



Chapter 5: Trafficking in Children

Glenn Miles, Ph.D., up! Collective, [Chab Dai](#), [Azalea-Flint](#), [GAHTS](#)

Josephine-Joy Wright, Ph.D. Clinical Psychologist, NHS

Haley Clark, M.S. [World Hope International](#)

Arlyn Brunet, Ph.D., [Vivens Organization](#)

Stephanie Goins, Ph.D., [NAITS](#)

Katie Milazzo, M.A., [World Hope International](#)

Adesty Dulawan, [World Hope International](#)

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." [Matthew 19:14](#)

"If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." [Matthew 18:6](#)

Objectives:

- Understand the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and how it is useful to lobby governments and use it in projects.
- Understand the importance of child participation in service provision and research per Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and how this is understood both biblically and also how it relates to survivor engagement.
- Understand how the Adverse Child Experiences (ACEs) toolkit can be used to understand the

vulnerability and resilience of children and how to use them. Understand the Bronfenbrenner ecological approach applied to child development.

- Understand key elements of Psycho-Social and Sexual Development in youth and how these can be impacted by trauma.
- Understand the impact of pornography on children and youth & how to support them in avoiding adverse consequences.
- Identify and understand the impacts of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and its various forms.
- Identify and understand the impacts of Other Forms of Trafficking in Children
- Understanding the importance of Trauma-Informed Aftercare and Child Participation in decision-making about care practices.
- Understand the importance of and how to do effective Child Safeguarding in churches and other community organizations.

Introduction

This comprehensive chapter explores the complex issue of child trafficking through a Christian lens, equipping faith-based practitioners with the knowledge and tools necessary to understand, prevent, and respond to this grave violation of children's rights. The chapter covers a wide range of topics, including the importance of the UNCRC, the impact on child development of children who are sexually abused or exploited at different ages, and the differences between the experiences of boys and girls who are sexually exploited.

Various forms of child trafficking are explored, including child-to-child sexual violence, drug-endangered children, child labor, adoption and fostering, child marriage, and the exploitation of children in conflict and militarized settings. It also examines the dangers of pornography for children and the importance of helping them make informed choices, as well as the connection between pornography and the demand for sexual exploitation.

Additionally the chapter stresses the importance of child protection and safeguarding in churches, faith-based organizations, communities, and emergencies. Case studies and reflective questions are provided to help practitioners apply the concepts to real-life situations. It will delve into the needs of children and young people who are healing from trauma, emphasizing the importance of understanding complex developmental trauma and its impact on the brain and overall development.

As people of faith, we are called to approach the issue of child trafficking with compassion, recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of every child. By integrating spiritual principles and evidence-based practices, we can work towards creating safer environments and supporting the holistic healing and restoration of child survivors. This chapter equips practitioners with the knowledge and tools necessary to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those affected by the devastating realities of child trafficking.

Who is Considered a Child? What is Trafficking in Children?

According to the UNCRC, a child is a human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child the majority of age is attained earlier. To further delineate, youth are considered to be persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Those who meet the definition of a child are offered protection under these guidelines.

When considering trafficking in children, governments, law enforcement, legislators, Non- Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and Faith-Based Organizations (FBO) look to the definitions of trafficking in persons provided by the Palermo Protocol (for a full definition, see [Chapter 1](#)) to determine if a child meets the criteria as a victim of trafficking. Caregivers need to understand that the threshold of meeting these criteria is much less for children. In many countries, they are considered unable to legally consent to the acts they are asked or forced to participate in.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Child Rights are sometimes underestimated but in this section, we will see how it is vital for us to understand them. In 1924 Eglantine Jebb, a Christian developed the Declaration on the Rights of the Child. It was primarily about protecting children and was adopted in 1959. The UN International Year of the Child was in 1979, and then in 1989, the UNCRC was held. All but one member of the UN body (the United States) accepted and ratified rights to protect children. A Summary of the UNCRC in English can be found [here](#). A translation can be found in the UNICEF office of your country.



Eglantine Jebb

“Human Rights Law recognises that children are especially vulnerable and therefore require extra protection as well as extra provision so that they can live and grow” - Judith Ennew

Mieke Holkeboer suggested that human rights are, ‘A Quest for Universal acceptance and Universal commitment to a common morality’ and Michael Ignatief said ‘Human Rights has become a major article of faith of a secular culture that fears it believes in nothing else’. The following are some practical values of the UN’s Rights of the Child document:

- It is Universally accepted
- It is Holistic in nature - physical, emotional, social, spiritual
- It has International Respect in 192 countries
- It provides a 'Lingua Franca' - a common language for all to use.
- It is empowering for NGOs, and of course children

While it is important to think about the rights of children from this global and cultural perspective, those who claim the name of Christ have older and wiser source documents that offer universal rights of dignity.

STOP & THINK

1. In your culture, how are the rights of children perceived? How are children to be protected? What are the responsibilities of children?
2. How does the church view these issues differently than the surrounding culture? Why is it important for FBOs to engage with the UNCRC? How should FBOs go about using children's rights with Governments and NGOs? How can FBOs engage with other secular NGOs using the UNCRC?

Definitions of Rights from a Biblical Perspective

In the context of a Christian approach to child rights, it is essential to understand the fundamental definitions of rights. A **right** is that which is due to a person or group of persons, while **human rights** are moral claims made by individuals or groups on others, based on the conviction of shared humanity.

Universal human rights extend this concept further, asserting that there are certain entitlements to which all human beings everywhere are entitled.

The Bible supports the concept of responsibilities, from which rights can be inferred. The biblical command to love one's neighbor as oneself implies that others have rights that must be respected. The idea of universal human rights is rooted in the belief that all people are created in the image of God, *imago Dei* (see [Chapter 2](#)), endowing each person with inherent dignity and worth. While some criticize rights as too individualistic, a theology of rights views the *Imago Dei* as communal, valuing both individual and collective rights.

The Bible contains numerous appeals to care for and protect the vulnerable, including orphans and widows ([Deuteronomy 10:18, 24:19, 27:19](#); [Psalm 82:3](#); [Isaiah 1:17](#); [Jeremiah 22:3](#)). Jesus himself demonstrated a special concern for children, by welcoming them, listening to them, and holding them up as examples of faith ([Mark 9:30-50, 10:14](#)). The biblical case for child rights is compelling.

The Bible's emphasis on justice, righteousness, and the inherent dignity of all human beings as created in God's image should guide FBOs' approach to child rights. As the largest child welfare institution with a passion for serving the poor, the church has a unique opportunity and responsibility to promote child

rights. This involves listening to children, and protecting children from abuse and neglect, both within the church and beyond. By partnering with like-minded organisations and addressing the root causes of child vulnerability, the church can build a more just and compassionate society for all children. Another such useful tool is [Here We Stand: World Vision and Child Rights](#).

The Effects of Childhood Trauma and Abuse

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur during an individual's childhood. ACEs can occur in the form of direct maltreatment of a child, through physical abuse, verbal abuse, and neglect, or they can be broader experiences (e.g., neighbourhood violence, witnessing violence, experiencing bullying, poverty, homelessness, and being in the foster care system; [Camacho & Henderson, 2022](#)) related to a child's environmental circumstances ([Gershon et al., 2013](#)). These primary home circumstances are referred to as "household dysfunction" experiences. These experiences include living in an environment that consists of domestic abuse between the adults in the household, the presence of mental illness or substance misuse experienced by family members, having an adult member of the household in prison, or experiencing parental separation ([Walsh et al., 2019](#)).

The prevalence of ACEs is high globally. For instance, one study found that approximately half of the population of England had experienced at least one ACE ([Bellis et al., 2014](#)). A recent study of several sub-Saharan African countries revealed that 20% of females and 24% of males experienced three or more ACEs ([Amene et al., 2024](#)). The prevalence of ACEs is higher among disadvantaged populations, such as incarcerated individuals, or those who are unhoused ([Walsh et al., 2019](#)).

STOP & ACT

[Take the ACEs Quiz](#) or for guidance on administering the ACEs see the [World Health Organization's Adverse Childhood Experiences International Questionnaire](#).

1. What was your ACEs score?
2. How might your adverse childhood experiences affect you?
3. What resilience factors were present in your life (see [Chapter 4](#) for a review)?

Ecological Systems Theory and Resilience Factors

Experiencing ACEs can lead to poor mental health outcomes, as they increase the likelihood of mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders. Additionally, experiencing ACEs also increases risks for problematic health conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or heart disease ([Kalmakis, 2014](#)). For more information see [Chapter 6: Understanding the Physical Health Needs of Survivors](#).

Experiencing ACEs does not necessarily guarantee that an individual will experience poor health outcomes. Previous research has identified several individual and societal level factors that act as buffers such that they reduce the detrimental impacts of ACEs. The role of these factors is best understood through the application of the Ecological Systems Theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1994).

The Ecological Systems Theory posits that human development is influenced by the relationship between individuals and their environment, which occurs in multi-layered systems the individual interacts with and develops within (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 as cited by Lopez et al., 2021). When applied to ACEs, the Ecological Systems Model can demonstrate multilevel factors that impact individual risk and resilience related to experiencing ACEs. For instance, previous research has shown that healthy emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and internal motivation, are protective when experiencing ACEs (Cohrdes & Mauz, 2019). At the micro systemic level, researchers have found that factors such as parenting styles, positive peer relationships, access to healthcare services, and access to quality education decrease the likelihood that an individual will experience negative health outcomes despite experiencing ACEs (Powell et al., 2021), thereby acting as resilience factors. When working with child survivors of trafficking, caregivers need to consider both the ACEs the child has experienced as well as resiliency factors that can promote better outcomes throughout their healing processes. ACEs and resiliency factors will be different for each child. Placing the same growth and recovery rate expectations on children will result in frustrated child survivors and frustrated, burned-out caregivers. Patience is required. For more information on resiliency, see [Chapter 4: Trauma-Informed, Dignity Inspired Aftercare](#).

STOP & THINK

1. What are ACEs? Describe a situation in your local area that would qualify as an ACE. Discuss the impact on the child.
2. Why is it important to know about ACEs and whether one has experienced them?
3. What are some possible protective factors that buffer against the impact of ACEs.
4. How can your program build systems to encourage growth in resiliency for children who have experienced trafficking?

Effects Of Abuse, Trauma, and Trafficking on the Brain and Development

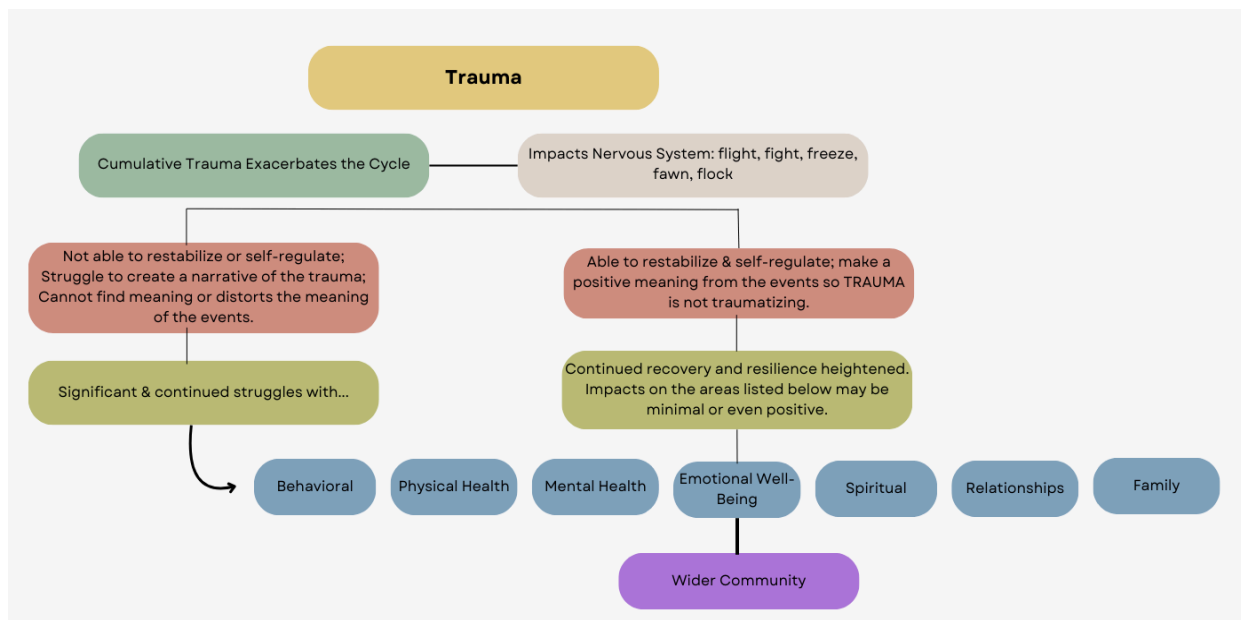
To understand what traumatised children and young people need, we need to understand how trauma impacts their current and future development. In [Chapter 4: Trauma-Informed, Dignity-Inspired Aftercare](#), the typical response to threats to safety was discussed as well as how repeated trauma can lead to more extensive and holistic concerns for survivors of trafficking. Those will be discussed in more depth for adults in the following chapters. However, it is necessary in this chapter to discuss the effects of abuse on the development of children.

One concern for those sustaining ACEs and trafficking is the development of Complex Developmental Trauma (DT). DT is an integrative term that encompasses exposure to multiple, chronic, or recurrent

traumatic experiences and the wide-ranging and long-term impact of these experiences (Ford, [2021](#); [2023](#)). It emphasizes the difficulties which arise from a person's efforts to endure and adapt to adversity ([Hughes et al. 2017](#); [Liming & Grube, 2018](#)). DT results from interpersonal trauma, and can be perpetuated by caregivers when an expectation of safety is not met, forcing the individual to see the world as unsafe. Being trafficked often involves both threat and deprivation. Thus, the traumatized child and their family and community are dealing with the impacts of:

- **Any pre-trafficking trauma and deprivation** present. This is typical of many trafficked children as most have a high number of ACEs.
- **The trauma and deprivation of being trafficked.**
- **The child is unable to fulfil the developmental tasks of healthy development** due to deprivation or the psychological, physical and social consequences of trauma and living in an environment of perpetual fear such as not being provided with a secure, reliable, attuned, responsive environment to learn to trust ([Holmes, 2019, 2020](#)), thus jeopardizing their ability to achieve the other tasks of development, including participating in learning/education and in making and sustaining healthy relationships ([Hughes, 2018](#)).

