



Stop Trafficking!

Awareness Advocacy Action

Anti-Human Trafficking Newsletter • October 2026 • Vol. 24 • No. 10

FOCUS: This month's newsletter focuses on the impact of human trafficking on families.

Human trafficking destabilizes families, and the emotional trauma experienced by parents and siblings often goes unnoticed. When a parent or sibling learns that their loved one is missing or trafficked, they may feel anger, guilt, shame, fear, and a deep sense of loss. Family members ask, "How could this happen to my child, sister, or brother?"

Family members of trafficking victims are often overlooked, though the trauma they experience is very real. The focus of this newsletter is the impact of the trafficking of a family member, not related to familial trafficking.



Impact on Parents

When a parent or caregiver discovers that their child is being trafficked, they may experience feelings of guilt, deep grief, and helplessness—often blaming themselves, their spouse, or other family members. They are desperate to find their missing children. They find themselves constantly thinking about the child, questioning their parenting abilities, and whether they missed warning signs or failed to protect their child.

If there are other children in the family, they become alert and hypervigilant. This often leads to marital and family dysfunction and shatters their sense of security,

The grief, shame, and sense of failure are magnified if the parent or caregiver played a role in making the child leave the home, for example, a parent or another family member asking the child to leave the home out of momentary anger.

Many parents withdraw from their communities that usually support them due to shame, fear of judgment, or a perceived stigma about their child's trafficking. This can prevent them from accessing vital support networks and serve to increase their isolation.

The costs associated with searching for a missing child, legal battles, and specialized long-term social services or rehabilitation if the child was using drugs can quickly deplete family resources. Families often face unexpected expenses such as legal representation, private security to scrub leaked data from the internet, and ongoing mental health therapy for the child and family members, which can last for years and add significant financial and emotional strain.



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Impact on Siblings

When a brother or sister is trafficked, the siblings often experience behavior changes and struggle with a variety of emotions such as fear, loneliness, and sadness. At times, they may feel at fault or struggle to trust others and to form healthy relationships. They often have trouble concentrating, and their academic performance plummets.

Parents and caregivers may become highly stressed, hyper-vigilant, or entirely consumed by trying to locate, protect, or support the trafficked sibling. As a result, other siblings can feel invisible, neglected, or resentful while the dynamics at home are driven by the trafficking victim, whether they are present or not. Furthermore, the trauma experienced by the siblings while a victim can cause fear and anxiety about their own safety.

Siblings need their own safe spaces, such as peer support groups, sports, or individual counseling, to help reduce feelings of isolation and fear. Offering these supports can help siblings feel understood and valued, which is essential for their emotional well-being..

Family Risk Factors

Several family-based risk factors may contribute to the vulnerability to human trafficking, including a history of violence or abuse, dysfunctional family dynamics, poverty, migrant status, and homelessness. Traffickers can also coerce victims by threatening the safety of family members or, for example, in the case of sextortion, threatening to send photos to the parent's workplace.

Families' lack of awareness of human trafficking is another important factor, as traffickers may encourage families to place children into exploitative situations to ease poverty. Individuals may be manipulated into entering jobs to support their families, but consequently, they may be subjected to exploitative situations.

Finally, parents or other relatives can also be traffickers or part of the trafficking network. [A 2024 study](#) by the Department of Justice found that family members were involved in 40-50 percent of child trafficking cases in the United States, while the [International Organization for Migration](#) estimates that over 41% of child trafficking situations are facilitated by relatives or caregivers. While it can occur anywhere, in the United States, familial trafficking disproportionately affects younger children and those in isolated or impoverished rural communities.

Families are key in detecting behavioral changes in their children who are experiencing exploitation by someone outside the family while the child is living at home. Providing specific signs, such as sudden withdrawal, secretive behavior, or changes in online activity, can help parents recognize potential risks early.

Victims of Sextortion

If a child discloses to their parents that they are a victim of sextortion, the parents often feel a loss of control and powerlessness. They often blame themselves for not monitoring devices closely enough. They may become fixated on their child's moods or behavioral changes. They often carry the secondary trauma of witnessing their child's intense fear and shame. Many parents also suffer severe anxiety about exposure, ongoing financial blackmail, and fears for their child's immediate physical safety.

Brothers and sisters often experience "secondary trauma", leading to feelings of profound anxiety, guilt, anger, and betrayal. Siblings may live in constant anxiety, fearing that they or their brother or sister will be targeted next, that they did not protect their sibling, or that the perpetrator will physically show up. To help them cope, families should openly discuss feelings, provide reassurance, and consider counseling if needed. Managing these emotions helps maintain a supportive environment and reduces long-term psychological impact.

If the parents react by over-policing their social media use, it can lead to tension within the family and, especially for younger siblings who may not fully understand the situation, make the home feel unsafe. Finally, if the sextortion takes up all the family's time and resources, the sibling may feel resentful toward the victim and the family.

