatever a child discloses. Recognize the child's courage and resilience, and explain the limits of confidentiality. Focus on listening; provide affirmative statements; and avoid making promises you can't keep. Explore their feelings about reporting, and ask what they feel would help them.

For more on using survivor-centered and trauma-informed approaches when working with newcomer children, see Switchboard's guide [Trauma-Informed Care: A Primer for Refugee Service Providers](#) for strategies on how to implement trauma-informed care and the webinar [Traumatic Stress Among Refugee Children and Youth: Implementing Trauma-Informed Care with Children and Families](#).



## Practical Skills

### Prevention

To mitigate risk of abuse, exploitation, and trafficking, provide linguistically accessible information and education to all child clients and their caregivers. For example, you may inform both caregiver and child of their basic labor rights or describe the terms of healthy relationships to help them identify exploitative or abusive conditions they may encounter.

### Safety Planning Overview

Safety planning helps mitigate risk in circumstances that hold a high potential for harm. Do safety planning when a child is at high risk of abuse, exploitation, or trafficking or prior to potentially escalating events, such as when leaving a risky situation or remaining in contact with an unsafe person.

Safety plans should consider ways to prevent unsafe events, ways to anticipate future risky events, and how a child can protect themselves in an unsafe event. These strategies include recognizing warning signs, reaching out for help, and relying on inner strengths.

Advise children and youth to consider elements of **physical safety** (such as where to go, whom to call, and how to safely exit a situation) and elements of **emotional safety** (such as coping skills and relaxation techniques, and people who can offer support).

Safety plans should be individualized, concrete, and realistic. Involve a child's caregivers, teachers, and mentors when it is safe to do so. Programs like the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program are encouraged to integrate safety planning and assessment in their service delivery, ensuring the well-being and security of vulnerable youth in the program.

Safety plans should be **age-appropriate**. For younger children (ages 3–10), this may include:

- Memorizing an emergency phone number (911)
- Identifying a safe adult other than their primary caregiver
- Practice calling 911 and the safe adult
- Identifying a safe location during an emergency
- Learning their own address and phone number

For older youth (ages 11–17) safety plans may include:

- Whom to talk to regarding concerns about work
- How to stay safe if they're unhoused
- Whom to contact if their home becomes dangerous
- How to stay safe while on social media

For children who can read, safety plans should be written down in their native language. A copy of the plan should be included in the child's case file.

For more on safety plans, see [Switchboard's webinar on Safety Planning with Unaccompanied Minor Refugees](#), [Switchboard's guide on Fundamentals of Gender-Based Violence \(GBV\) for Refugee Service Providers: The What, Why, and How of Safety Planning](#) and [USCRI's toolkit on Safety Planning with Foreign National Children and Youth Survivors of Trafficking](#).

### Making Referrals

To best refer clients to appropriate resources outside your organization, maintain lists of community resources, and, when possible, directly connect clients to relevant staff at those organizations. Provide children and caregivers information about relevant services, encouraging choice and answering their questions about what an outside referral will entail. Always gain consent before making a referral.

## Resources

### Client-Facing Resources

- [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#) online, on the phone (1-888-373-7888), or via text (233733)
- [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children \(NCMEC\)](#)
- [NetSmartz Kids](#) (a division of NCMEC): activities and videos for children to increase Internet safety

### Provider-Facing Resources

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [Trafficking Screening Tools tip sheet](#)
- [Framework](#) offers e-learning, including [Foundations to Combat Labor Trafficking](#)
- The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) toolkit: [Trauma-Informed Case Management with Foreign National Children and Youth Survivors of Trafficking](#)
- International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC): [Human Trafficking Toolkit](#) and [HealthPortal Resources on Sexual Abuse, Exploitation, and Trafficking](#)
- Switchboard: [Combating Child Labor Trafficking: A Resource Collection for Providers Serving URMs and Other Youth](#) and [an evidence summary on strengths-based, trauma-informed approaches](#)

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