Figure 1: Variations in the Impact of Trauma. Figure by Josephine-Jo Wright, Ph.D.



Epstein ([2014](#)) stated that the ability to develop a coherent narrative of the trauma and its sequelae and to find meaning within and from it, significantly influences our recovery. He argues that traumas trigger four questions within us:

1. Am I worthy/unworthy – do I have intrinsic value as I am?
2. Are other people trustworthy or untrustworthy?
3. Is life meaningful or meaningless?
4. Is the world benevolent or malevolent?

The effects of traumatic events can be influenced by a number of factors depending on the specific nature of the event. These are some to consider:

- Event severity - How badly was the child hurt, could have been hurt, and how close were they to where the event happened?
- What was the child's age at the time of the event?
- What personal characteristics, such as temperament or prior mental health challenges existed?
- Did anyone stop the abuse or trauma or attempt to help?
- Did the child feel they could tell anyone or did they feel scared or guilty about telling?
- Did they react horrified, shamed, or dismissive?
- Did others believe the child's story? Did they show care and concern?
- Was the trauma caused by a known person or a stranger? Should the child have been able to trust to a certain level of safety or protection?
- Did the trauma occur once or multiple times? Over how long a period of time did abuse happen?
- Did events result in long-lasting disruptions to daily life?
- Did the child have exposure to other traumatic events?

For trafficked children, who are often harmed physically, sexually, and emotionally, the answers to the questions are usually the worst-case scenarios. They are often not protected, believed, or cared for. Abuse is typically repeated and is often caused by those they should be able to trust. To understand the impact of childhood maltreatment, we need to examine the impact of such traumas on the developing child's brain in more detail.

Effect of Developmental Trauma on the Brain

Developmental trauma is theorized to start from early interpersonal trauma. However, it may also result from the lack of a secure attachment relationship, which would have protected the developing individual during early trauma events. For example, a child who, within the context of a securely attached relationship with their caregiver, is exposed to abuse, is likely to respond more positively than one who is exposed to the same abuse yet lacks a secure attachment.

Exposure to complex developmental trauma in early childhood can lead to structural and functional brain changes, particularly in the amygdala, the alarm center of the brain, and in the hippocampus, a brain area critical to memory consolidation or remembering the narratives of our lives. Additionally, children who live with chronic stress often begin adulthood with a depletion in stress hormones necessary to tolerate and recover from normal stressful daily life events, which may lead to later problems with metabolic syndromes such as diabetes and heart problems ([Johnson et al., 2013](#)).

Role of Sensitive Periods in the Impact of Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Development

While not all people who endure traumatic events develop PTSD, several important developmental factors contribute to risk for PTSD, including childhood adversity and hormonal activation. As the neural circuitry of fear responses develops, several putative sensitive periods emerge when trauma exposure may be particularly detrimental. It is important to fully understand the timing of such sensitive periods in order to apply optimal intervention and prevention strategies in children.

There are 3 natural periods in development where children are especially susceptible to change.

1. **Early Childhood (0-5 years):** Brain development is rapid. Any exposure to ACEs, during this period of development may hinder healthy development ([Webster, 2022](#)).
2. **Adolescence (12-18):** The brain is experiencing neural pruning and individuals are seeking a sense of identity.
3. **Early adulthood (19-25):** This period is crucial for developing self-efficacy, pursuing meaning, and exposure to opportunities for success. These developmental transitions are periods of vulnerability and opportunity.

The figure below (taken from [Stevens et al, 2018](#)) shows the putative timing for the primary factors that increase the risk for PTSD during development such as early deprivation, child abuse and trauma exposure, and activation of gonadal hormones. In contrast, factors that decrease the risk for PTSD include maternal protection and social support. In the aftermath of early deprivation, enriched environments have been shown to potentially mitigate negative risk.

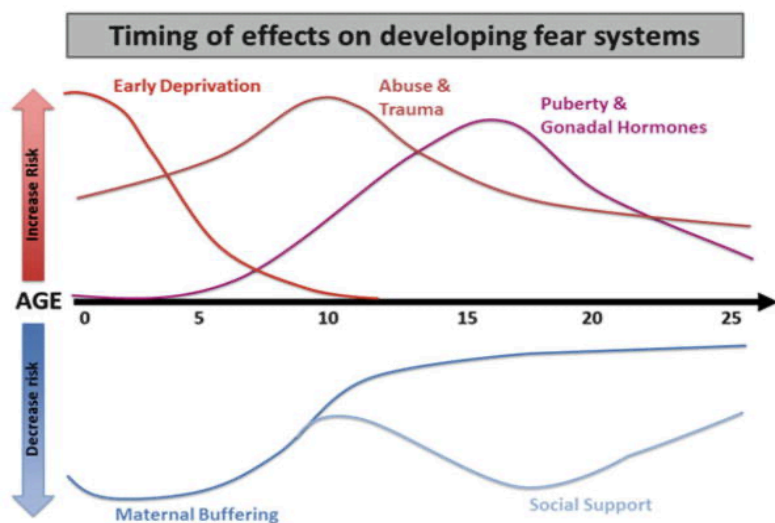
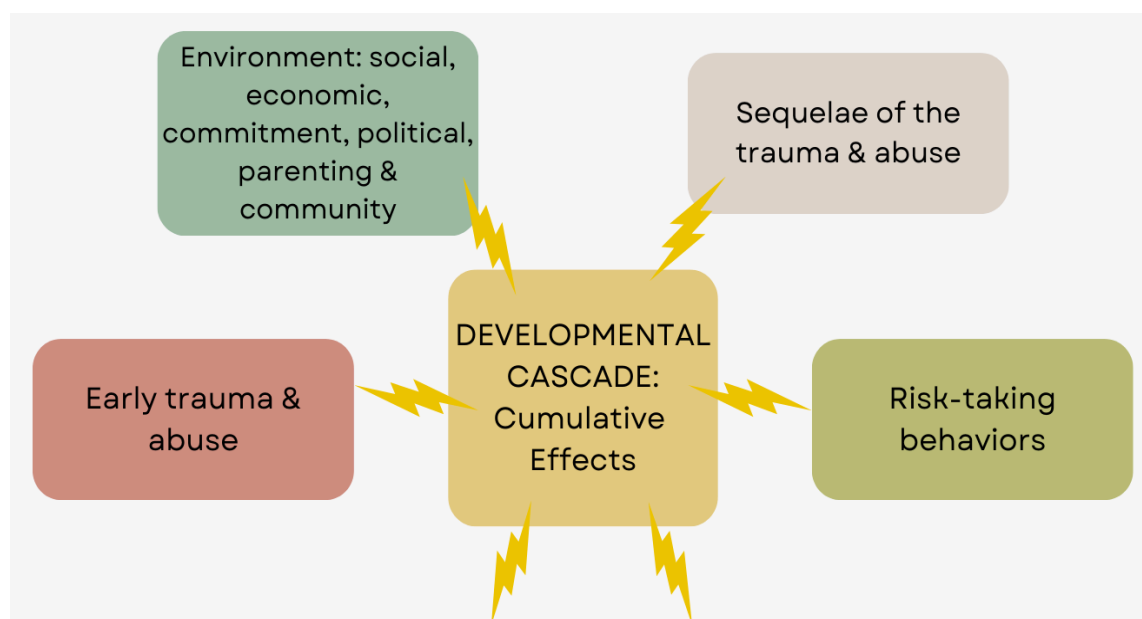


Figure 2: Timing Effects of Developing Fear Systems in 0-25 yr olds (Stevens, 2018)

Figure 2: Timing Effects of

It is also important to consider the framework of developmental cascades to the study of risk and development of trafficked children. Masten and Cicchetti (2010), define developmental cascades as “the cumulative consequences for development of the many interactions and transactions occurring in developing systems that result in spreading effects across levels, among domains at the same level, and across different systems or generations.” (p. 491). This framework can be used to explain the impact of family systems on individual child development and the relationship between one area of development on another. It encompasses the impact of one system on another area of development, such as the connection between ACE exposure in childhood and health outcomes in adulthood; this negative type of developmental cascade is also referred to as a risk cascade.

Figure 3: The Developmental Cascade from Trauma and Abuse. Diagram by Josephine-Jo Wright, Ph.D.



Conversely, a positive developmental cascade may be triggered by the impact of an intervention that promotes a healthy developmental trajectory that has lasting effects. This type of cascade is evident in the research on the effectiveness of interventions in early childhood that promote skills for school readiness and parental education that alter the predicted course of development and have a lasting impact (Webster, 2022).

STOP & THINK

1. When considering ACEs and developmental trauma...
 - a. How much abuse/trauma do you suspect in your community (include your church community in this discussion as well)?
 - b. What impacts can you see on children and their long-term outcomes? Give examples and discuss from within your communities.

2. What resilience factors or positive developmental cascades do you see in your community that can be engaged to promote more well-being for children in your community?
3. In Chapter 12, we will discuss community engagement, but for now, briefly discuss how a project led by your local congregation could help develop resilience and positive developmental cascades in your community.

Childhood Trafficking and Post-Traumatic Stress

Human trafficking is a form of interpersonal trauma that has significant mental health impacts on survivors; the experience of being trafficked, especially in the case of childhood victims who may have been trafficked by a family member or other trusted person, is itself a lasting complex trauma that impacts all aspects of normal physical and mental health and development.

Many survivors of human trafficking face a compounded impact. The initial developmental trauma made them vulnerable to the subsequent manipulation and trauma of trafficking itself. Developmental trauma is already complex and layering on human trafficking makes the situation much worse.

Trafficked children are frequently exposed to multiple traumatic events, including during their recruitment, transit, and exploitation. It has been hypothesized that such exposures can lead to the development of Complex PTSD (C-PTSD) which includes (in addition to the core PTSD symptoms of re-experiencing, avoidance, and hyperarousal) disturbances in emotional regulation, dissociation, self-concept, interpersonal relationships, somatization, and systems of meaning. C-PTSD is more prevalent for children with repeated trauma and trafficking backgrounds than for those who experience single event traumas ([Hooper et al., 2018](#); [Ottisova et al., 2018](#)). Thus, repeated exposures to traumatic events leads to higher rates of symptoms and developmental concerns.

Although there were no significant differences in the prevalence rates of diagnoses of PTSD or depression between survivors of sex and labor trafficking, important group differences are identified. Compared to survivors of labor trafficking, sex trafficking survivors had higher prevalence rates of pre-trafficking childhood abuse and a higher incidence of physical and sexual violence during trafficking. They reported more severe post-trauma reactions than labor trafficking survivors, including more PTSD and C-PTSD symptoms and higher rates of co-occurring depression.

Effect of Complex Developmental Trauma on a Child's Overall Development

The traumas that trafficking inflicts have all-embracing consequences on a child's development. These consequences are mediated by the impact of the traumas on the developing brain. Case studies of victims suggest that childhood sexual exploitation (CSE) is physically and emotionally damaging for the victim because of the persistent physical, sexual, spiritual, and psychological abuse that accompanies it. Some children die as a result of abuse and exploitation; others disappear ([Hansen et al., 2019](#)).

Trafficked children experience both direct sequelae from the trauma and abuse, and also indirect consequences due to significant alterations to children's cognitive, emotional, physiological, and relational capacities. As a result, they experience widespread disruptions to their academic, social, and occupational functioning. These include:

- **Educational Deprivation:** Children who are trafficked are robbed of the few educational opportunities available to them and, thus, a chance to improve their future economic situation. Physical and psychological neglect and abuse result in developmental delays and cognitive difficulties such as attention, concentration, language, and deficits in verbal and memory skills, leading to poorer academic performance. Living in persistent states of fear and terror, and recurring traumas become a transformative developmental experience that alter their global appraisals and future responses to stress, which disrupts self-awareness, information processing, interpersonal communication, and mastery of age-appropriate developmental competencies particularly in building healthy relationships. These struggles can lead to problems with learning.
- **Behavioral Problems:** Adverse behavioural outcomes, including attachment difficulties, mistrust of adults, antisocial behaviours, and difficulties relating to others, have been widely reported among children who are trafficked. Research suggests that childhood sexual abuse that involves force/penetration leads to a higher rate of riskier sexual behaviors as adults ([Senn et al., 2006](#)). Evidence also exists that for some, early childhood abuse is one factor leading to early entry into sex work ([Oralia Loza et al., 2010](#); [Shah et al., 2023](#); [Shokoohi et al., 2022](#)). They are also at greater risk for substance abuse and are at increased risk for violence, antisocial behaviours, and related problems as they struggle to work with their feelings or use their behaviour to communicate their pain.
- **Complex Emotional and Spiritual Problems:** Children who have been trafficked often struggle with their sense of self and have very low self-worth and self-esteem which puts them at risk of further abuse, attachment disorders, and difficulties with working with interpersonal sensitivities, dynamics and conflicts, leading to consistent problems in relationships, with peers, adults, and primary caregivers, encountering ongoing high rates of exposure to family and community violence. They often experience disorders of control such as eating disorders and Obsessive Compulsive Disorders. They often struggle to differentiate between people who are safe, or not safe, as well as struggling with spiritual concepts such as God as a safe, loving father. McLaughlin and colleagues ([2019](#)) suggest that children who have experienced severe adversity or developmental trauma are not able to adjust their behaviour effectively to shifting environments or demands, regardless of threatening and non-threatening circumstances. This inability can lead to an increased risk of experiencing avoidance, anger, frustration, and anxiety as primary ways of being in the world even when the world is safe, therefore detrimental to an individual's development and their ability to function, especially when needs are not met.
- **Health Problems:** Several studies have shown high rates of co-occurrence between PTSD and other mental health disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, panic, phobias, and psychotic disorders), and metabolic syndromes ([Kratzer et al., 2022](#)). Related research has also identified many adverse health outcomes for children who have been abused, maltreated, and victimized ([Mehta et al., 2021](#); [Strathearn et al., 2020](#)). As [ECPAT International](#) has documented, victims of child trafficking experience inhumane living conditions, inadequate diet and hygiene, beatings and abuse, neglect, and denial of basic human rights to health care and protection, resulting in lasting health problems. They are often further threatened by unsafe sexual practices, heightening risks of

unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, complications from frequent high-risk pregnancies; and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.

