



TIPSHEET

How Schools Can Start a Human Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Program

Human trafficking and child exploitation can happen anywhere. Because schools are designed to be safe spaces full of caring adults, they can also be invaluable places for students and staff to learn about trafficking and exploitation prevention and resources.

School-based prevention programming includes providing universal education to all students and staff and developing protocols for responding to youth who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing trafficking or exploitation. **Program delivery can range from a curriculum for all students and training modules for all staff to a one-time assembly or staff webinar.** School leaders and staff do not need to become experts on trafficking prevention, but they do need to know who to go to for help in the community. Ideally schools develop partnerships with organizations involved in trafficking and exploitation prevention work, such as local and federal law enforcement and human trafficking task forces and coalitions.

When schools engage in trafficking and exploitation prevention work with educators and students, they need to ensure their approach

- is culturally relevant and responsive to student needs;
- offers appropriate activities for students and staff;
- includes experts in the community; and
- is supported by families, students, and school staff on the importance of openly talking about trafficking and exploitation prevention programming in schools.

What Is Human Trafficking?

Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act; the crime hinges on the exploitation of another person. Causing someone under the age of 18 to engage in a commercial sex act, regardless of force, fraud, or coercion is human trafficking under U.S. law. Trafficking victims can be any age, race, gender identity, sex, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, and socioeconomic class.

What Is Exploitation?

Exploitation is treating a person unfairly to benefit from their work. It can involve the use of threats, manipulation, or force to get someone to do something they don't want to do for the benefit of another person.

This tipsheet complements [Building a Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Program: Best Practices for Schools](#), a webinar in the [National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#) (NCSSE) [Human Trafficking and Child Exploitation Webinar Series](#). The tipsheet highlights how K–12 educators can implement a human trafficking and exploitation prevention program and includes specific steps and strategies schools and districts can take, as well as key features of school safety protocols. It also shares related resources.

Steps and Strategies for Implementing Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Programs

A thorough trafficking and exploitation prevention program includes educating staff on risk factors and indicators of trafficking and exploitation, educating parents/caregivers and students about the red flags, and establishing a clear protocol for identifying possible victims and the appropriate response to disclosure from a suspected victim. Prevention can be implemented on a larger or smaller scale. The key is that all students and staff hear the prevention message; this is universal prevention or Tier 1 program implementation. Minimally, schools can have an educational assembly during the school year or incorporate short lessons about human trafficking into a health class, for example. Schools with more capacity for prevention can create or use a curriculum with several lessons to educate students. Finally, schools can do all the above and have staff members who are specially trained to talk individually with students about trafficking and provide support to both students and staff. Bottom line, schools can start small and grow their programs.

Practice Example: In the webinar [Building a Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Program: Best Practices for Schools](#), Prince William County Public Schools trafficking prevention specialists discussed how they grew their human trafficking prevention programming over time and across funding streams. The district began small by providing one-off educational events to students and then expanded their program to educate students about human trafficking (what it is, warning signs, and how to get help). Next, they sought funding to hire human trafficking prevention specialists, who expanded programming to include regular education for students in physical education classes. Then, school social workers focused on providing triage and mental health services to students identified as experiencing human trafficking. Now, the two human trafficking prevention specialists engage in program development, coordinate implementation of the human trafficking prevention lessons, raise awareness of human trafficking, collaborate and coordinate with school staff to identify student needs, and connect students to resources and services.

[The National Human Trafficking Resource Center](#) recommends the following questions for schools to consider when building a trafficking and exploitation protocol:

- What are the laws on human trafficking in my state?
- Is there already another related protocol with parallel reporting steps?
- What are the mandatory reporting obligations for various staff in my school?
- Who is best positioned to be a lead point of contact on human trafficking in my school?

- Would a school-based or district-based protocol be most successful in my area?
- What resources and referrals are available in my area for potential trafficking victims?
- What is my school's relationship with local and federal law enforcement?
- What do I tell the student's parents/guardians?

Additional key considerations include the following:

- **Experts.** Include trafficking and exploitation lived-experience experts to support program development and participate in program delivery. Download [How Schools Can Combat Human Trafficking in Partnership With People With Lived Experience](#), the supplement to NCSSE's [Human Trafficking in America's Schools](#) guide for ideas on how to ethically engage lived-experience experts in prevention efforts in a trauma-informed way.
- **Allies.** Identify champions in the school to support the development and implementation of a prevention program, including staff to deliver the programming and support staff, such as school counselors, social workers, or psychologists, to provide additional support to students.
- **Partners.** Involve community partners, including mental health providers, human trafficking service providers and advocates, parents, and others who can support implementation; gain buy-in from parents and other community members.
- **Strengths.** Emphasize the ways you are already building protective factors through programming, such as healthy relationship classes, social-emotional learning activities, positive school climate, and other prevention programming. Align your human trafficking and child exploitation prevention efforts with these activities.
- **Education.** Access and clarify what the adults in your school know about trafficking and exploitation; what they need to learn; and the best way to deliver training to staff, including risk factors and red flags of trafficking and exploitation. Also identify students' needs (e.g., cultural perspectives, language, developmental ages, and stages).
- **Protocols.** Review or create policies and protocols related to prevention program delivery and Tiers 2 and 3 responses. It is important that all school personnel know the steps to take and the people they should connect with in the event a student reports trafficking, exploitation, or any other issue of concern. [Tools for Educators](#) from the National Human Trafficking Resource Center provides an example of a decision tree for identifying and responding to suspicions of human trafficking.
- **Programming.** Identify how you will deliver programming (e.g., one time or multiple assemblies, curricula throughout the year, integrated across curricula). Remember, it is ok to start small and with intention and build up programming to incorporate explicit trafficking and exploitation prevention programming into other classes.
- **Evaluation.** Plan how you are going to evaluate your program and then use that data to make adjustments or improvements.

