Human Trafficking Impact on Youth

TRAFFICKED CHILDREN CAN EXPERIENCE COMPLEX TRAUMA

Information for Caregivers


Complex Trauma

Traffickers use many different methods to control their victims. Methods include psychological manipulation and coercion as well as physical violence. What’s important to remember, is that these methods often destroy the physical and psychological defenses a child needs in order to escape. The first step in understanding the impact of human trafficking is to be aware of all that happened to a youth who was trafficked. Here are just some of the methods traffickers have used to control children (IOM, 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2003):

- Physical, sexual and psychological violence
- Isolation
- Sent to work in areas unknown to them
- Dependence on alcohol and drugs
- Controlled access to food and water
- Monitoring through use of weapons, cameras and dogs

Children who are victims of trafficking experience complex trauma. Not only do they experience physical and sexual abuse, but their trauma is compounded by the actions a trafficker uses to manipulate and control them. Complex trauma takes into account the cumulative effects of these types of trauma and the fact they are compounded because the person causing the trauma is someone the child relies on to meet her or his needs. Below are some ways trafficking impacts youth educationally, physically, emotionally and behaviorally. Learning all you can about trafficking will help you be better prepared to care for these youth.

Educational Challenges

- Trafficked children often lack access to educational opportunities.
- Learning may be impacted by their exhaustion from working long or late hours, the use of drugs or alcohol, or their lack of physical or emotional well-being.
- Both of the above can result in poor academic performance and delays in cognitive and psychological functioning.

“Under conditions of constant threat, youths’ internal resources go toward survival. When their bodies and minds have learned to be in chronic stress response mode, they may have trouble thinking a problem through calmly and considering multiple alternatives; find it hard to acquire new skills or take in new information; struggle with sustaining attention or curiosity or be distracted by reactions to trauma reminders; show deficits in language development and abstract reasoning skills; or have learning difficulties that may require academic support.”

(Cook, et.al. 2003)
The combination of adverse educational outcomes, physical and emotional problems and adverse behavioral outcomes places children who are victims of trafficking on a particularly challenging path to recovery.

Health Challenges
- Conditions such as inhumane living conditions, poor diet and hygiene, ongoing physical abuse, and lack of access to health care and protection can result in long-term health problems.
- Unsafe sexual practices also contribute to health issues such as unplanned pregnancies, dangerous abortion practices and sexually transmitted diseases.

Emotional Challenges
- Emotional trauma can be caused by isolation and/or removal from families, homes, friends, schools and communities.
  - "Emotional well-being is often jeopardized by the psychological abuse (threats, isolation, and witnessing abuse of others) human trafficking survivors sustain."
  - Depression, hopelessness, guilt, shame, flashbacks, nightmares, loss of confidence, lower self-esteem, and anxiety are common experiences of trafficking survivors.
  - Survivors of human trafficking may also experience emotional and social withdrawal or isolation.
  - These children may also be more likely to experience "symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and suicide."

Behavioral Challenges
It is important for caregivers to understand how trauma shapes the brain. "Unwanted behaviors" are often hardwired in and not committed by the child out of spite or because they choose to not control themselves.

Behavioral challenges observed in youth who have been trafficked include:
- Attachment difficulties, mistrust of adults, antisocial behaviors and problems relating to others frequently observed in these children.
- Increased risk of sexualized behavior
- Self-harm
- Detachment through use of drugs or alcohol
- Hostile and aggressive behavior
- Suicidal behaviors and emotional problems

NCTSN’s white paper on complex trauma provides a good summary of how trauma impacts the brain and in turn the behavior of children. “A child with a complex trauma history may be easily triggered or “set off” and is more likely to react very intensely. The child may struggle with self-regulation (i.e., knowing how to calm down) and may lack impulse control or the ability to think through consequences before acting. As a result, complexly traumatized children may behave in ways that appear unpredictable, oppositional, volatile, and extreme.” (Cook, et.al. 2003)

To view the complete articles please visit:
http://www.nctsnet.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/edu_materials/ComplexTrauma_All.pdf

See the next page to complete a worksheet designed to help review what you learned in this article.
A place to capture key learning

Answer the following questions to capture what you have learned. Sharing what you learned with someone else – a partner, colleague, or caseworker is another way to make sure you’ll remember the key points.

### KEY LEARNING POINTS

1. Why do children who are trafficked have increased risk for educational challenges?

2. List three health challenges faced by children who have been trafficked.

3. What are some emotional challenges of children who have been trafficked?

4. List potential adverse behaviors of children who have been trafficked.

5. Based on what you learned about the complex nature of trauma these children experience, what skills or experience do you have that could help you provide good care to these children?

6. What additional knowledge, skills or resources will you need to care for children who have been trafficked?