The Impacts of Child Sex Abuse and Child Sexual Exploitation

Sexual Abuse and Psychosocial Developmentally Expected Responses

Child sexual abuse (CSA) occurs when adults engage in sexual activities with minors, as individuals under the age of 18 cannot consent to sexual activities. However, sexual abuse can also occur when a child is sexually harmed by another child or youth ([Gewirtz-Meydan & Finkelhor, 2019](#); [Kloppon et al., 2016](#)). Children and adolescents can respond to sexual abuse in a variety of different ways, as responses are moderated by several individual factors such as temperament, social support, age, and the experience of other adverse life experiences. Further, responses to sexual abuse may be dependent upon whether the child perceives the abuse as abuse or has the vocabulary necessary to report the abuse to a safe adult ([Brennan & McElvaney, 2020](#)). Some children show increased fear, and therefore, may refuse to be away from their parents or caregivers while others experience increased anxiety due to feeling vulnerable and develop a sense of poor self-esteem ([Gewirtz-Meyaan & Finkelhor, 2019](#)). Additionally, due to early socialization regarding sexual behaviors, some children may experience embarrassment and guilt after experiencing sexual abuse, thus making them less likely to report instances of abuse. Due to the physical trauma and emotional turmoil caused by sexual abuse, children may begin to isolate or draw away from contact with others ([Gewirtz-Meyaan & Finkelhor, 2019](#)). They may refuse to speak and regress developmentally by sucking their thumbs, begin to wet the bed again, and may experience increased difficulties sleeping due to nightmares, refusing to sleep alone, and crying at bedtime.

Experiencing sexual abuse can lead to similar actions of isolation responses in adolescents, as they may pull away socially from their friends and families. Further, after experiencing sexual abuse, adolescents may exhibit poorer performance and attendance in school. Some adolescents may display externalizing symptoms, such as physical and verbal aggression or begin to drink alcohol, and other substance use, predominantly marijuana. In most cases, adolescents may develop PTSD symptoms, depression, or anxiety due to the experienced sexual abuse ([Mainali, et al., 2023](#)).

STOP & THINK

1. What is child sexual abuse? In your community, how is child sex abuse viewed?
2. What are some possible responses that children may display after experiencing sexual abuse?
3. What are some behavioral responses that adolescents may display due to experiencing sexual abuse?
4. **Brief case study:** Cara tells a worker in the safe house about her early childhood abuse. She notes, ‘When I was 6, my adopted mom took me to the doctor, but left me alone with him. He touched me sexually. I tried to tell my parents, but they did not believe me. They never believed me. When I went to see them recently, I told my dad again what happened, he said,

“Oh well, you have always been a flirt. You were probably wanting it.” He still doesn’t see my pain or the problems in my life because of trauma.’(Communication with Survivor, 2021).

- a. Discuss, why is it difficult for adults to believe when children tell them about sexual abuse?
- b. Do beliefs exist in your community that are more likely to place blame on the abused person rather than the abuser?

Gender-Related Differences

While the sexual exploitation of children affects both boys and girls, there are significant gender-specific differences in their experiences, vulnerabilities, and societal responses to their abuse. Historically, the sexual exploitation of girls has received more attention, while the experiences of boys have often been overlooked or minimized. However, research and evidence increasingly show that boys are also victims of sexual exploitation and face unique challenges in accessing support and protection. Understanding these gender-specific experiences is crucial for developing effective, tailored interventions and advocacy strategies. The following chart provides a good overview of the myths and realities associated with the sexual exploitation of children. Challenging the myths and refocusing efforts on meeting the needs of all children, will enable Christian organizations to provide trauma-informed dignity-inspired care that promotes restoration, hope, and healing.

Myth

Reality

Only girls are victims of sexual exploitation.

Both boys and girls can be victims of sexual exploitation. However, the sexual exploitation of boys is often underreported and overlooked, due to societal stigma and gender stereotypes.

Boys who are sexually exploited are less traumatized than girls.

Trauma from sexual exploitation can be equally severe for both boys and girls. However, boys may face additional challenges in seeking help and support due to societal expectations of masculinity and the fear of being perceived as weak or vulnerable.

Boys who are sexually exploited are more likely to be gay or become gay.

Sexual orientation is not determined by sexual abuse or exploitation. Perpetrators of sexual exploitation target vulnerable children regardless of their sexual orientation.

Boys are more resilient than girls and can better handle sexual exploitation.

All children, regardless of gender, can experience profound and long-lasting trauma from sexual exploitation. The idea that boys are more resilient is a harmful stereotype that can prevent them from receiving the support they need.

Girls are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation than boys.

While girls are often perceived as more vulnerable, boys can be equally at risk of sexual exploitation. Factors such as poverty, family dysfunction, and lack of support systems can increase the vulnerability of both boys and girls.

Sexual exploitation of children is primarily perpetrated by strangers.

In many cases, children are sexually exploited by someone they know and trust, such as family members, friends, or authority figures. This can make it more difficult for children to disclose their abuse and seek help.

Child sexual exploitation only happens in certain countries or regions.

Child sexual exploitation is a global issue that affects children in all countries and regions, regardless of economic or social status. However, factors such as poverty, conflict, and lack of protection systems can increase the risk of exploitation in certain areas.

Boys who are sexually exploited are responsible for their own abuse.

Children can never consent to their own exploitation. The responsibility always lies with the perpetrator who takes advantage of the child's vulnerability. It is crucial to challenge victim-blaming attitudes and ensure that children receive the support and protection they need.

Children as Trafficking Victims

It is important to recognize that child sexual exploitation differs from the sexual exploitation of adults in several ways. They have less ability to assess risks and threats, limited negotiation power with perpetrators, and little control over their lives. Traffickers and exploiters prey upon these vulnerabilities, as well as factors such as poverty, family dysfunction, and lack of access to education and opportunities. A recent study found that globally, an estimated 35% of trafficking victims are children (18% girls and 17% boys) ([UNODC, 2022](#)). These factors make children particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and it is crucial for practitioners and responders to understand these differences when developing interventions and support strategies.

Child trafficking for sexual purposes involves the following:

- A child is treated as a sexual object for commercial gains
- A child is used for prostitution or the making of pornography
- There is a demand for sexual services from children
- In some cases, labor exploitation can also turn into sexual exploitation

Understanding the specific context of child trafficking for sexual purposes is essential for developing targeted interventions and support services. Responders and caregivers must be aware of the unique

vulnerabilities and experiences of children who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation. It is crucial to consider the gender-specific experiences of sexually exploited boys and girls, as well as the factors that contribute to their vulnerability, in order to develop effective interventions and advocacy strategies.

Defining Child Sexual Exploitation and Its Correlates

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is a broad term that refers to a form of **child sexual abuse** involving some combination of particular elements including power imbalance, grooming, manipulation, coercion, deception, fraud, force, threats, exchange, or status. Definitions, research, and resources are inconsistent and often conflate different kinds of CSE and CSA, making the concept difficult to generalize and questioning the utility of separating CSE from CSA ([Rimer, 2024](#)).

CSE can involve the **Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)**, **Child Pornography or Sex Abuse Material (CSAM)**, **Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC)**, the production and distribution of child abuse materials, grooming of a child for sexual purposes, sexting, etc.

It is important to understand that **CSE** refers to any of the following acts even if **consent** appears to have been granted by the child:

1. Child sexual abuse with consideration whether monetary or nonmonetary consideration, favor, or benefit in exchange for the opportunity to perform such an abusive or exploitative act.
2. Actual sexual intercourse with a child or children with or without consideration of the child.
3. Employing fraud, machination, undue influence, intimidation, threat, or deception by any person to commit sexual abuse of or sexual intercourse with a child or children; or
4. Any other similar or analogous acts related to child abuse, cruelty, or exploitation or to be responsible for other conditions prejudicial to the development of the child.

Two, forms of **CSEC** have become more noticeable and predominant. First, the **Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC)** is the exploitation and abuse of a child through a virtual means. It is any representation either through visual, video, audio, written, or a combination of these and includes the live representation (live streaming) of a child engaging in real or simulated explicit sexual activities or any depiction of the sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes. This production of CSAM is child pornography. Additionally, several things can contribute to the occurrence of OSAEC:

- The sharing of self-generated sexual content involving children can lead to or be part of OSAEC, even if this content is initially produced and shared voluntarily between peers, as it can be passed on without permission or obtained by deception or coercion. This sharing is often done in the context of a perceived safe romantic relationship with the expectation of privacy.
- Sexual extortion of children - For example, coercing a child or youth to agree to further sexual acts or sending photos or videos to cover up the first instance of image or video sharing.
- Sexual harassment of a child and unwanted exposure of a child to sexual content are other phenomena which can constitute or enable OSAEC in some instances.

OSAEC and other forms of online sexual exploitation can be perpetrated through online grooming and cyberbullying. Online grooming is a predatory act, or pattern of acts, of establishing a relationship of trust, or emotional connection by another, with a child or someone who is believed to be a child, and/or the family, guardian, or caregivers, whether in person or via electronic and other similar devices, for the purpose of perpetrating sexual abuse or exploitation or the production of any form of sexual abuse material. Cyberbullying, an aggressive behavior involving a type of electronic communication intending to harm a victim that can have profound effects on adolescents ([Kumar & Goldstein, 2020](#)), may also be used.

Table 1: Risk Factors of Child Sex Trafficking & Sexual Exploitation. (Greenbaum, 2022)

Individual-Level Factors	Relationship-Level Factors	Community-Level Factors	Societal-Level Factors
"Street" Children, Homeless, Runaway	Family Dysfunction (violence, substance abuse, etc.)	Natural Disaster/Societal Upheaval	Gender-based Violence & Bias
Prior Abuse/Neglect	Poverty & Unemployment	High Level of Violence	Strict Gender Roles for Males
LGBTQ+ Status	Migration	Corruption of Officials	Cultural Beliefs & Stigma
Substance Abuse	Bullying & Ostracism	Drug Use & Sales	Racial, Ethnic, Religious, Sexual, & Cultural Bias/Discrimination
Marginalized Status Due to Discrimination	Gang Affiliation	Increased Travelers & Tourists	Lack of Effective Anti-Trafficking Laws & Policies
Limited Education	Limited Education	Mass Migration	Low Recognition of Child Rights
	Abandonment by Husband or Loss of Caregiver	Commercial Sex in Area	

CASE STUDY: *A boy aged 15 years in the Philippines was badly physically abused by his father so he ran away to Manila. He quickly got connected to a gang which forced him to steal. One day he was confronted by a tourist who invited him to stay in his hotel room. When he arrived to the room there were cameras set up to video tape him having sex with the man. It was the first time he had been penetrated*

and it really hurt. He had blood in his trousers that he had to clean up. The man gave him some money but it wasn't much. He was too embarrassed to tell anyone what had happened in case they thought he was 'gay.' Later he heard about an organization called 'Stairway' that helped street involved kids like him and he finally got the courage to talk to one of the leaders about what had happened.

Finally, **Child Sex Tourism (CST)** continues to be a concern worldwide. CST is defined by the United Nations as “the exploitation of children for sexual purposes by people who travel locally or internationally to engage in sexual activities with children.” While sex tourism is legal in several countries (e.g., Netherlands, New Zealand), this legality does not include sex with children. However, traffickers often take advantage of this legality to offer access to children.

In the following sections, we will discuss how sex trafficking impacts the development of harmful sexual behaviors and child-to-child sexual violence in some survivors as well as the detrimental impacts of pornography use by children on their overall development. These topics are sensitive and are often viewed as taboo. We encourage the reader to engage with this material. Taboo or not, the reality of the sexual exploitation of children in this fallen, sin-filled world makes the reality of these discussions necessary and important.

Sex Trafficking of Children & Child-To-Child Sexual Violence

As caregivers working with child survivors of trafficking, it is crucial to understand the complexities of their experiences and the potential for child-to-child sexual violence, or **harmful sexual behaviors (HSB)**. Thus readers need to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to recognize, prevent, and respond to these challenging situations. It is essential to recognize that children who have experienced abuse or exploitation may exhibit various traumatic responses, including sexually harmful behaviors. This insight underscores the need for caregivers to approach these situations with empathy and understanding, guided by the wisdom and compassion of their faith.

Harmful sexual behaviors refer to sexual actions that are developmentally inappropriate, abusive, or problematic ([NSPCC, 2022](#)). These behaviors can range from problematic sexual behaviors, such as inappropriate sexual play or advanced sexual knowledge at a young age, to more severe and abusive actions, including non-consensual sexual activity or the use of threats or force ([Hackett, 2010](#)). HSB can occur both offline and online, with technology-assisted HSB (TA-HSB) becoming an increasing concern in the digital age ([Belton & Hollis, 2016](#)).

People of faith are called to approach the issue of HSB with a deep sense of compassion, recognizing that all children, even those who have sexually harmed other children, are created in God's image and deserving of love, support, and the opportunity for healing and redemption. They must be willing to confront the harmful dynamics that are at times at work in faith communities and create an environment of openness, accountability, and proactive protection for all children, particularly for those who face the complexity of recovery from sex trafficking. By deepening our understanding of child-to-child sexual violence and HSB, and by integrating spiritual principles and practices into our prevention and response efforts, we can work towards creating safer, more supportive environments for child survivors of trafficking. This knowledge is essential for providing trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and

developmentally appropriate care that promotes healing, resilience, and the restoration of God's intended wholeness for every child.

The Spectrum of Sexual Behaviors

To effectively support child survivors of trafficking, caregivers need to have a clear understanding of harmful sexual behaviors (HSB) and how they differ from developmentally normal sexual exploration. Children and youth engage in a wide range of sexual behaviors, some of which are developmentally normal and others that are problematic or abusive. The Hackett Continuum ([Hackett, 2010](#)) provides a useful framework for understanding this spectrum of behaviors.

