

A photograph of three young children sitting together on a concrete surface, laughing and smiling. The child on the left is a toddler with dark hair, wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and dark pants. The child in the middle is a young girl with blonde hair, wearing a white t-shirt with colorful paint splatters and dark pants. The child on the right is a young girl with dark hair, wearing a floral patterned dress and dark pants. They are all barefoot. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a white fence and some greenery.

# 10 Ways

# to protect Your Child

from human traffickers





# 10 Ways to Protect Your Child from Human Traffickers

## *My child has been taken...*

Those unspeakable words rank near the top of a parent's worst fears.

Yet few parents understand the real threat of human trafficking, nor do they take meaningful measures to protect their children from this horrific reality.

Most of us live in communities we feel are safe. If we protect our child from bullying at school or on social media, and carefully monitor their whereabouts, we feel we've got the important bases covered. *Human trafficking? That's something that happens in other parts of the world or the large city hours away.* We think it always happens "somewhere else."

**Reality Check: the threat of human trafficking is very real, and as close as your own neighborhood. No place on earth is outside the reach of modern-day slavery.**

Is there nothing we can do to protect our children then? Should we give up? No. Thankfully, there are many ways we can protect our loved ones from traffickers, but putting our heads in the sand and telling ourselves "What we don't know can't hurt us" isn't one of them!

Arming yourself with information is a crucial first step. If you follow simple strategies like the **10 Ways to Protect Your Child** outlined below, you will greatly reduce your family's vulnerability. But don't stop there. Share this article; tell as many as will listen, so that this knowledge will help protect others.

**First, let's dispel some popular myths and half-truths about human trafficking:**

**MYTH:** Human traffickers are usually strangers who trick children into getting into their vehicles and then whisk them away, so if I teach my children about "stranger danger," they are safe.

**TRUTH:** Most human traffickers are people a child already knows and trusts, such as a relative (uncle, aunt, or older cousin), a boyfriend, or someone in their community. "Frontline" traffickers are middlemen (or women) who've been enticed by the offer to make "easy money" by deceiving or seducing someone they know. That person then hands them off to others who break down the victim's will to resist through intimidation, beatings, rape, forced drug dependence—or a combination of those methods—before final placement into sex slavery or other forced servitude.

**MYTH:** Human traffickers target those who live in poor neighborhoods, those who are abused by parents, or are loners; my child is safe because she's a straight-A student with lots of friends.

**TRUTH:** Although traffickers do target the aforementioned children because they have already been traumatized and desire to escape their current situations, traffickers

also target “good” kids from average and even upscale neighborhoods. Such kids usually fetch more money on the black market. They are generally healthier, and considered less tainted. Maneuvering such children into a place of vulnerability, however, can be more difficult and time consuming. Strategies include befriending the victim on social media, or becoming a doting older boyfriend to win their trust.

**MYTH:** Human traffickers only look for girls, so my boys are safe.

**TRUTH:** A quarter of all trafficked children are boys, and this percentage is increasing. Although boys are often trafficked for sex slavery, many become slave labor for certain industries like fishing, or in factories. Homeless boys and girls (due to poverty, natural disaster, war, or who are runaways) are at greatest risk of being trafficked.

Now that you have a better understanding of the threat, here are **10 ways you can help protect your child from human trafficking**:

1. **Provide your children with a firm emotional foundation** by setting a high standard for love in your home. Modeling what love truly is will help kids spot the many counterfeits in our world. Your children need to learn that real love has healthy boundaries, such as being able to say no to those who seek to manipulate or take advantage of them. They need to know that flattering words or extravagant gifts do not prove love, and they need to know there are people who will selfishly use such strategies against them to get what they want.

Unfortunately, many parents don’t have a firm emotional foundation themselves, and have little—or even twisted—guidance to offer their kids. Co-dependency and other crippling disfunctions are all too common in our culture today. Parents who can honestly recognize their shortcomings are wise to seek help from books, mentors, counselors, seminars and other helpful resources to strengthen their families.

2. **Talk to your children about sexual abuse.** This can be very difficult, so do not hesitate to enlist some guidance from others who model good parenting, or find resources on the internet. (The nature of this conversation will vary widely depending on the age and maturity of each child.) Boys and girls need to know what sexual abuse means, and that there are places on their bodies that no one should touch except themselves or a healthcare provider—in your presence. Take care not to communicate shame associated with body parts. Children need to know how to say no, and how to escape a situation where another person will not respect their wishes. Make sure you have this talk with your children before extended-family gatherings that will include spending unsupervised time with older cousins, aunts and uncles, etc. Don’t suggest to your children that their relatives might be sex abusers, of course, but don’t naively trust relatives simply because they are “family.” Many children have been traumatized—and some repeatedly so—in such unprotected situations. Remember, human traffickers (and sexual abusers) are most often individuals a child already knows and trusts.



