

Child Sex Trafficking Competencies for Counselors

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Competent Counselors will:

Intervention Strategies and the Helping Relationship

A. Attitudes and Beliefs

1. Maintain a non-judgmental, open-minded, understanding, and empathic attitude when working with sex-trafficked youth.
2. Acknowledge the importance of maintaining a real, transparent, and honest therapeutic relationship when working with sex-trafficked youth.
3. Remain persistent and determined to provide consistency for youth whose unstable living conditions and/or family dynamics increase vulnerability to child sex trafficking.
4. Remain objective, flexible, and patient towards sex-trafficked youth who may resist help from counselors and avoid reporting due to well-founded fears of physical violence or threats.
5. Maintain a calm and thoughtful attitude towards youth who are disrespectful or “act out.”
6. Maintain a positive and hopeful attitude towards the counselor’s ability to effectively work with sex-trafficked youth and increase awareness about child sex trafficking.
7. Maintain a humble and respectful attitude without abusing, controlling, or forcing a therapeutic relationship with sex-trafficked youth.
8. Maintain a sound mind to clearly understand sex-trafficked youth’s circumstances and make important decisions that prioritize youth’s best interest overall.
9. Be willing to collaborate and consult with colleagues and other services in the community (e.g., medical, psychological, advocacy, legal services) that can help identify and support sex-trafficked youth.
10. Demonstrate a willingness and commitment to continuous learning about child sex trafficking and vulnerable populations.
11. Recognize the importance of providing psychoeducation on child sex trafficking, grooming, and recruitment to youth, adults, and the community.
12. Acknowledge the importance of providing care beyond and in addition to basic needs (e.g., shelter, food, clothes, safety) to sex-trafficked youth.
13. Acknowledge the importance of fostering consistent, healthy, and safe relationships between sex-trafficked youth and adults.

B. Knowledge

1. Possess knowledge of advanced therapeutic interventions that assist children and adolescents escape and/or heal from the impact of child sex trafficking.
2. Possess knowledge of strengths-based approaches to promote positive, resilient, and growth-oriented outcomes with sex-trafficked youth.
3. Possess knowledge of social services offered by government, private, profit, and non-profit organizations available to sex-trafficked youth in the community.

4. Possess knowledge of aftercare services in the community that can support sex-trafficked youth.
5. Possess knowledge of integrated care services in the community that can assist sex-trafficked youth throughout their recovery.
6. Possess knowledge of community resources for children, adults, parents, and family members impacted by child sex trafficking.
7. Possess knowledge of previous mental health scenarios.

C. Skills

1. Create a safe, compassionate, caring, and kind relationship that provides humanness and a humanistic perspective with sex-trafficked youth, groups, and communities.
2. Honestly provide affirmations and validation to sex-trafficked youth during initial encounters.
3. Instill hope, while helping sex-trafficked youth re-envision their life and future.
4. Engage in honest/tough conversations about sensitive topics (e.g., sex, prostitution, health related issues) without judgments, causing embarrassment, or invalidating the youth.
5. Build rapport and trust with sex-trafficked youth by demonstrating unconditional positive regard, empathy, and authenticity.
6. Maintain a positive relationship with sex-trafficked youth while enforcing needed boundaries (i.e., not being too sympathetic).
7. Understand the importance of providing services in youth's preferred language.
8. Foster youth's autonomy and self-determination to empower youth over their bodies, boundaries, identities, stories, and choices.
9. Motivate sex-trafficked youth to acknowledge their accountability and locus of control in their recovery and change.
10. Utilize youth's intelligence and resilience in the process of recovery and healing.
11. Create a supportive relationship with sex-trafficked youth, groups, and communities regardless of their receptivity to receive help and their readiness for change.
12. Practice strong clinical skills (e.g., reflective language, active listening, interpersonal communication skills, mirror vulnerability) that allow sex-trafficked youth to tell their story and reach out covertly, if necessary.
13. Appropriately use confrontation skills (e.g., not using judgmental or confrontational language) when working with sex-trafficked youth.
14. Foster and/or create supportive systems (e.g., case manager, probation officer, strengthening the family) for sex-trafficked youth's successful reintegration into the community through education and job training
15. Provide individualized treatment and necessary services for each child or adolescent.
16. Attend to comorbidity related issues (e.g., substance abuse/use, mental health, trauma) when working with sex-trafficked youth.
17. Seek out educational and training experience to improve their understanding and effectiveness of theoretical knowledge and evidence-based practices (e.g., Solution-