1. **Developmentally normal sexual exploration:** These behaviors are typical and expected for a child's age and stage of development, such as curiosity about their own and others' bodies, consensual play with same-aged peers, and use of appropriate sexual language.
2. **Inappropriate sexual behaviors:** These behaviors are outside the normal range for a child's age and development but may not be harmful. Examples include single instances of sexual symbols and gestures toward others, use of pornography, or crude sexual talk.
3. **Problematic sexual behaviors:** These behaviors are concerning and potentially harmful to the child or others, such as compulsive masturbation, persistent sexual themes in talk or play, or engaging in sexual behaviors with younger children.
4. **Abusive sexual behaviors:** These behaviors involve the use of coercion, force, or power differentials to engage others in sexual activity. Examples include non-consensual sexual touching, forcing others to watch sexual acts, or penetrative sex with younger children.
5. **Violent sexual behaviors:** These are the most severe forms of HSB, involving the use of significant physical force or weapons to sexually abuse or exploit others.

Caregivers must understand that not all sexual behaviors displayed by children are harmful or abusive. Many are part of normal sexual development and exploration. However, when behaviors fall outside the developmentally appropriate range, cause distress or harm to the child or others, or involve power differentials or lack of consent, they require intervention and support. People of faith need to respond to these situations with both compassion and accountability, offering forgiveness and grace while also taking steps to ensure the safety and well-being of all children involved.

The Importance of Language and Terminology: When discussing HSB, it is essential to use appropriate language and terminology that accurately describes the behaviors without stigmatizing or labelling the child. This is particularly important in faith communities, where language that implies blame or shame can be deeply damaging. Terms such as "sexually abusive" or "sex offender" can fail to recognize the complex factors contributing to HSB, such as trauma, ACEs, or the child's victimization ([Hackett, 2014](#)).

Instead, caregivers should use language that separates the behavior from the child, such as "a child who has displayed harmful sexual behaviors" rather than "a sexually abusive child." This approach

acknowledges that the child is not defined by their actions and that with appropriate support and intervention, they can learn to engage in healthy, developmentally appropriate sexual behaviors ([NSPCC, 2022](#)). By using respectful and compassionate language, we can create a safe space for children and families affected by HSB to seek help and support without fear of judgment or condemnation.

Manifestations of HSB in Offline and Online Contexts

HSB can occur in both offline and online settings, and it is important for caregivers to be aware of how these behaviors may manifest in different contexts.

Offline HSB can include:

- Inappropriate sexual play or games
- Persistent sexual themes in conversation, play, or artwork
- Non-consensual sexual touch
- Forcing others to engage in sexual activity or penetration
- Sexual aggression which may include unwanted sexual acts with physical acts of violence to facilitate the primary act

In the digital age, **technology-assisted HSB (TA-HSB)** is a growing concern. TA-HSB is a relatively new area of research, and there is still much to learn about the characteristics and motivations of children who engage in these behaviors. However, emerging evidence suggests that there may be differences between children who display HSB solely online versus those who engage in both offline and online HSB ([Belton & Hollis, 2016](#)). Examples of online HSB include:

- Accessing, creating, or sharing sexually explicit images or videos of minors
- Engaging in sexually explicit conversations or role-play online
- Using technology to sexually exploit or blackmail others
- Grooming or manipulating others online for sexual purposes

Responding to HSB in Child Aftercare Settings

Children in residential care are also at a heightened risk of both exhibiting HSB and being victimized by others. This dual vulnerability underscores the importance of creating safe, supportive environments that prioritize the protection and well-being of all children in care. This is also a key consideration for re-integration, ensuring that the behaviors are addressed to prevent them from continuing when the child re-enters their community. The focus is placed on addressing the underlying causes of HSB, rather than simply focusing on the problematic behaviors themselves. For example, ignoring the behavior or resorting to overly punitive measures can perpetuate a cycle of trauma and hinder children's healing and development. Training for all caregivers of services for trafficked children is vital to foster a culture of understanding, prevention, and early intervention.

The trauma experienced by child survivors of trafficking can have a profound impact on their psychosexual development and increase their risk for HSB. The sexual exploitation and commodification of their bodies, combined with the manipulative and coercive tactics used by traffickers, can normalize harmful sexual behaviors and create a distorted sense of sexual norms and expectations ([Rafferty, 2013](#)). Additionally, the chronic stress and hyperarousal associated with trafficking can impair children's ability

to regulate their emotions and impulses, further contributing to the potential for HSB ([Greenbaum & Bodrick, 2017](#)).

It is important to emphasize that recognizing the impact of trauma and ACEs on a child's development and behavior does not excuse or minimize the harm caused by HSB. Rather, it helps us to respond with greater empathy and understanding, seeking to address the underlying wounds and support the child's healing and restoration. We are called to extend compassion and grace to all children, recognizing that their behaviors are often a reflection of the deep pain and adversity they have experienced.

Challenging Assumptions

Gendered assumptions and stereotypes can significantly influence how we perceive and respond to children. These assumptions often perpetuate the idea that boys are more likely to engage in HSB, while girls are primarily victims. However, such beliefs can be problematic and limit our understanding of the behaviors.

Societal norms and expectations around gender roles can shape our understanding of sexual behavior, including HSB. Some common gendered assumptions and stereotypes include ([Hutton & Whyte, 2006](#); [NSPCC, 2022](#)):

- Boys are more likely to engage in HSB than girls
- Girls are primarily victims of HSB, rather than perpetrators
- HSB is a result of male aggression and dominance
- Girls who display HSB are more psychologically disturbed than boys
- Boys are less likely to be emotionally affected by their own HSB or victimization

These assumptions are often rooted in traditional gender roles that portray men as aggressive and sexually dominant, while women are seen as passive and submissive. They can also be reinforced by media representations and societal attitudes that minimize or normalize male sexual aggression ([Hutton & Whyte, 2006](#)).

While it is true that the majority of reported cases of HSB involve boys as perpetrators and girls as victims, relying on gendered assumptions can be problematic for several reasons ([NSPCC, 2022](#)):

- **Underreporting:** Gendered stereotypes can make it more difficult for girls who display HSB to be recognized or acknowledged, while also creating barriers for boys who have been harmed to come forward and seek help, as they may feel ashamed, stigmatized, or disbelieved ([Bunting, 2014](#)).
- **Simplifying complex behaviors:** Gendered assumptions can oversimplify the complex factors that contribute to HSB, such as trauma, adverse childhood experiences, and developmental issues, by attributing these behaviors solely to male aggression or dominance ([NSPCC, 2022](#)).

- **Limiting effective interventions:** Stereotypical beliefs about gender and HSB can lead to a one-size-fits-all approach to intervention, rather than considering the unique needs and circumstances of each child ([Bunting, 2014](#)).

Research has shown that girls do engage in HSB, although their behaviors may be less likely to be recognized or reported compared to boys ([Bunting, 2014](#)). Additionally, studies have found that boys can experience significant psychological distress and trauma as a result of their own HSB or victimization, challenging the notion that they are less emotionally affected than girls ([NSPCC, 2022](#)).

It is important to be mindful that some faith traditions have strong norms and teachings around gender roles. While these teachings can provide valuable guidance and structure, they may also contribute to rigid or unbiblical assumptions about the nature and causes of HSB. It is essential to critically examine our beliefs and interpretations, ensuring that they align with the core principles of our faith, such as love, compassion, and the inherent dignity of all human beings.

STOP & THINK

1. How might a child's cultural background, family context, or developmental stage influence their understanding of and engagement in harmful sexual behaviors? What strategies can caregivers use to assess and address these unique factors when working with child survivors of trafficking?
2. Considering the growing concern of technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviors (TA-HSB), what specific challenges might caregivers face when addressing these issues with child survivors of trafficking? How can caregivers stay informed about the evolving digital landscape and adapt their interventions accordingly?
3. Trauma-informed care emphasizes the importance of creating a safe, supportive environment for children who have experienced adversity. What specific actions can caregivers take to foster a sense of safety, trust, and empowerment when working with child survivors of trafficking who have displayed or experienced harmful sexual behaviors?
4. Collaboration and coordination among professionals and systems (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health) are essential for providing a holistic, comprehensive approach to addressing harmful sexual behaviors. What strategies can caregivers use to build effective partnerships and advocate for the needs of child survivors of trafficking within these systems? How can they navigate potential challenges, such as differing mandates, resources, or philosophies, to ensure the best outcomes for the children they serve?

Impacts of Pornography on Youth

Pornography creates an illusion. First, it creates an illusion that one needs a particular body type to enjoy sex. Pornography has an addictive quality. Neuroscience has found that it has the same qualities as addictive types of drugs and often activates similar neuropathways leading to more use and more use of violent pornography content. Studies have shown that pornography can cause documented harm to the developing brains of children and youths. These findings are being confirmed by advances in neuroscience that can show how pornography changes our brains, which in turn impacts behaviour. In children pornography addiction can cause problems with impulsivity, difficulties with emotional regulation and control, and learning ([Kang et al., 2020](#)); while in youths more problems may develop in the areas related to dopamine responses (the brain chemical responsible for rewards) and the limbic system (emotional control). These difficulties can lead to more compulsive behaviors, especially for those who consume a higher amount of pornography content ([Faisal et al., 2022](#)). Additionally, the more pornography a person watches, the part of the brain responsible for social interaction, motivation, decision-making, and memory shrinks. It can also lead to an increased use of paid content which results in debt, work loss and family breakdown.

In the context of pornography, many people want to try out what they view and may sexually exploit their partners, look for a person in prostitution to fulfil a fantasy, or act out a scene on a child. Access to sites that adults have is discouraging. Rapid changes in technology led to increased access to pornography online over the years. In the past, pornography was available only in printed form to those adults who sought it out, usually at a price. Now it is freely available with a click away through the internet and mobile devices. The pervasiveness of online pornography extends to all corners of the globe. From urban centers to remote villages, children and youth have access to sexually graphic and sexually violent material.

Adults and other youths use 'sexting' and cyberbullying to entice children and young people to send images and videos for use in the creation of pornography. Many times these youth, whose judgement is not fully developed, are not fully aware of the permanent nature and potentially damaging consequences of posting online, which may cause a lifetime of shame. In some cases, young people whose pictures were posted without permission have even taken their own lives out of shame.

Predators use newly popular online media to groom and exploit their victims. Social media, online games and other applications encourage children to post personal information, giving pedophiles the very information they need to build intimacy and manipulate them to gain access. Once a connection has been established, predators may exploit children virtually (through sexually explicit conversations or the use of a webcam) or in person (through meetings arranged during online conversations; often the predator poses as a fellow child). Predators also use child pornography to groom children into believing that it is normal for adults to have sex with children. Finally, pornography is a problem that is exacerbated by the internet but not limited by it. Even offline forms of pornography, such as DVDs, are finding wider distribution amongst children, especially in developing countries where pirated videos are for sale cheaply and without any restriction on who buys them.

CASE STUDY: *On a visit to Costa Rica, Victor Malarek ([2009](#)) heard the following from a woman in a bar, who was hoping to sell sex that night: This girl I knew was videotaped and then she found out it was*

on the Internet. She went to a café for the Internet and found herself. She ran screaming from the place. She begged people if there was anything to remove this from the Internet and was told it was there forever. The next day, she was found dead. She cut her wrists (p. 146).

Christians and the church can help end the demand through education and promoting attitude change to protect children and youth. Here are three things we must consider when we work with children and youth who have used pornography or been used for the production of pornography.

Harmful Views on Sexuality

Pornography alters views on healthy sexuality. Pornography shapes how children think about sex. But it does so in a way that distorts developing values and perceptions about human sexuality. Far from being a good method of teaching children about sex, as some may claim, pornography teaches without supervision or guidance, filling children's minds with messages about their bodies. The messages that pornography imparts are false. It teaches about body parts and sexual acts, rather than integrated beings and relational intimacy. It teaches dehumanization and self-gratification rather than the inherent value of others and self-sacrificial love. Children who learn about sex from pornography can be led to believe that sex is an entitlement, in which the man is dominant. They may learn a variety of sexual positions, but what will they comprehend about the unique beauty of true commitment and love?

Research Study: Cambodia

In a study of 106 Cambodian youth, researchers asked about pornography use and beliefs. While 58% agreed that watching pornography is "normal," 75% agreed that it was addictive, 84% indicated that it can lead men to rape others, and 82% stated that it made people want to visit prostitutes. Two findings from these youths, a majority agreed that pornography can ruin your life and should be made illegal. As a result of this research, the '[Asian Youth against Porn' Flip Chart](#) has been developed and is currently being used and distributed in Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka.

Pornography Can Generate a Demand For Sex and Sexual Exploitation

Although the porn industry might tell us otherwise, people who watch pornography – including violent forms – want to try out what they see ([Fordham, 2005](#)). Pornography shapes people's expectations about sex and what they expect from their partners (and, for some, what they expect from prostitution). What was 'normal' for them 10 years ago is different now. While pornography seems to simply be the supply side of the equation, it would not exist without the demand. It is not clear that watching pornography immediately leads to the purchase of sex, but it seems to be a contributing factor as it normalizes such behaviours ([Eberstadt & Layden, 2010](#)).

Although pornography, prostitution and trafficking are different aspects of the sex industry, they are also related. Some experts would even argue that pornography is integral to prostitution ([Farley et al., 2004](#)). Firstly, many people who are in prostitution or who have been trafficked have been subjects of pornography. In one study of people in prostitution in nine countries, about half (49%) of the participants reported that pornography was made of them ([Farley et al. 2004](#)). Secondly, pornography can be used for 'seasoning' or 'training' into prostitution ([Peters, 2018](#)). Thirdly, pimps and traffickers can use pornography as a tool for trafficking into prostitution. Sometimes traffickers will take pictures or videos of their victim whilst she or he is nude or engaged in sexual acts. The trafficker will then threaten to show

the pictures or videos to the victim’s family unless the victim agrees to engage in prostitution. For some, the enduring threat of harm from pornography can be fatal. Finally, pornography can be the purpose of trafficking. According to expert Donna Hughes, ‘production of pornography and internet sex shows are markets which often rely on trafficked victims’ ([Hughes 2005, p. 25](#)). In some cases, pornographers force victims of trafficking to make pornography or perform live Internet sex. However coercion is also common in the pornography industry as a whole ([Peters, 2018](#)).

Reducing Child Use of Pornography Through Training

However, one thing is clear: unless we stop the tide of demand by protecting children from pornography, exploitation will continue to occur for generations to come. But how do we protect children and young people from the harm of pornography and online threats? What is the best way to do so without scaring them and causing further damage?