(Note: Even if your child is not trafficked as a direct result of sexual abuse at a family gathering, such trauma, if unreported and untreated, will significantly increase the emotional vulnerability of a child, making them easier targets for traffickers in the future.)

3. **Talk to your children about sex trafficking**—an equally difficult subject. Like conversations about sexual abuse, parents are often fearful of “putting ideas in the heads” of their children. This fear has some merit (especially if not planned or executed poorly), but is minimal compared to the dangers of keeping your children in the dark. And a well-planned, age-appropriate talk with them on these matters—in the context of a loving relationship where they feel safe—will further minimize such risks. It’s also important to “keep the door open” on these subjects so your children feel safe asking questions later, or telling you about their fears or an uncomfortable situation they witnessed or to which they were subjected (such as a peer exposing them to pornography).
4. **Provide firm but reasonable guidelines and policies in your home regarding all media.** Children are exposed to more sexually-suggestive and explicit movies, TV programming, music, and social media than ever before in history—and at ever-earlier ages. *Many parents provide little or no supervision* regarding what their children watch, and even dismiss such concerns as outdated. Teach them that porn is never okay. Human traffickers use such tools to desensitize kids to their advantage.
5. **Talk to your children about the dangers of social media.** Let them know that Facebook and similar apps have a dark side that allows predatory individuals to seek out victims. Tell them to never reveal too much about themselves to people they don’t know (such as their full name, home or email address, school or details of their living situation/habits/interests that identify them or provide information that could be used to lure them) no matter how friendly that person may appear to be. Tell your kids how easy it is for someone to start an account using a fake name and photo, and how a predator can fake personal interest, or claim to have the same interests as your child based on their profile and/or posts.  
  
***WARNING:** Do not let your preteen kids take their cell phones to bed with them, and warn teens that traffickers fish for victims on social media! The hours of 9pm-1am—when kids are often alone in their rooms and on social media—are especially dangerous. Traffickers pose as “understanding friends” to those who are hurt or lonely, or the opposite—someone hurt and lonely themselves, hoping to lure a teen wanting to help.*
6. **Tell your children to never agree to a face-to-face meeting with someone they’ve met on the internet via social media, etc., unless they’ve discussed it with you first.** Remind them that when new “friends” seem “too good to be true” they should proceed with great caution. One can never truly know someone they’ve only met on social media.
7. **Talk about secrets.** Perpetrators will often use secret-keeping to manipulate children. For example, someone might share a porn image or video with your child (via phone, tablet, laptop, or even in person), or be shown someone touching another child inappropriately,

and then be told not to share “their secret” with anyone—with a dire warning of shame or other harm to your child, or another person, if they do. Let your children know they can always talk to you, especially if someone has told them to keep a secret.

8. **Tell your child to never feel ashamed about choosing to leave a situation or relationship where they feel unsafe or are being harmed or threatened.** Explain how predators will try to manipulate them with shame or feign hurt feelings if your child chooses to leave that relationship. Tell them how these can be important signs a person should not be trusted. Real friends will care about your child’s feelings, respect their wishes, and give them space—even if that makes their friend sad or hurt, or causes the relationship to end.
9. **Listen to your child.** Let them know by your words and actions that you are always there for them. Pay attention to what they say to you about new friends, and what you overhear from their conversations with peers. “Listening” also means paying attention to any unusual changes in your child’s behavior. This includes sudden good moods, which may indicate they have met a trafficker in disguise who is now showering them with attention.
10. **Lastly, tell your child that if they are in immediate danger or are being physically harmed they should immediately call 911.** Other important phone numbers are the Runaway Hotline (1-800-Runaway) and the National Human Trafficking Hotline (1-888-3737-888 or text “BeFree” [233733]). Remind your kids you might not be around when they or a friend face potential danger, and that it is very important to have these numbers on speed dial in their phones. (Not in the U.S.? Many other countries have similar hotline resources.)

These 10 suggestions will help protect your child from human trafficking. But use caution when and how you have these conversations with your children. Try not tell them all at once, as this will reduce memory retention and will likely fill them with fear. Cushion these hard truths by sandwiching them in love and affirmation from you. It is very important that they first feel very secure in your family setting. Remind them that there are many more kind, loving people in the world than there are those who would seek to harm and exploit them, but knowing the information you are sharing with them will help them identify the “wolves in sheep’s clothing.”

And remember, there is no better defense than a strong offense: Provide your children with a loving home environment and a wisely-chosen community of friends. Kids who are strong emotionally, have a firm set of values, and live in a supportive, loving family are well protected against the threat of human trafficking. Remember: the best weapon in a human trafficker’s arsenal is ignorance. Be informed. Inform your kids. Share your knowledge with all who will listen.