- Focused Therapy, Trust Based Relational Intervention, Motivational Interviewing) for working with sex-trafficked youth.
18. Seek out educational and training experience to improve their understanding and effectiveness of treatment planning and goal setting practices (e.g., break large goals into small doable goals, setting goals and working towards them) for working with sex-trafficked youth.
 19. Teach basic life skills and conflict resolution skills to help sex-trafficked youth deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.
 20. Utilize creative and imaginative interventions to engage with sex-trafficked youth during the therapeutic process.

Trauma and Sex trafficking

A. Attitudes and Beliefs

1. Acknowledge that change, healing, and recovery are non-linear and possible for sex-trafficked youth despite several instances of relapse.
2. Recognize that change, healing, and recovery are long-term processes.
3. Acknowledge what sex-trafficked youth have gone through and that they will likely run away, return to their traffickers, be hesitant to share their experiences, and even reject help.
4. Recognize that all children exposed to sex trafficking are victims and worthy of counseling services regardless of their desire and/or ability to disclose, change, or leave their traffickers or the “lifestyle.”
5. Engage in reflective practices that challenge and/or discard preconceived notions about child sex trafficking, prostitution, and the characteristics of victims and survivors.
6. Acknowledge that due to exploitation and coercion tactics youth’s involvement in sex trafficking behaviors is not a choice.
7. Recognize that working towards removing youth from traffickers is worthwhile.
8. Maintain an attitude free of victim blaming.
9. Acknowledge the importance of addressing personal trauma and attachment when working with sex-trafficked youth.
10. Acknowledge broad conceptualizations, misconceptions, and myths (e.g., victims will always be physically restrained) of sex trafficking that can negatively affect working with sex-trafficked youth.
11. Recognize that child sex trafficking is a complex phenomenon without a simple solution.
12. Acknowledge that perpetrators of child sex trafficking can include pedophiles, traffickers, parents, relatives, or guardians.
13. Acknowledge the importance of focusing on perpetrator targeting practices that may prevent the occurrence of child sex trafficking.
14. Acknowledge that the impact of child sex trafficking does not end when the abuse ends or with the arrest of the trafficker.

B. Knowledge

1. Possess knowledge of the types of trauma (e.g., violence, sexual abuse, intimate partner violence) and the emotional, behavioral, and neurobiological impact of trauma on sex-trafficked youth.
2. Understand how feelings of shame may prevent sex trafficked youth from seeking help or sharing their experiences.
3. Understand that child sex trafficking can cause complex trauma (i.e., exposure to multiple severe traumatic events), which compounds youth's physical and mental health risks.
4. Possess knowledge of the human psychology that informs trauma bonding, a coercive control process similar to Stockholm Syndrome, in which traffickers instill a sense of fear as well as gratitude for being allowed to live.
5. Possess knowledge of all forms of trafficking, including child sex trafficking.
6. Possess knowledge of terminology and slang (e.g., daddy, boyfriend) associated with child sex trafficking.
7. Possess knowledge of common behaviors of child sex trafficking perpetrators including grooming and recruitment tactics used to allure and maintain youth in sex trafficking.
8. Understand power and control mechanisms that influence the relationship between victim and child sex-traffickers.
9. Possess knowledge of coercion and coercive practices used by traffickers to obtain and maintain control of victims.
10. Possess knowledge of exploitation and exploitive practices used by traffickers to obtain and maintain control of victims.
11. Possess knowledge of solicitation behaviors and solicitation charges that may indicate vulnerability or connection to child sex trafficking.
12. Possess knowledge of the pressures and survival modes of sex-trafficked youth.
13. Possess knowledge of anti-social victimization (e.g., bullying) experienced by sex-trafficked youth.