One primary way is to teach children about healthy sexuality. Parents, safe teachers, and youth leaders need to talk to children and youth about pornography, but firstly they need to talk to them about healthy sex. They should not just leave it to others, and they should certainly not leave it to pornography sites or their friends. There are many resources that can be used to teach children about healthy sexuality and ways to stay safe from abuse and sexual exploitation.

Table 2: Resources for Training Children to Stay Safe from Abuse

<u>Good Touch, Bad Touch</u>	<u>Stairway Foundation</u>	<u>Fair Girls</u>	<u>Justice Resource Institute</u>
Originally developed by <i>Chab Dai</i> for use in Asian contexts www.good-touch-bad-touch-asia.org , this material provides information in a narrative style to girls and boys to protect them from sexual abuse. Now available in African versions www.tehila.org	An online series of animated videos to teach children and young people about the risks of incest or sexual abuse, pedophilia and sex trafficking, as well as how to protect themselves.	‘Tell Your Friends’ was developed for use in the United States. It covers topics such as human trafficking, the pimp culture, the use of language and victim blaming.	“My Life, My Choice” developed by JRI is an in-depth curriculum for at-risk girls. It is designed for those in more Western cultures.

Prevention Programs for At-Risk Youth

When teaching children about sexuality, we must rid ourselves of misassumptions about vulnerability that are based on faulty views about gender. Girls look at porn. Boys are sexually abused. Both girls and boys can be sexually exploited, pimped and trafficked. Both boys and girls need protection and care. It is also

good for boys and girls to learn together and to hear each other's perspectives in a safe way, led by trainers who are adequately knowledgeable regarding child protection.

Secondly, we must teach children and young people how to be safe. We have seen how changes in technology have increased vulnerability to pornography and online threats. Do we unplug children from the internet? The answer is 'no'. We must remember that the increasing reach of the internet can be a good thing, empowering more and more people, including young people, to have better access to good information and resources. But, unfortunately, those same highways for good may also lead to bad. Therefore, how do we keep young people safe online?

However, even the best tool will only have optimal effectiveness if we have prepared ourselves. We must be willing to talk to children at their own level, and not in a way that causes them to feel fear, punishment, or shame. We must also not be afraid of honestly talking to them about the threats. The threats will not go away simply because we are embarrassed to talk about them. Stairway Foundation, which has trained hundreds of children to be safe online, has found that most often young people are more concerned about what their parents' reactions will be than they are bothered about the content of online safety material itself.

Other Forms of Child Trafficking

Child Trafficking and Drug Endangered Children

A drug endangered child is "*...a person under the age of 18 who lives in or is exposed to an environment where drugs, including pharmaceuticals, are present for any number of reasons, including trafficking and manufacturing of these drugs*" ([Alshuler, 2005](#)). Children are often drug-endangered. Children who are exposed to drugs - which includes legal drugs like alcohol, prescription and over the counter medications amongst others, as well as illegal ones - are at risk of experiencing physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, by their parents, caretakers, or by individuals visiting the home. They are also at greater risk of harm resulting from the inhalation, ingestion, or absorption of illegal drugs or chemicals being used to manufacture drugs in the home, and also are at higher risk of being forced to participate in illegal or sexual activity in exchange for drugs or money, likely to be used to purchase drugs. In time, they are also more likely to misuse legal and illegal drugs and develop mental health disorders. The below are just a few of the many examples on how drugs are used to exploit children:

- Clients using drugs and alcohol with children to make them more compliant, disinhibited, and therefore vulnerable.
- In Cambodia sexually exploited women and children were encouraged to sell beers to customers in bars. The more they sold the more they got as a bonus. They got the clients to buy beer for them too so that they could get a higher bonus by collecting ring pulls as evidence. They made them more likely to be drunk and vulnerable and addicted to alcohol.
- Children in the Caribbean islands are often sexually exploited for profit and also used to go to the drug point to purchase drugs.

- Construction workers in Bangkok are given amphetamines in their drinking water to make them work longer and harder.
- Captagon, a psychostimulant, is being given to youth in the Middle East to make them more prone to violence and withstand long hours awake and without the need to eat.

The prevalence of drug endangered children has increased post COVID-19 pandemic. The drug trade was slightly impacted, but drug traffickers quickly adapted to meet demand. More individuals and families are misusing drugs and are suffering from higher levels of mental health and substance use disorders than before the pandemic. Hence, children are more exposed to drug endangered environments. A scientific brief from the WHO (2022) noted a marked increase in the use of drugs such as cocaine, amphetamines, opioids other than heroin, cannabis, and prescription drugs, like benzodiazepines, as well as an increase in depression and anxiety among youth.

The Intersection of Child Labor and the Drug Trade

Drug related crime associated with the manufacturing and trafficking of drugs is impacting almost every corner of the world, and children being used in drug trade is rarely discussed. However, the participation of children is not a rarity, but a growing reality and is also intertwined with child labour. The below are some examples:

- *Children are used in farming:* as “*raspachines*” or leaf pickers from coca bushes in Peru, Bolivia and Colombia, source countries for coca fields. These minors work long hours in the sun, harvesting coca leaf for cocaine processing. They are exposed to harsh terrain conditions and harmful chemicals used in the processing of the leaf into cocaine. Often unprotected children are exposed to sexual exploitation by drug traffickers that control these fields.
- *Children as logistical support:* Children are considered a cost-effective alternative to adults, due to lower feeding costs, and because they are easily indoctrinated and influenced into obedience. At an early age, children who are soldiers are also used for multiple other forms of labor within the camps, like for logistical support to sustain the camps, as quota collectors, and to support domestic shores like food preparation and clean up.
- *Children used to gather information:* Children are used as reconnaissance assets to search for places to hide and camp as they are readily mobile through harsh terrains and dense vegetation. In addition, children are used to gather intelligence about the presence of law enforcement in a particular area and to describe the weapons officers are carrying. An example of this is the children in the Amazonian Peruvian jungle who are part of the narcoterrorism group, the Shining Path or “Sendero Luminoso”.
- *Children and gangs:* Children who experience neglect and abuse often end up on the streets and are vulnerable to gang recruitment. Youth involved in gangs are often conducting drug trafficking activities to benefit the gangs or drug trafficking organizations. Criminal behavior incidents in the school system, such as severe discipline problems, violent incidents, vandalism, and property theft are typical indicators of youth involved with these types of groups. Younger children are often socialized into gang life by selling drugs as additional income for the family. Often, young individuals are recruited for street-level sales within the school system, act as drugs or weapons smugglers because they blend into crowds well and are not perceived as threatening when they travel through towns and villages.

Strong connection between drug endangered children and sex trafficking

Children are vulnerable when parents or caretakers are involved in substance misuse or drug related activity. In these environments homes are usually chaotic, there is poverty, and inadequate supervision, leaving the children vulnerable to sex trafficking. Over half of trafficking cases begin with family members; 65% are trafficked by mothers and 32% by fathers and 82% of familial trafficking is related to drugs according to the organization National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children.

Recognizing the connection between drugs and sex trafficking is important. Identification of potential observable indicators are frequent medical visits, difficulties in school, cognitive, behavioral, or emotional problems and, involvement with child welfare, foster care or law enforcement and the criminal justice system at an early age.

CASE STUDY: *A 51-year-old female was arrested for sex trafficking of her 13-year-old daughter. According to a criminal complaint, the mother directed a 13-year-old daughter to become involved in a sexual relationship with a 58-year-old adult male and demanded that the male make monthly deposits into the mother's bank account. In addition to the monthly deposits, the mother periodically demanded other cash payments in exchange for facilitating the male's continued access to the minor.*

Response

When a survivor of sex trafficking arrives at the aftercare program, it is important to include in the screening intake, questions to assess drug endangerment dynamics and history. The information gathered may add another level of complexity and need for treatment. A collaborative response includes early intervention and support, early identification of risks and effects, and the connection of multidisciplinary services. The National Alliance for drug endangered children has multiple resources and tool kits that are helpful to train caregivers in holistic aftercare programs, and can be found using this link: [Resources - National Alliance For Drug Endangered Children \(nationaldec.org\)](https://nationaldec.org/resources) and [Online Training - National Alliance For Drug Endangered Children \(nationaldec.org\)](https://nationaldec.org/online-training). For a more in depth look at drugs, substance abuse and addiction related topics please visit **Chapter 6: Understanding the Physical Health Needs of Survivors, Substance Abuse section.**

CASE STUDY - Puerto Rico: *A 14-year-old female lives in a housing project (ward) in San Juan, Puerto Rico with her mother who is addicted to heroin, fentanyl, and xylazine. The mother sexually exploits her daughter to make money to buy more drugs, sometimes up to 15 men would come to the house in one day. The child is unable to attend school on most days and is prohibited from telling anything to the teachers or anyone she knows as her mother intimidates her with violence. The child is only able to leave the house at night just to go purchase the drugs for her mother to consume.*

CASE STUDY - Thailand: *Adults and teenage children are often from the Isaan region of Thailand to work in construction in the cities of Bangkok and Chiang Mai where they are given amphetamines in their drinking water to make them work harder and longer. But after a while, they get sick from taking 'speed'.*

Child Trafficking in Child Labor

The term child labour is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or interferes with their schooling by: depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in the world's poorest countries, more than one in five children are engaged in child labor ([UNICEF, n.d.](#)). Globally, children engage in labor that is not detrimental or harmful to them. It is quite necessary in some settings, given the lack of access to certain necessities, such as running water and electricity, for children to contribute to the daily running of a household. However, according to UNICEF, in the least developed countries, slightly more than one in four children are engaged in work that is detrimental to their health and development ([UNICEF nd](#)).

UNICEF's standard indicator for child labor includes the following:

- Age 5 to 11 years: At least 1 hour of economic work or 21 hours of unpaid household services per week.
- Age 12 to 14 years: At least 14 hours of economic work or 21 hours of unpaid household services per week.
- Age 15 to 17 years: At least 43 hours of economic work per week (UNICEF, nd).

In some situations, child labor becomes human trafficking. The worst forms of child labor are categorized in Article 3 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 182:

- a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
- b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;
- c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties;
- d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children ([ILO, 1999](#)).

According to a 2020 report published by UNICEF and ILO, they stated that the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to erode global progress that had been made so far against child labor. The report suggested that a further 8.9 million children would be in child labor by the end of 2022 as a result of rising poverty driven by the pandemic ([UNICEF & ILO, 2020](#)). It's also important to note that child labor puts children at risk for other forms of abuses, including human trafficking, as you will see in the case study below.

Hazardous child labor is work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

Guidance for governments on some hazardous work activities which **should be prohibited** is given by Article 3 of ILO Recommendation No. 190:

- work which exposes children to **physical, psychological or sexual abuse**;
- work **underground**, under water, at **dangerous heights** or in **confined spaces**;
- work with **dangerous machinery, equipment and tools**, or which involves the manual handling or transport of heavy loads;
- work in an unhealthy environment which may, for example, expose children to **hazardous substances**, agents or processes, or to temperatures, noise levels, or vibrations damaging to their health;
- work under particularly difficult conditions such as **work for long hours or during the night** or work where the child is unreasonably confined to the premises of the employer.

End Slavery Now indicates that exploitative child labor is present in many industries - from the carpet sector in Afghanistan to the cocoa plantations in the Ivory Coast.

Figure 4: [Examples of Dangerous/Worst Forms of Child Labor](#)



CASE STUDY from West Africa: *Isata was living with her mother in their village, but her mother was rarely physically present because she was a petty trader who went from one village to the next, collecting goods and selling them. Because her mother was mostly not present, people in her community would ask Isata to help them with chores in exchange for food. The survivor explained that there was a particular time in which her mother stayed away from the village for quite a long time. She said she was so exhausted from all the chores that she did not attend school regularly. She explained that one day, she decided to make a trip to visit her paternal grandmother who lived in another village, so she could stay with her. Her grandmother was happy to see her but told her she would not be able to provide for her needs because of a medical condition she had. Isata said she decided to stay because it was better to be with her grandmother than to be with her mother who was never around.*

Isata continued staying with her grandmother even though they had little or no food to eat. She was able to attend school because she did chores for people around the community who in turn provided what she and her grandmother needed. She explained that there was a moment her mother came to see her and her grandmother and asked for her to return with her, but Isata refused. She explained that her mother left disappointed in her.

Isata explained that she was 13 years old, when she met a man who told her that he would provide everything she needed if she would consent to be his girlfriend. She told her grandmother about it, and her grandmother told her to consent. This man provided food, clothes and school fees but he would ask her to go spend the night with him so that he could sexually abuse her. This continued until a woman who had been observing her reported the matter to the police. When the police tried to arrest the perpetrator, he ran away. Isata said it was when she went to a rape treatment center, which the police referred her to, that she confirmed she was pregnant.

STOP & THINK

1. What aspects of Isata's experience were abusive?
2. Which aspects of her story led to further abuses?
3. How did the COVID-19 pandemic make children more vulnerable to labor abuse?

For an additional learning opportunity see the following Oscar-nominated short film about exploitive child labor by Gregg Helvey-[Kavi](#)

Child Trafficking in Adoption and Fostering

International adoptions are occurring every day around the world, shining a light on the power and beauty that can lie within a diverse and loving family. In its original intent, international adoption should often not be the first option for a child who has been separated from their biological family. In many countries around the world, kinship care systems are in place. In Sierra Leone, this is referred to as *menpikin* (Cody, 2024). Within the faith of Islam, many countries practice *Kafala*, where a child can be raised by someone aside from their biological parents without any official documentation or transfer for guardianship (Assim et al. 2014). In more developed countries, interventions are in place to intervene in dire circumstances and within the biological family unit to determine if that child can safely remain within their family, and is often done so with the support of legal documentation. However, in many places around the globe, such services are not in place.

What is in place in most of these countries are orphanages, providing supposed safe shelter for orphaned children. According to UNICEF, an orphan is a child younger than 18 years who has lost one or both parents to any cause of death. Today, orphanages are 'home' to approximately 8 million children around the world (Petrowski et al., 2017). However, it is estimated that approximately 80-90% of those children have one living parent.

