



ARIZONA DEPARTMENT of CHILD SAFETY

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“The relationship IS the intervention” is a frequent refrain from clinicians who work with survivors.

Through the CFT process, behavioral health providers deliver services to survivors. Although service providers will be the ones who work primarily with survivors to help them heal, DCS Specialists can help survivors develop trust in professionals as a first step toward creating a strong support system.

DCS Specialists should build rapport with youth from the first interaction by:

- providing a comfortable, relaxed, informal setting to meet with them;
- explaining that your goal is to keep them safe and free from exploitation;
- empathizing with them and allowing them to lead initial conversations.

Helpful Tips:

- Avoid using language that may label the survivor as an offender or criminal. This may convey that they deserved the sexual violence and social isolation they may have experienced.
- Build on the healthy things the youth is already doing to survive; support their positive decisions.
- Engage the youth in developing an individualized safety and case plans so the youth feels empowered throughout the process.
- If necessary, please seek support to prevent or overcome compassion fatigue/secondary trauma.

Engagement with Sex Trafficking Survivors

Characteristics of Sex Trafficked Youth

Sex trafficked youth come from all demographics. Traffickers frequently target individuals who lack social supports, are experiencing financial hardship, have experienced abuse in the past, and/or have been marginalized from society. LGBTQ youth are more vulnerable to sex trafficking as they face higher rates of discrimination, violence, and economic instability. Potential red flags include but are not limited to:

- history of sexual abuse;
- history of running away or current status as a runaway;
- involvement with the juvenile justice system;
- expensive gifts, clothing, or electronic devices;
- presence of, or communication with, an older controlling person;
- withdrawal or lack of interest with previous activities;
- gang involvement.

Engagement Recommendations

Establishing physical, emotional, and psychological safety is critical in building a successful relationship with trafficked and exploited youth. Clarify the purpose of the conversation. Inform youth that you are asking questions in order to offer help.

Be aware of factors that may hinder engagement:

- Survivors rarely self-identify, or even realize they have been trafficked. It is difficult for survivors to reach out for help, especially LGBTQ youth who fear that they will not receive adequate assistance due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Encourage the youth to tell their story without interruptions or interjections.
- Survivors may justify and rationalize the exploitative relationship. They may be unaware of rights and services or ashamed of admitting victimization.
- There may be cultural barriers that hinder communication about sensitive personal issues.
- Survivors may fabricate or change stories many times due to a fear of the trafficker or police or a feeling of allegiance to the trafficker. They may experience trauma-bonding (loyalty to a person who is destructive) to the trafficker. It may take time and several interviews to engender trust.

Make sure that survivors have access to food, medical care, and that their basic needs are met.

Establishing long-term and permanent support systems is the final stage of relationship development.

Supportive, advocacy-based relationships include assisting the youth in fulfilling the goals of the case plan and helping them to navigate systems of care.

How Survivors May React

When interviewing and gathering information from survivors, they may re-experience trauma via flashbacks and intrusive thoughts, be easily triggered by certain places, people, or situations, and experience memory loss and hyper-arousal. All of these reactions underscore the need for a referral to a clinician who can provide trauma-informed therapy.

Check in with the youth during the conversation about how they are feeling and do not force them to answer questions. Avoid drawing conclusions or creating case plans based on stereotypes of a youth's culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

Engagement Approach

Demonstrate a compassionate, non-judgmental, and respectful attitude. Show unconditional positive regard for the youth.

Do not press for details if they are not offered; the conversation should not feel like an interrogation. Do not exacerbate the survivor's trauma.

Sex-trafficked youth find it difficult to trust and are more likely to engage in services if they trust the sincerity of the interviewer; active listening skills are important.

Do not ask questions out of curiosity – only ask what you need to know; further forensic interviewing by law enforcement may be required later for assistance in holding the trafficker accountable.

Build on the youth's strengths while also addressing the youth's needs.

Be aware that the youth may have a high level of loyalty to their trafficker. They may be disconnected from the rituals and social norms of their non-trafficked peers.

Understand that readiness for leaving harmful relationships is critical, and that our role is to assess the situation in order to help the youth understand and overcome the complex trauma the youth has experienced.

Be cognizant of the fact that most survivors have experienced abuse, neglect, and other adverse childhood experiences prior to their victimization. Most sex trafficked children have a history of childhood abuse or neglect that began prior to their commercial exploitation.

Messages That Inspire Trust

- Our priority is safety and finding you a safe place to stay.
- We will get you the medical care you need.
- You have a right to live without being exploited and endangered.
- Let's work together to help you become self-sufficient and independent.

For further information on resources, please refer to [Community Assistance to Minor Victims of Sex Trafficking \(DCS-1279A\)](#).