C. Skills

1. Seek out educational and training experience to improve their understanding and effectiveness of trauma-informed (e.g., EMDR, SERVE model) clinical approaches for working with sex-trafficked youth.
2. Seek out educational and training experience to improve understanding and effectiveness of victim centered clinical approaches for working with sex-trafficked clients.
3. Establish measures aimed at protecting sex-trafficked youth from re-victimization.
4. Seek out educational and training experience to improve understanding of suicide prevention, crisis management interventions, and harm-reduction interventions.
5. Seek out educational and training experience to improve understanding and effectiveness of residential trauma-informed care to sex-trafficked youth.

6. Develop knowledge and understanding of child sex trafficking through case studies that improve identification and counseling interventions.
7. Engage in self-care and restorative practices to remain resilient and prevent compassion fatigue, secondary traumatization, burnout, and being jaded.

Assessment for Risk Factors and Indicators

A. Attitudes and Beliefs

1. Acknowledge that child sex trafficking can happen to anyone (e.g., women, men, boys, girls, immigrant children, educated families, kids from "good homes," "problem kids") and anywhere (e.g., rural areas, suburban areas, low-income areas, wealthy areas).
2. Recognize that any child or teen can become involved with risk taking behavior (e.g., drugs, alcohol, sex, sexting, making money, sneaking out, prostitution) that may be associated with or contribute to the vulnerability of sex trafficking.
3. Recognize that sex-trafficked youth will present a spectrum of emotions and symptoms (i.e., there is no "perfect" victim).
4. Recognize that "acting out" or other behaviors of youth labeled as "bad kids" are often manifestations of child sex trafficking.
5. Acknowledge that every sex-trafficked child or teen is unique.
6. Acknowledge the importance of treating underlying mechanisms that increase risk of child sex trafficking and prevent healing and recovery, in addition to the symptomology presented by the youth.

B. Knowledge

1. Understand that sex-trafficked youth seldom self-identify due to denial, fear, shame, stigma, their connections with traffickers, or difficulties with recognizing their situations.
2. Understand that sex trafficked youth may lie, hide the truth, or be reticent to disclose.
3. Possess knowledge of risk factors and indicators of child sex trafficking such as a history of abuse, neglect, domestic violence, homelessness, lack of education, low socio-economic status, mental health disorders (e.g., depression, substance use), delinquency, truancy, and running away.
4. Possess knowledge of risky behaviors associated with child sex trafficking (e.g., unsafe sex).
5. Understand that traffickers may target youth with feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and low self-worth.
6. Understand that youth from broken homes looking for love and acceptance are vulnerable to sex trafficking.
7. Understand that drug or alcohol use in the home is a risk factor for child sex trafficking.
8. Understands that youth labeled as "outsiders" or who are marginalized are vulnerable to sex trafficking.

9. Possess knowledge of populations at-risk and vulnerable to sex trafficking such as youth with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ population, or those who are involved in juvenile detention centers, probation, or foster care.
10. Possess knowledge of child welfare (e.g., consider living situation, emotional vulnerability, risk for being targeted, trauma history, family dynamics) that may increase vulnerability to child sex trafficking.
11. Possess knowledge of online victimization and the use of social media in child sex trafficking.

C. Skills

1. Seek out educational and training experience to improve understanding and effectiveness of comprehensive and holistic assessment procedures.
2. Seek out educational and training experiences to use sex trafficking screening tools (e.g., CSE-IT) appropriate for youth.
3. Seek educational, training, and consultative experiences to identify vulnerable populations within each community (e.g., juvenile detention, homeless shelters, kids running away) within a short period of time.
4. Seek educational, training, and consultative experiences to identify victims and acts of child sex trafficking.
5. Seek educational, training, and consultative experiences to connect small crimes to sex trafficking (e.g., looking for victims previously charged with small crimes due to involvement with a trafficker).
6. Seek training and expertise to efficiently observe behavior (e.g., body language, attitude, social media and phone concealment, romantic relationships with adults) to assess for grooming and child sex trafficking risk.
7. Seek training and expertise to recognize physical signs (e.g., tattoos, dress code) that may indicate grooming and child sex trafficking risk.
8. Seek training and expertise to appropriately interview and probe sex-trafficked youth to assess risk and vulnerability (e.g., read between the lines, elicit answers beyond surface level).
9. Become familiar with community statistics related to child sex trafficking, higher-risk locations, and traffickers in the area.