Problems with Institutional Living

While orphanages have been regularly used in the past to provide care for orphans, most institutional settings fail to provide the same support as a family and are also becoming increasingly detrimental and dangerous for children in many parts of the world. One factor contributing to these dangers in some countries is the prevalence of orphan tourism where wealthy Western tourists visit orphanages in poor countries in what some have termed “hug an orphan” vacations ([Guiney, 2018](#)). Orphan tourism is often done without vetting of visitors or protective measures in place, lack of external regulatory entities to monitor levels of care for children in institutions, corruption within local governments, and lack of funding to line ministries or governing bodies to offer social support to children and families. When orphanages are misused, they become places of extreme vulnerability for children, a stopover before international adoption, or a place where they age out of care without proper planning or support to transition to adulthood.

Supply/Demand Factors Specific to Adoption and Orphanage Trafficking

There are also many push and pull factors that lead to children ending up in institutional settings. Some common push factors may be poverty, inadequate and inequitable access to education, incentives to families, and parental migration for labor. Pull factors may include foreign funding, orphanage volunteering and tourism, and incentives for adoption. What these factors create is supply and demand. Push factors, such as poverty, lead families in desperation to find options to help them with their children. When facilities are incentivized (through sponsorship programs or adoption fees) to bring in more children, they are more likely to ‘search’ for these children. Within some institutional settings, children are often left in poor conditions and often forced to perform or satisfy foreign visitors to solicit financial support ([Cheney, 2019](#)). It is estimated that US Christians alone donate approximately \$3.3 billion annually to support residential care around the globe ([Barna, 2021](#)). When these two components collide, children become separated from their parents; not necessarily because they are orphans, but because their families need help and others can profit off relieving the burdens some face in raising their children in hardship (Cheney 2019).

In countries where a lack of systems prevents proper monitoring, and institutions lack training and understanding of the need for connection with biological families, children often become isolated from those they are most familiar with ([Levy et. al. 2003](#)). For example, if a child is born in a very remote village within a West African country but is placed in an orphanage in a capital city, it can be difficult for a biological family to possess the resources needed to visit or check in on their children. Without such accountability factors, children are far more likely to be exploited, abused, and trafficked. In looking at the linkage between harmful practices within institutionalized settings and international adoption, several factors play into the occurrence of seemingly legalized adoptions of children whose biological families may have either been coerced into giving up their children or are not part of the legal process of adoption at all.

CASE STUDY: *A young girl in Uganda was adopted by the Davis family in the United States. The Davis’ adopted daughter was believed to have been an orphan, with a stated history that her father had died and her mother had severely neglected her. After their adopted daughter arrived in the United States, the Davis family began to see signs that their adoption was not what they believed it to be. They were able*

to establish a connection with the child's biological mother and learned she had been coerced into the adoption, being told that she was simply signing an agreement for her daughter to receive a 'once in a lifetime' opportunity to receive an education. In fact, this child's mother had signed over all parental rights for her daughter to be adopted and to move to the United States. The Davis family, after a long fight, reunified their adopted daughter with her biological mother, something that no government entity requested or forced them to do.

The Davis' experience represents thousands of instances of child exploitation for the purpose of financial gain with shocking regularity. Many biological families are not given access to legal support or counsel, may not be able to read or write, or understand the laws surrounding their guardianship rights. For the Davis' case specifically, their adoption was facilitated by an adoption agency, European Adoption Consultants, which was found to have received approximately \$76.3 million in revenue between the years of 2000 and 2015. In 2015, the Ugandan government, with support from UNICEF, determined that Ugandan parents were being deceived and financially bribed for adoption. Additionally, they found that orphanages were not always verifying the reported histories of children before placing them up for adoption ([Walakira et al 2014](#)). Like the Davis', many adoptive families are trusting of such agencies and are unaware of the potential histories that were rewritten so that they, too, are taken advantage of in the process of providing a home to a child they believed needed one.

In looking into different aspects of such exploitation, some indicators can be seen or noted in investigating suspected cases. [Better Care Network](#) has provided a list of indicators of acts of orphanage trafficking. It is more comprehensive than the list below. While these items are not necessarily evidence of orphanage trafficking, they may warrant further investigation.

STOP & THINK

1. Consider the Davis case. How could a young vulnerable mother be persuaded to part with her child?
2. What could have been done to prevent the Davis family from being lied to?
3. What could have been done to prevent the child from being trafficked?
4. What would be the challenges of a child being repatriated back to their birth family? ([Chapter 9](#) will address repatriation in more detail).

Figure 5: Signs of Orphanage Trafficking



What we know today is that orphanages were started with a purpose; to offer a home to children who did not have one. As time has gone on, as a whole, better practices, options, and resources have been shared and learned that offer safer alternative solutions to both preventing and managing family separation.

Institutions, even those offering the best possible services, are not an adequate alternative to a family ([Rosenthal, 2018](#)). Dire circumstances in many countries can create push factors, incentivizing orphanages to expose, exploit, and sell children ([Van Door, 2016](#)). Through these practices, children are being forced into labor, exposed to physical and sexual assault and abuse, and stripped of their identity, all for the profit of other individuals and entities. While not all orphanages are run in inappropriate ways and can be helpful, we must be diligent in monitoring harmful practices like those discussed above. We are charged with making necessary changes that prohibit harmful and deceptive practices and elevate those who are seeking better practices for assisting children and their families.

CASE STUDY - Cambodia: *As someone working in Cambodia to champion children's rights with Tearfund I was approached to visit an orphanage where there were approximately 10 children. The children appeared to be malnourished and they only had one carer. After several visits, we realized that the children were being fed before we arrived so that they did not appear to be hungry. A couple of the children had fevers but the house mother did not have the resources to buy medication. She would sometimes tie the children to the beds and keep them naked so she didn't have to wash their clothes. The children did not go to school. I asked the house mother if she could give me the contact details of the person who sent money to her. She gave me the name of a person called Benjamin K. We asked him to provide sufficient money to pay for enough food, clothes, and medicine for the children. He was resistant to doing more and accused us of expecting too much. I reminded him that all children in his care had the right to care, education, and health and not be abused. His reluctance led us to dig deeper and we found that he was collecting funds for the orphanage and other ghost (non-existent) orphanages around the country from churches around the world and pocketing most of the money for himself. Even after we exposed him many of his supporters could not believe he was scamming them "because he was such a nice guy". The UN got involved and he was required to make certain changes.*

STOP & THINK

1. If you came across an orphanage like this, what would you initially do?
2. How can you know if an individual is making money from a scam like this? Where was his accountability?
3. If you chose to get involved in challenging such a situation, what are the real risks? Would you be willing to take those risks?

Child Trafficking in Child Marriage

The issue of child marriage is addressed in several international conventions and agreements. [The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#), for example, covers the right to protection from child marriage in Article 16, which states: "The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage...." The right to 'free and full' consent to marriage is recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says that consent cannot be 'free and full' when one of the

parties involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner ([UNICEF, 2024](#)).

Forced marriages occur throughout the world, and primarily affect women and girls. In a forced marriage, one or both persons are coerced, forced, or fraudulently made to marry, rather than freely consenting to the union. The United Nations Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery identify forced marriage as akin to slavery, and it is considered a human rights violation under U.S. law ([End Slavery Now, 2020](#)). Neither of these legal positions prevents forced marriages from occurring, however. Forced marriage may become enmeshed with other forms of human trafficking and slavery, such as sex and/or labor trafficking. Families may force a daughter to marry for economic reasons, to solidify relationships between families, to control sexual behavior, or to provide for a disabled family member. A rape victim may be forced to marry her rapist to “protect” her reputation. The majority of forced marriages occur in Asia, the former Soviet Republics, the Pacific region, and Africa.

Forced marriage has been documented in the United States as well. The Tahirih Justice Center 2011 Survey on Forced Marriage in Immigrant Communities in the United States documented 3,000 known and suspected cases identified by survey respondents within a 2-year timeframe. Forced marriages were seen in immigrant communities from 56 different countries and many faiths ([Tahirih, 2011](#)).

A particularly disturbing aspect of forced marriage is when children are forced to marry by their parents or guardians. This continues to be a problem in the United States because most states do not prohibit child marriage. If the parents give consent, or a judge authorizes it, a child can be forced to marry against her—it is usually a girl—will. Although not all states maintain records on child marriages, [Unchained at Last](#) determined that at least 248,000 children, as young as 12, were legally married in the United States between 2000-2010. Their research showed that 77% of the children were minor girls married to adult men; this frequently met the legal definition of statutory rape under state laws, yet the marriages were considered legal ([Unchained at Last, 2020](#)). States such as California, New Mexico, Idaho, Maine and others have no minimum age for marriage so long as the parents consent. Pennsylvania and Minnesota did not outlaw child marriage until the late spring of 2020, and Virginia became the 12th state in the US and the first in the South to end child marriage ([Tahirih, April 9, 2024](#)).

Why is the topic of forced marriage important within the broader context of human trafficking? Because children or women who are trafficked for sex may also be sold into forced marriages. Because forced marriages of children often have profoundly disruptive effects on the children’s lives: dropping out of school, spousal abuse, and mental-emotional-physical health consequences.

CASE STUDY: *Young Lives International conducted an Impact Study on the results of early marriage on the outcomes of girls in four countries. In India, evidence from the study “contributed directly to the Supreme Court of India’s 2017 landmark judgment ruling that a man who has sex with his wife when she is less than 18 years old is committing rape.” This was an important ruling as 1/3 of child marriages occur in India. For more on policy influence in India and in Ethiopia see [Young Live Impact Case Study](#).*

Child Trafficking in Conflict and Militarised Children

Children have and continue to be used as soldiers in armed conflicts worldwide. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), also known as the child soldier treaty, is a multilateral treaty whereby states agree to: 1) prohibit the conscription into the military of children under the age of 18; 2) ensure that military recruits are no younger than 16; and 3) prevent recruits aged 16 or 17 from taking a direct part in hostilities. The treaty also forbids non-state armed groups from recruiting anyone under the age of 18 for any purpose.

Children have often been used as part of armed conflict, particularly boys. Violations of this type are higher in countries affected by war violence like Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen ([UNICEF, 2022](#)). Children are uniquely vulnerable to military recruitment and manipulation into violence because they are innocent and impressionable. They may be abducted by militant narcoterrorism groups or may be lured to join willingly. Factors such as poverty, illiteracy, and the need for belonging are powerful forces that may drive the voluntary recruitment of adolescents into criminal groups. Some children are born into militia groups by women who are there both willingly and unwillingly. Children in armed conflicts are indoctrinated into violence and may be used as assassins posing a higher threat to counter-narcotic efforts, since law enforcement is not usually trained or mentally prepared to engage children. Nevertheless, children as young as five or six are trafficked into armed conflicts for a multitude of reasons. When conflicts become more protracted, they become more vulnerable. They are believed to be more malleable and obedient, and therefore easy to train and they typically want to please the traffickers. Because their brains are not fully developed, they are less risk-averse and more compliant with requests traffickers make. As they age, they are faced with pressure to commit repeated acts of interpersonal violence such as rape, murder, torture, etc.

These early experiences fail to allow the development of empathy and conscience that would prevent them from engaging in harmful behaviors toward others. Additionally, their smaller bodies enable them to conduct tasks and maneuvers which would be more difficult for adults. Children are believed to be expendable and because they often make up the majority of the population in the given country, are viewed as a readily available resource.

Demobilized children, often referred to as former child soldiers, are young individuals who have been released from military service or armed groups. These children face numerous challenges upon their release and require help practically, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Safe and stable housing, food, clothing, and medical assistance are the basics. Daily routines, including regular mealtimes, attending school, and participation in culturally appropriate activities (including traditional spiritual rituals, sports, art, or drama) are critical. Children also need opportunities to make meaningful contributions to the family and community, which in turn fosters self-esteem, trust, and respect. Empathetic caregivers, be they in the home or the community, can help children process their conflicted emotions and memories. Elders in the family and community are especially important in this process. Family and community restoration is dependent on this. For more information about child soldiers across the globe, the [2022 Human Rights Reports: Insights Into Global Child Soldier Recruitment & Use](#) provides overviews by location.

CASE STUDY - Militarized children in Colombia: *A 12-year-old child works in the coca fields with his family in Colombia. The child picks the leaf from coca bushes when ready for harvest, so his dad can process the leaf and make coca paste as members of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) control many of the source zones where coca is harvested and processed, come to collect the coca paste. The child is then recruited by force into the guerrilla group and becomes militarized. After training in how to use firearms, the child becomes part of the group that uses violence and intimidation to collect extortion fees from those working in controlled areas, aids in the drug trade, as this is the main source of funding for the group, and engages in other violent, acts the adult combatants command him to do.*

STOP & THINK

1. How would you respond to this child if you learned that his activities had resulted in the murder of a neighbor?
2. How has the trauma he sustained impacted his behaviors?

CASE STUDY in the Thai Burmese/Myanmar border: *There has been ongoing fighting between the Government troops and soldiers of the tribal groups e.g. Karen and Shann in the border areas. When Government troops attack a tribal village the children flee to the jungle. When the tribal soldiers return to the village the adults are dead and the children are on their own. They therefore take them with them and the children end up carrying weapons, gathering food from the jungle, cooking, and are sometimes trained to be snipers.*

One Christian American/Shann couple set up a shelter for children on the border. They approached the tribal commander and he was happy to release the children into their care where they received food, shelter, and an education. In the future, the children hoped to become pastors, teachers, and soldiers.

Note: If you are working with militarized children, this brief [GUIDE](#) may be helpful to help you to help them share their needs.

The Importance of Trauma-Informed Approaches in Child-Focused Aftercare

Given the significant role of trauma and ACEs in the development of PTSD, HSB, social-emotional development, and learning problems, it is essential for caregivers working with child survivors of trafficking to adopt trauma-informed approaches. Trauma-informed care recognizes the pervasive impact of trauma and seeks to create a safe, supportive environment that promotes healing and resilience ([SAMHSA, 2014](#)).