Prevention Protocol Example: The Office on Trafficking in Persons has developed a [Toolkit for Building a Human Trafficking School Safety Protocol](#). This toolkit is one of many trafficking prevention protocols available to schools, but we highlight it here as an example of a human trafficking school safety protocol.

Key Features of School Safety Protocols

When offering Tier 1, Universal prevention programming, it is important to have school safety protocols address what to do if a student reports a suspicion of trafficking or exploitation or that they are being trafficked or exploited. In this way, Tier 1 prevention links to Tier 2 interventions, which are focused on students who may have more risk factors or who may be involved in trafficking. The need for Tier 3 interventions might surface after Tier 1 programming is delivered for students who have been trafficked or exploited and are in need of additional services, both in school and in their community, to support their recovery and reintegration into the school community. Because the three tiers are inextricably linked, it is essential to have clear safety protocols for all students.

Human trafficking school safety protocols (HTSSPs) are put in place to ensure that students who are at risk of being trafficked or exploited or are victims of trafficking or exploitation are referred to the appropriate services or programs intended to reduce further victimization. HTSSPs follow individual state-mandated reporting laws and are ideally implemented with the entire school community. HTSSPs include the following actions:

- **Respond.** Quickly respond to suspected or confirmed cases of human trafficking and exploitation.
- **Hear.** Honor student disclosures and reports from others in a trauma-informed, person-centered, and culturally and linguistically responsive way.
- **Protect.** Maintain the confidentiality of students and staff.
- **Contact.** Reach out to the appropriate authorities (e.g., child welfare, law enforcement) when potential victims are identified.
- **Communicate.** Confidentially talk with parents, guardians, or caregivers (if the safety of the student is not compromised by disclosing) regarding concerns that their child has or may have experienced human trafficking.
- **Refer.** Identify appropriate organizations for referral services and maintain and update victim referrals.
- **Monitor.** Collect and report data on the number of victims identified through training of students, educators, and other staff.

Protocol Template Example: The San Diego County Office of Education developed [this protocol template](#) to use in suspected or confirmed cases of sexual exploitation or trafficking in schools. This tool describes different levels of response to suspected grooming, victimization, and confirmed cases of victimization and includes space to identify local law enforcement and child welfare contacts. This template can be customized by other school districts to use in their prevention education and is just one example of many.

Additional Resources

General Resources

- If you suspect labor or sex trafficking or child exploitation, report it. Follow your internal school process if there is one. Call the National Human Trafficking Hotline for guidance by dialing 1-888-373-7888. The [Hotline website](#) also has information about safety planning, general information about trafficking, statistics, human trafficking support service directors, and more. In many states, human trafficking and child exploitation require a report to Child Protective Services. The U.S. Department of Labor should be contacted if you suspect a student might be a victim of labor trafficking or unfair labor practices.
- [U.S. Department of Education, Human Trafficking](#)
Offers a dedicated webpage with helpful federal resources for administrators, teachers, specialized instructional support personnel, parents, caregivers, and students to combat trafficking.

Resources Leadership Can Use to Educate School Staff

- [ACF/HHS National Human Trafficking Prevention Framework](#)
Offers 8 strategies and 32 approaches that can prevent human trafficking and its recurrence (primary and secondary prevention) while promptly identifying and reducing harm caused by human trafficking (secondary and tertiary prevention).
- [Addressing Human Trafficking in America's Schools Staff Development Series](#)
Provides a three-part staff development series; includes brief videos that provide information key to identifying potential trafficking, generating appropriate school-level responses, and efforts to prevent trafficking of students. Each video includes comments by both content and lived-experience subject matter experts, as well as reflection questions for educators to consider individually or as a group.
- [SOAR for School-Based Professionals](#)
Provides training for school staff so that they can recognize indicators of trafficking in school settings, utilize a trauma-informed approach, develop a trafficking response protocol, and coordinate services to trafficked students with community partners.

Resources Educators Can Use to Support Programming for Students

- [Addressing the Growing Problem of Domestic Sex Trafficking in Minors through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports](#)
Highlights the broader issue of domestic minor sex trafficking and suggests a framework for integrating school-based prevention and intervention strategies through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).
- [Human Trafficking Framework for Instructional Programming in Schools](#)
Provides foundational information about trafficking and best practice suggestions for schools to address it.

Resources Staff Can Use to Support Students

- [How to Talk with Youth About Human Trafficking an Exploitation Tipsheet](#)
Offers strategies K–12 educators can use to talk with youth about human trafficking and exploitation.
- [Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Strategies for Vulnerable Students Tipsheet](#)
Provides strategies for building protective factors for students who are vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.

Resources for Establishing Protocols

- [Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children \(CSEC\): Recommended Protocols for Schools](#)
Provides a protocol to use in suspected or confirmed cases of sexual exploitation or trafficking in schools. This tool describes different levels of response to suspected grooming, suspected victimization, and confirmed cases of victimization and includes space to identify local law enforcement and child welfare contacts.
- [Office on Trafficking in Persons Toolkit for Building a Human Trafficking School Safety Protocol](#)
Helps schools and districts plan, develop, and implement a human trafficking school safety protocol, ensuring consistent support is offered to all students impacted by trafficking.

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