Ethical Practice

A. Attitudes and Beliefs

1. Acknowledge that children cannot consent to sexual relationships with adults, prostitution, and/or participation in the commercial sex industry.
2. Recognize that child sex trafficking is different than prostitution.
3. Recognize that counselors are at the forefront of efforts to prevent child sex trafficking and that mandated reporting might facilitate protection, identification, and early intervention for sex-trafficked youth.

4. Recognize the importance of understanding child sex trafficking from a law enforcement perspective.

B. Knowledge

1. Possess knowledge of state, federal, and international definitions of child sex trafficking (e.g., United Nations definition, 18 U.S. Code 1591 – Sex trafficking of children or by force, fraud, or coercion, Texas Penal Code).
2. Possess knowledge of child sex trafficking courts and public policies (e.g., National Judicial Institute on Domestic Child Sex Trafficking, the SAVE Act, U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking, child protection compact partnerships, anti-sex trafficking legislation, immunity and diversion programs, affirmative defense).
3. Possess knowledge of laws pertaining to sexual consent among minors (e.g., Romeo and Juliet Law, statutory rape laws, age of consent, age differential).
4. Possess knowledge of child sex trafficking victim rights (e.g., Trafficking Victims Protection Act).
5. Possess knowledge of state, federal, and international legal and ethical implications of child sex trafficking (e.g., UNODC's Model Law against Trafficking in Persons, UN's Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children [Palermo-Protocol]).
6. Possess knowledge of law enforcement procedures regarding child sex trafficking (e.g., officer training practices, FBI Child Exploitation Task Forces, juvenile human trafficking screening checklist).

C. Skills

1. Seek educational, training, and consultative experiences to demonstrate ethical competency (e.g., boundary setting) when working with sex-trafficked youth.
2. Seek educational, training, and consultative experiences to ensure the safety of sex-trafficked youth (e.g., safety planning, risk assessment and reduction skills).
3. Seek educational, training, and consultative experiences to effectively carry out mandated reporting procedures (e.g., do not question youth, alert law enforcement, making a CPS report).

Cultural Diversity and Human Growth and Development

A. Attitudes and Beliefs

1. Commit to cultural humility, competency, and sensitivity; culturally relevant interventions; and social justice advocacy when working with sex-trafficked youth.
2. Acknowledge and deconstruct preconceived biases (e.g., racism, homophobia, anti-immigration), stereotypes, and stigmas of child sex trafficking that may prove detrimental to the counseling relationship.
3. Recognize and respect sex-trafficked youth's diverse background (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation) throughout assessment, recovery, and healing.

4. Recognize the importance of addressing systemic deficiencies (e.g., legal and foster care systems) that increase vulnerability to child sex trafficking and often fail to protect at-risk youth.

B. Knowledge

1. Possess knowledge of norms, mores, behaviors, and values of child and adolescent culture.
2. Possess knowledge of childhood and adolescent development and the impact of trauma.
3. Possess knowledge of brain development and the impact of trauma.
4. Possess knowledge of the intersectionality of privilege and power that may lead to added layers of vulnerability towards child sex trafficking.
5. Possess knowledge of discriminatory norms (e.g., racism, sexism) that affect vulnerable populations of child sex trafficking.

D. Skills

1. Have experience working with youth.
2. Support vulnerable populations particularly those who are already “systems” involved (e.g., youth in probation or in foster care who often do not have control over their lives and are not given agency to make decisions about their personal needs).
3. Seek educational and training experiences to effectively apply developmentally appropriate interventions when working with sex-trafficked youth.
4. Utilize advocacy skills to ensure agencies use trauma-informed practices.
5. Seek educational and training experiences to effectively apply multicultural counseling skills and techniques to provide culturally competent services to sex-trafficked youth, groups, and communities.
6. Seek educational and training experiences to effectively engage in social justice and advocacy activities for sex-trafficked youth, groups, and communities.