When working with children who have experienced trafficking, trauma-informed approaches involve:

- Recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma and understanding how it can affect children's behaviors, relationships, and overall functioning. This recognition includes understanding how some exhibited behaviors are indicators of turmoil in the child/adolescent life. These behaviors include:
 - Truanting or skipping school
 - Acting out in verbally or physically aggressive ways; hyperactivity
 - Self-harm- alcohol, drugs, cutting, food, etc. to relieve inner pain
 - Over-working and over-pleasing either to stay in good favor with adults or to reduce the use of violence
 - Refuse to say where they are going (so you ask)
 - Intimidating clothes and make-up to keep adults wary and questions at bay
 - Living in a fantasy world - extensive online use or gaming
 - Using dissociation (shutting down) to deal with fear, conflict, or stress
 - Denial of pain, physical and psychological
 - Rationalizing filial piety and abuse as culturally acceptable or a duty
 - Rejection of love as it challenges ones negative self-concept
- Creating a sense of safety and stability through consistent, predictable routines and a nurturing, non-judgmental environment. Safety can also be communicated by treating children with respect and dignity. Culturally, the way this will look may vary.
- Empowering children by involving them in decision-making, respecting their choices, and building on their strengths and resilience (see **Child Participation** below).
- Providing developmentally appropriate, evidence-based interventions that address the unique needs of each child, including trauma-focused therapy, skill-building, and family support.
- Collaborating with other professionals and systems (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health) to ensure a coordinated, holistic approach to care. This care should include services that either lead to healthy reintegration or placement with care providers that are safe and well-trained.
- Engaging in ongoing training and self-care to prevent vicarious trauma and burnout among caregivers.

By incorporating trauma-informed principles into their work, caregivers can create a more supportive and healing environment for child survivors of trafficking. This approach recognizes the complex interplay between trauma, development, and behavior, and seeks to address the underlying causes of PTSD, HSB, educational problems, and inappropriate social behaviors rather than simply focusing on the problematic behaviors themselves.

Furthermore, trauma-informed care emphasizes the importance of building trust, safety, and connection with children who have experienced significant adversity. By providing consistent, nurturing relationships and opportunities for healthy attachment, caregivers can help children develop the social and emotional skills necessary for positive, age-appropriate development ([Rafferty, 2013](#)).

As people of faith, we have a unique opportunity to integrate spiritual principles and practices into our trauma-informed approaches. By offering prayer, pastoral care, and the teachings of our faith traditions, we can support the holistic healing and resilience of children and families. This may involve:

- Praying with and for children, asking for God's healing, protection, and guidance in their lives.

- Providing spiritual counselling and support, helping children to find meaning, purpose, and hope in the midst of their struggles.
- Sharing scriptures, stories, and teachings that emphasize God's unconditional love, forgiveness, and desire for their wholeness and well-being.
- Engaging children in rituals, practices, and community activities that foster a sense of belonging, connection, and spiritual nourishment.
- Collaborating with faith leaders and communities to create a network of support and resources for children and families affected by trafficking, including those that display HSB.

By embracing a trauma-informed approach that integrates both evidence-based practices and spiritual principles, caregivers can offer a comprehensive, holistic response to the complex needs of child survivors of trafficking. This approach recognizes the inherent dignity and worth of every child and seeks to promote their healing, resilience, and restoration in body, mind, and spirit. For more practices that incorporate the wants and needs of the child, see the section below on **Understanding the Context of Child Participation in Regard to Trafficking Recovery**.

The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in the Recovery of Sexually Exploited Children

FBOs play a crucial role in addressing the issue of child sexual exploitation, as they are often on the frontlines of providing care, support, and advocacy for survivors. However, their current responses and approaches to this issue have both strengths and limitations, and there are opportunities for improvement to better serve the needs of all survivors, regardless of gender.

Current Responses and Approaches

FBOs have traditionally focused their efforts on providing care for survivors of child sexual exploitation, with an emphasis on rescue and rehabilitation. This has often involved providing shelter, counseling, and vocational training to survivors, particularly girls. However, there has been less attention given to the specific needs of boys and gender-diverse youth who have experienced sexual exploitation.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition among FBOs of the need for a more comprehensive approach to addressing child sexual exploitation. This has included an increased focus on advocacy and research, as well as efforts to provide better follow-up care for survivors. Some FBOs have also begun to provide more thorough training for their staff and volunteers, such as the Developing Protection and Trafficking Awareness (DPTA) and Celebrating Children programs.

There has also been a growing awareness of the need for legal reform and implementation to better protect children from sexual exploitation. Some FBOs have begun to advocate for stronger laws and policies to prevent exploitation and hold perpetrators accountable. Additionally, there has been an increased emphasis on developing and implementing child protection policies within FBOs themselves.

Responses of FBOs so far

- Emphasis tends to be on care rather than advocacy or research.
- Rescue is done but without considering a good follow-up.
- Rehabilitation (though nearly always for girls rather than boys) including vocational training.
- Better at exploring re-integration and sustainable livelihoods.
- Beginning to do more thorough training e.g. DPTA/CPTA, Celebrating Children, Hands that Heal.
- Beginning to appeal for better legal reform/implementation.
- Beginning to do (better) child protection policies.

Strengths and Limitations

One of the strengths of FBOs in addressing child sexual exploitation is their ability to provide a compassionate and supportive environment for survivors. Many FBOs have a long history of providing care and support to vulnerable populations, and they often have deep roots in the communities they serve. This can make them well-positioned to identify and respond to cases of child sexual exploitation. However, there are also limitations to the current approaches of FBOs. One significant limitation is the lack of attention given to the specific needs of boys and gender-diverse youth who have experienced sexual exploitation. Many FBOs have focused their efforts primarily on girls, which can leave boys and gender-diverse youth without access to the care and support they need.

Another limitation is the lack of trauma-informed care within many FBOs. Survivors of child sexual exploitation often experience complex trauma that requires specialized care and support. Without proper training in trauma-informed approaches, FBO staff and volunteers may inadvertently re-traumatize survivors or fail to provide the level of care they need.

Furthermore, traditional beliefs about gender and sexuality within religious and cultural contexts can lead to the blaming, shaming, and silencing of sexually exploited boys and gender-diverse youth. These beliefs can manifest in several ways:

1. Toxic masculinity norms that promote a narrow definition of masculinity, leading boys and young men to feel ashamed or emasculated for experiencing sexual exploitation.
2. The stigmatization and discrimination against boys and gender-diverse youth who have experienced same-sex sexual exploitation compounds their trauma.
3. Purity culture and sexual shame that place a high value on sexual purity and chastity, leading survivors to feel "tainted" or "ruined" after experiences of sexual exploitation.
4. Victim-blaming attitudes that suggest survivors are somehow responsible for their own abuse, particularly if they are perceived to have transgressed gender norms or sexual boundaries.
5. Silencing and denial of the exploitation of boys and men, making it difficult for survivors to come forward and seek support.

6. Lack of inclusive resources and frameworks to adequately address the needs of boys and gender-diverse youth who have experienced sexual exploitation, leaving them feeling invisible and marginalized.

Opportunities for Improvement

- **Gender-sensitive interventions:** To better serve the needs of all survivors of child sexual exploitation, FBOs must develop gender-sensitive interventions that take into account the unique experiences and needs of boys, girls, and gender-diverse youth. This may involve providing specialized services for male survivors, such as support groups or counseling that addresses the specific challenges they face. It may also involve creating safe and inclusive spaces for gender-diverse youth to access care and support.

Critically examining and challenging harmful gender and sexual norms that may be embedded in their religious and cultural traditions is also crucial for FBOs. This requires a willingness to have difficult conversations, listen to the voices and experiences of diverse survivors, and develop more inclusive, affirming, and justice-oriented theologies and practices.

- **Trauma-informed care:** In addition to providing gender-sensitive interventions, FBOs must also prioritize trauma-informed care when working with child sexual exploitation survivors. This involves providing training for staff and volunteers on the impacts of trauma and how to provide care that is sensitive to the needs of trauma survivors. It may also involve partnering with mental health professionals who specialize in working with survivors of sexual trauma.

Creating safe, non-judgmental spaces for boys and gender-diverse youth to share their stories and access support is crucial in dismantling the shame, stigma, and silence that too often surround their experiences of sexual exploitation.

- **Collaboration with diverse stakeholders:** FBOs must work in collaboration with a diverse range of stakeholders to effectively address child sexual exploitation. This may include partnering with law enforcement, social service agencies, and other community organizations to provide a coordinated response to cases of exploitation. It may also involve working with researchers and policymakers to better understand the root causes of exploitation and develop evidence-based interventions.

Taking these insights into careful consideration can allow FBOs to play an even more effective role in preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation. FBOs can help to create a world where all children are protected from sexual exploitation and have access to the care and support they need to heal and thrive, but this requires real investment in measurable change.

Child Participation

Faith communities have a unique role to play in preventing child trafficking, protecting victims, and promoting restoration and empowerment ([Bunge, 2008](#)). One key aspect of this response is child

participation - the principle that children have the right to express their views and to be involved in decisions that affect their lives ([Article 12: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989](#)). By empowering trafficked children to participate in their own care, recovery, and advocacy, we can help them reclaim their dignity, agency, and hope.

Biblical Foundations for Child Participation and Dignity

The Bible consistently affirms the inherent value and dignity of children, as well as their capacity for leadership and participation in God's purposes. [Chapter 2](#) provides an overview of dignity and *Imago Dei*. These biblical principles extend to children and challenge us to see children not just as vulnerable and dependent, but also as capable of meaningful participation and contribution in the Kingdom of God. As Christians working with trafficked children, we must recognize their God-given potential and create opportunities for them to exercise their agency and voice. Here are a few examples:

1. The Psalms declare that children are a heritage and reward from the Lord ([Psalm 127:3](#)).
2. The Proverbs instruct parents to train up children in the way they should go ([Proverbs 22:6](#)).
3. Samuel: Spiritual ministry. Practical service in the temple. Heard God, Spoke for God ([1 Samuel 2-3](#)).
4. Little Girl in 2 Kings: Supernatural love – enabled healing of her abductor, Her Faith – healed a leper; that led to evangelism- Naaman committed himself to God ([2 Kings 5:1-15](#)).
5. In the New Testament, Jesus welcomes and blesses children ([Mark 10:13-16](#)).
6. Jesus as a Child: Had a discussion with temple elders, understanding of God's word ([Luke 2:41-52](#)).
7. Children: Worship and praise, preaching – told who he is and what he came to do; prophetic prayer – it came to pass ([Matt 21:1-16](#)).
8. Young Boy fish and loaves: Follower of Jesus, provided caring help, sacrificially gave, had faith he could be helpful to Jesus ([John 6:1-13](#)).
9. Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of God belongs to those who receive it like a child ([Luke 18:15-17](#)).

STOP & THINK

1. In what ways does your culture honor the voice of children well?
2. In what ways does it struggle with viewing their active participation in the Kingdom?

Understanding Child Participation in the Context of Trafficking

Trafficked children face unique vulnerabilities and challenges that can impact their ability to participate in decisions about their lives. Many have experienced complex trauma, which can manifest in symptoms like mistrust, fear, shame, and difficulty forming healthy relationships ([Hopper, 2017](#)). They may also struggle with internalized stigma, self-blame, and a sense of powerlessness due to the coercion and manipulation they have endured ([Countryman-Roswurm & DiLollo, 2016](#)). In some cases, trafficked

children may have developed coping mechanisms or traumatic bonds with their traffickers that make it difficult for them to assert their own needs and desires ([Sanchez et al., 2019](#)).

Despite these challenges, child participation plays a crucial role in the healing and resilience of trafficked children. When children are given opportunities to express their views, make choices, and contribute to decisions about their care and future, they can begin to regain a sense of control and empowerment ([Sapiro et al., 2016](#)). Participation can also help children build self-esteem, develop healthy relationships, and engage in meaningful roles and activities that promote their overall well-being ([Feinstein & O'Kane, 2008](#)).

However, implementing child participation with trafficked children requires sensitivity, skill, and intentionality. Practitioners must be aware of potential barriers such as power imbalances, communication difficulties, and cultural norms that may inhibit children's ability to speak up ([Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2024](#)). It is essential to create safe and supportive environments where children feel heard, respected, and believed, and to use trauma-informed approaches that prioritize their physical, emotional, and spiritual safety ([Chaffin & Mortensen, 2021](#)). By applying child participation principles in a way that is responsive to the unique needs and experiences of trafficked children, we can empower them to engage in their own liberation and restoration.

Empowering Trafficked Children through Participation

To effectively empower trafficked children, it is essential to create safe and supportive environments that foster genuine participation. This requires trauma-informed care that recognizes the pervasive impact of trauma on children's lives and seeks to promote healing and resilience through safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment ([SAMHSA, 2014](#)). In practice, this means building trust and rapport with trafficked children through consistent, reliable relationships, respecting their boundaries and choices, and involving them in decisions about their care and future ([Dianiska et al., 2024](#)).

One key strategy for empowering trafficked children is to involve them in collaborative care and recovery planning. This involves working with children to identify their strengths, needs, and goals, and developing a shared plan for achieving them (Leitch & Snow, 2020). By giving children a voice in this process, we can help them regain a sense of control and ownership over their lives. Another important aspect of empowerment is informed consent and assent - ensuring that children understand and agree to the services and interventions they receive, to the extent that their age and maturity allow ([Rothman et al., 2018](#)).

Trafficked children can also be empowered through child-led advocacy and peer support initiatives. By providing opportunities for children to share their stories, advocate for their rights, and support one another, we can help them develop leadership skills, build self-esteem, and contribute to wider efforts to prevent and address trafficking ([Azzopardi et al., 2024](#)). However, it is crucial to approach these activities with sensitivity and care, ensuring that children are not re-traumatized or exploited in the process.

Collaboration with secular agencies and experts is also essential for empowering trafficked children. Faith-based practitioners must be willing to partner with law enforcement, mental health professionals, social workers, and anti-trafficking organizations to provide comprehensive, coordinated care ([Davy,](#)

[2015](#)). By working together, we can ensure that trafficked children receive the legal advocacy, trauma-informed therapy, medical care, education, and other services they need to heal and thrive.

The Role of Faith Communities in Fostering Participation

Faith communities have a vital role to play in fostering the participation and empowerment of trafficked children. One key aspect of this role is providing spiritual support and discipleship that affirms children's worth, strengthens their resilience, and connects them to a loving, faith-based community ([McFarland, 2022](#)). This may involve offering prayer, pastoral care, mentoring, and age-appropriate religious education that helps children make sense of their experiences and find hope in God's love.

