

A Case for State-Mandated Human Trafficking Education in Schools

Children are among those uniquely vulnerable to traffickers—at times not even realizing they are victims.

In 2019, children comprised over half of the victims in all active federal trafficking cases. Even more striking, in cases where a defendant was a sex buyer, over 92% of the victims were children. These numbers underscore the gravity of the issue.

Social Media and Romance: Tools for Traffickers

Increasingly, traffickers use social media to contact and earn the trust of children they hope to exploit.

Today, 53% of children and 84% of teenagers have a smartphone by age 11,7 providing a broad platform for traffickers to recruit victims online.

According to one 2018 study, 55% of those who were first trafficked in 2015 met their trafficker on a website, app, or via text. In sex trafficking cases active in 2019, 38% of the defendants were connected to the victim on social media.

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- Sites like Facebook and Instagram inadvertently offer traffickers access to children and their profile information.
- a trafficker can anonymously browse the characteristics, behaviors, and social circles of their potential victims.
- Traffickers can also create fake profiles that impersonate individuals whom children might trust.

Online, traffickers entice victims with romantic relationships with the ultimate goal of exploiting them. Once the victim is being trafficked, the trafficker can utilize the personal information he or she uncovered in the “dating” process to keep the victim dependent. Victims recruited through fraudulent courtship may not even consider themselves victims; they may simply believe they are in a romantic relationship.

Promising Practice: Trafficking Curricula in Schools

Open communication between children and trusted adults may reduce incidents of traffickers successfully recruiting children through social media and romantic relationships.

But to confide in trusted adults, children must first be empowered to recognize dangerous situations before deceptive relationships progress too far

In September of 2019, Florida became the first state to require K-12 child trafficking prevention education.

The State Board of Education unanimously agreed to require each school district to submit methods for anti-trafficking instruction at every grade level, describe the professional qualifications of the instructors, and document the resources being used to the commissioner.

To support school districts in this effort, the Florida Department of Education website offers online training, webinars, hotlines, fact sheets, and local contacts to equip educators to teach child trafficking prevention.

With these resources, teachers will have a wider knowledge base and be better prepared to more readily recognize potential victimization of their students.

Parents can also use these resources to learn how to speak openly with their children about relationships, on and offline.

Florida’s proactive approach to ending human trafficking of children is an excellent blueprint for states that wish to shed light on the hidden world of trafficking and exploitation. There are also other workable models for states to adopt.

As mentors and role models, teachers are uniquely positioned to educate students about the dangers and warning signs of trafficking. Educating children about boundaries, online safety, and warning signs of predators and providing helpful local resources may help prevent them from joining the thousands of children in the United States who have been trafficked.