Faith communities can also offer practical assistance and resources to support trafficked children's participation and well-being by meeting tangible needs that promote a sense of security and stability. This may include providing safe housing, food, clothing, education, job training, and other basic needs, as well as connecting children and families to community services and support ([Duncan et.al, 2020](#)).

Another important role of faith communities is advocating for policies and practices that empower and protect trafficked children. This may involve working with local, national, and international policymakers to strengthen laws and regulations related to child trafficking, promoting trauma-informed practices in child-serving systems, and advocating for increased funding and resources for anti-trafficking efforts ([Musto, 2009](#)). Faith leaders can also use their platforms to raise awareness about trafficking and mobilize their congregations to take action.

Finally, faith communities can foster participation by collaborating with other faith-based and secular organizations working to combat trafficking and support survivors. By building partnerships, sharing resources and expertise, and coordinating efforts, faith communities can contribute to a more comprehensive, effective response to child trafficking ([Dragiewicz et al., 2019](#)).

Challenges and Considerations for Faith-Based Practitioners

While faith-based practitioners have much to offer in fostering the participation of trafficked children, they also face unique challenges and considerations. One significant challenge is navigating religious and cultural beliefs about children that may limit their agency and voice. In some contexts, children are seen as property of their parents or as lacking the capacity for meaningful participation ([Ansell, 2016](#)). Faith leaders must be willing to critically examine and challenge these beliefs in light of biblical principles and child rights standards.

Faith-based practitioners must also balance the importance of child participation with the need for adult responsibility and guidance. While children have the right to express their views and influence decisions, they also need the support and protection of caring adults ([Varaden, 2019](#)). This requires a delicate balance of empowering children while also providing them with age-appropriate structure, supervision, and support.

Another key consideration is ensuring child protection and safeguarding in ministry settings. Trafficked children are particularly vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation, and faith communities must have robust policies and procedures in place to prevent and address any harm that may occur ([Oakley et al.,](#)

[2022](#)). This includes screening and training staff and volunteers, establishing clear boundaries and codes of conduct, and reporting any suspected abuse to appropriate authorities (See **Safeguarding** below for more strategies to protect children).

Another challenge is avoiding re-traumatization and exploitation in the name of storytelling and advocacy. While sharing survivor stories can be a powerful way to raise awareness and inspire action, it can also be triggering and harmful if not done with sensitivity and care ([Boone, 2020](#)). Faith communities must prioritize the safety, privacy, and dignity of trafficked children and ensure that any public sharing is voluntary, informed, and empowering.

Finally, faith-based practitioners working with trafficked children need ongoing training and support to effectively foster participation and navigate the challenges involved. This may include training on trauma-informed care, child development, cultural competence, and self-care, as well as opportunities for peer support, supervision, and spiritual formation ([Chaffin & Mortensen, 2021](#)).

STOP & THINK: A Case Study- Dr. Barnardos

Thomas Barnardo began his work in London in 1867 when he set up a ragged school in the East End, where poor children could get a basic education. One evening a boy at the mission, Jim Jarvis took Thomas Barnardo around the East End showing him children sleeping on roofs and in gutters. The encounter so affected him he decided to devote himself to helping destitute children. By listening to and involving Jim Jarvis he was able to understand the real context of street children.

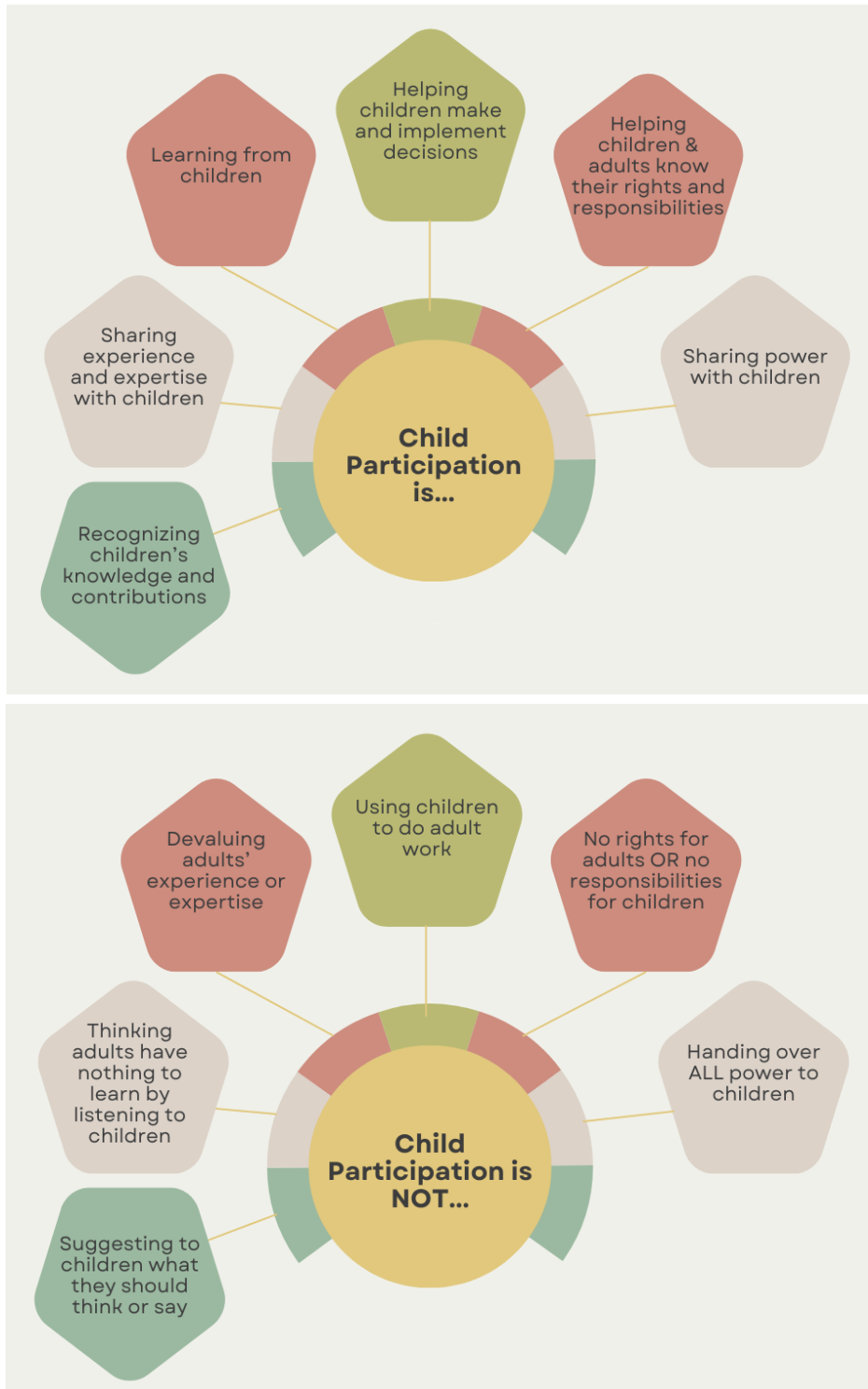
1. Why do we fail to listen to children and involve them in decisions that affect them?
2. How can we be better at listening and involving children in decisions that affect them? What changes would you personally need to make to hear children better?
3. How does child participation link to survivor empowerment?
4. What are ways you can involve young adult survivors in decisions about their lives?
5. How can we better listen to their concerns?
6. Could they be involved in designing and evaluating programs?
7. Could they be invited to participate on the board of an organization?

Adults responsibility: *“Children are only capable of what adults encourage them or teach them to do, and allow them to practise”* - **Judith Ennew**

It is important to note that some forms of perceived child participation are exploitative and harmful. For example, children are often made to sing, dance, or perform for visiting project beneficiaries. This makes use of the children as **decorations**. Sometimes they may be given a **token** role and told what to do or say, but the child’s consent or agreement is not obtained. In worst-case scenarios, children have been manipulated to support or demonstrate against issues they have limited or no understanding about, but they do so to please adults in their lives. Rather, we can demonstrate dignity and care by making strong use of **informed consent or assent** (the child is informed and agrees to actions that affect them),

consultation and collaboration with children on programs that impact them, and allowing them to take the lead in program development and design when feasible. By allowing children the opportunity to have a voice, we are not suggesting that adults are not needed for guidance or structure. However, involving children allows space for healthy recovery, building skills, and fostering healthy adult-child relationships. For more guidance on Child Participation and preparing yourself and the community to engage children in this way, see [Appendix C](#).

Figure 5 & 6: What Child Participation Is and Is Not (Dr. Glenn Miles)



Safeguarding Children From Abuse

“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea”

[Matthew 18:6](#).

With increased awareness of the need to protect children from abuse, many churches have put in place safeguarding policies to help ensure the safety of children within churches. But many are still lagging. Nurturing, respecting, and caring for children are part of the teachings and values of all major faiths. There is a general expectation to care for all life and a duty to support those in society who most need care and protection. Safeguarding and child protection guidance puts a duty on organizations to promote children’s welfare and protect them from harm from people within the community of faith as well as those that may venture in from without.

Since faith can play a major role in children's and young people’s lives, places of worship, faith settings, church camps, and special outings should take steps to keep them safe, which in turn fosters the sense of safety they need to grow in their relationship with God. These steps include:

- Following the relevant national legislation and guidance.
- Ensuring children are properly supervised.
- Making sure all adults understand how to share concerns about the safety or welfare of a child or young person.
- Making the environment as safe as possible for children and young people.
- Conducting background checks on all individuals who will work with children and ensuring that adults will not be alone with them.
- Providing training for church staff on safeguarding procedures. One such training is offered through [Thirtyone: eight \(formerly CCPAS\)](#), an independent Christian safeguarding charity.

However, there many specific challenges and barriers to safeguarding children have existed in the past for faith-based organizations and churches. For example, the trust people have in religious leaders, both creates opportunities for abuse and makes it less likely that victims will be believed if they accuse a religious community leader. Victims of abuse have often been blamed for trying to destroy the ministry of a beloved pastor or leader or the community of faith fears the loss of respect in the larger community if reports of abuse are known. This creates not only places where abuse is permitted but where it is permitted to occur repeatedly. When this involves children, the consequences are detrimental and life-long. In cases such as these, the concern can also be for the organizational reputation. Status is threatened by abuse within the organization and appears to be a consideration in the repeated covering up of potential scandals in many faith groups.

Additionally, attitudes of welcome and inclusion in many religious communities make them susceptible to people who wish to enter them to abuse them. This can be tied up with issues of forgiveness and second chances. While faith communities need to be beacons of hope and places where people find healing in the name of Jesus, they also need to be wise about who is allowed access to children. Another concern is the lack of a culture of accountability or organizational structure in many communities of faith that would promote improved safeguarding measures. Often volunteers are relied on to handle the vetting of others

who will serve on ministry teams. These ministry leaders may have limited knowledge and confidence in their roles and have limited support or training. In many of these situations, there are limited resources and difficult decisions are made about how to use these. Limited resources for safeguarding may be especially problematic in smaller communities of faith, charities, or organizations making cover-ups of abuse an easier option.

One final thing to consider is the tension that can exist between religious laws and customs and statutory requirements of the state. These differences will be one for discussion. However, it is recommended that ultimately the theological and ethical consideration of safeguarding the bodily and sexual integrity of children rests solely on the idea of *Imago Dei*. In too many religious and cultural communities across the globe, the saving of reputation has been more important across many thousands of years. The stories of abuse of children by supposedly safe adults and religious leaders can be heard from every nation under the sun. It is time to ask ourselves: What will we do to care for the children as Jesus did?

For more information on building safeguarding practices see Appendix C: Additional Concerns for Children.

Deliver us from Evil is a documentary about adult survivors of child sex abuse by a Catholic priest in the States. It helps persuade people of the importance of child safeguarding. It is available to watch for free <https://topdocumentaryfilms.com/deliver-us-from-evil/>

This is a really important video when I used it in training some folks changed from thinking "It would not happen in our church" to "I want to write the CP policy for my church."

STOP & THINK

1. This video covered the abuse of children in the US, but stories of abuse among clergy and religious leaders come from all over the globe. How is the abuse of children viewed in your country/culture?
2. Is it common to cover up abuse to protect adult clergy or religious leaders? From your cultural perspective, what are the benefits and risks of these practices?
3. Considering [Matthew 18:5-7](#), what might be the eternal risks?

Conclusion

As followers of Christ, we are called to protect and nurture the most vulnerable among us, and there are none more vulnerable than children who have fallen victim to the horrors of human trafficking. In this chapter, we explored the complex issue of child trafficking through the lens of our faith, seeking to

understand the root causes, the experiences of survivors, and how we can work towards prevention, restoration, and justice.

The Bible is clear about the value and dignity of children, with Jesus himself welcoming little ones into his presence and cautioning against causing them to stumble ([Matthew 18:6](#)). As we delved into the topics covered in this chapter, we kept biblical foundations at the forefront of our minds and hearts. We examined the importance of the UNCRC and considered how we can use this international framework to advocate for the protection and empowerment of children in our own communities and beyond.

Throughout this chapter, we grappled with challenging realities, such as the impact of trauma on child development, the unique vulnerabilities of boys and girls, and the insidious role of pornography in fueling demand for sexual exploitation. We also explored the various forms that child trafficking can take, from sexual violence and drug-related exploitation to child labor, child marriage, and the use of children in armed conflict. As we learned about these heartbreaking issues, we remain committed to hope and action.

This chapter provides practical guidance on child protection and safeguarding in various settings, as well as insights into the needs of children and young people who are healing from trauma. By understanding the principles of complex developmental trauma and its impact on the brain and overall development, we can become better equipped to provide the support and care that survivors so desperately need.

Our vision is for a world where all children are valued, protected, and empowered to reach their God-given potential. This includes trafficked children, who have endured unimaginable suffering and exploitation, but who also possess remarkable strength, resilience, and capacity for healing. By walking alongside them, listening to their voices, and advocating for their rights, we can be part of God's redemptive work in their lives and our broken world. Ultimately, our response to child trafficking must be grounded in the love, compassion, and justice that lie at the heart of our faith. By integrating spiritual principles with evidence-based practices, we can work towards creating a world where every child is protected, valued, and free to thrive.

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