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After their child has been trafficked and returns to the family, parents may still face many challenges just trying to distinguish what is normal age-appropriate behavior and a mental health crisis. They usually will need access to mental health services for their child and accompany the child to interviews with law enforcement and to obtain restraining orders to protect the child from the predator.

They also may need help securing the accommodation that may be needed for the child to succeed at school, such as waivers from classes regarding subjects that may be triggering for them. In the case of sextortion or some forms of trafficking, they will need to go through the process of having photos and other sensitive information from the internet.

Family members likely don't have the resources or awareness of how to emotionally support the survivor, especially if they suffer from PTSD and symptoms of trauma like nightmares, flashbacks, or anxieties that interfere with returning to normal daily life and routines.

The Freedom Story



Advocacy

When Victims are Never Reunited with the Family

The number of victims of human trafficking who are never reunited with their families is unknown. When the victim is not found, the family suffers the grief and uncertainty of not knowing what happened to their child. This pain and loss are compounded if a family member took part in increasing the vulnerability of the child by, for example, rejecting a child who identifies as LGBTQ, or asking them to leave home out of anger.

The migrant population is heavily affected by victims of trafficking who never return to their families, deepening their already significant distress and sense of loss.



How Families Cope Post Trafficking

While some survivors want to reconnect with their families and return home, others become isolated from their families because of their trafficking experience. Families in the survivors' immediate environment often feel relieved by their return, but may also experience conflicting emotions like guilt, anger, and fear. Recognizing these feelings can help families feel understood and supported, which is essential for building trust and empathy.

Family members themselves often lack the resources or awareness of how to emotionally support the survivor, especially if they suffer from PTSD and symptoms of trauma like nightmares, flashbacks, or anxiety that interfere with returning to normal daily life and routines.

Anti-trafficking [intervention and aftercare services](#) tend to be almost exclusively centered on the victims; however, the impact on their families—the people whose sister, brother, or child has gone missing— is often overlooked and sidelined, though the trauma they experience is very real. Family members need to feel supported both while a child is in a trafficked situation and after they return home.

[Engaging with therapists who specialize in trauma](#) helps parents understand what triggers trauma in the child and what behavioral responses. Connecting with support groups of peers, other parents, and families who have experienced similar situations can provide reassurance and foster trust, making families feel less isolated and more supported in their journey.

[Healing for parents](#) also means fostering a safe environment that promotes feelings of security and hope, avoiding victim-blaming, allowing the child to regain a sense of personal control, setting healthy boundaries, and avoiding guilt while guiding the child through the long-term healing process.

Parents also need guidance on how to navigate the legal process to prosecute the trafficker and, if the child was forced to commit a crime while trafficked, clear their name. Providing detailed information about legal rights, procedures, and available legal support can empower families, reduce anxiety, and encourage active participation in justice efforts.

Trauma May Be Transgenerational

“Studies have shown that the effect of human trafficking is transgenerational extending to the children of trafficked victims. Human trafficking victims rarely discuss their experience with their children, which is similar to most victims of war or torture. They often experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder which can include nightmares, involuntary memories, negative changes in mood, and avoidance. This repression of their trafficking experience creates an underlying atmosphere of anxiety and stress in the family and has a psychological effect on the next generation.

Children of human trafficking victims often display an anxious disposition, are prone to externalize anger and have behavioral problems at school. Trafficking victims often are overprotective, controlling, and demanding of their children, which places children in a constant situation of stress and anxiety. Adolescent children of trafficked victims who do not speak to the child of the trauma they suffered are often sad, anxious, and have behavior problems at school and later on are not able to relate well to others at work.”



World Union of
Catholic Women's
Organisations

World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations

The trauma of trafficking goes on to impact future generations and can put the children of trafficking survivors at risk. Mothers who are survivors of sex trafficking often feel compelled to be overprotective of their children. When children are overprotected, their independence may be discouraged, hindering the development of autonomy and increasing the risk of developing anxiety and separation issues. In addition, mothers also tend to avoid opportunities for socialization with other children or adults.

They also report that they tend to withdraw when struggling with personal stress, which leads them to feel emotionally disconnected from their children, thus decreasing their ability to respond to their young children's emotional needs in moments of stress. Many question their ability to be “good mothers,” which mental health professionals link to their experiences of disempowerment from being trafficked.

Action



The mission of **A Family In Need** is to lift families out of crisis and into stability. That includes acknowledging and addressing the dangers that threaten their safety and dignity.

A Family in Need reinforces the importance of safety amongst families. They believe real change happens when community-focused charities and passionate individuals work hand-in-hand.

A Family in Need:

- Funds directly to families impacted or recovering from this crisis
- Partners with local organizations to sponsor and support their mission to help
- Raises awareness in at-risk areas
- Provides resources for families to access tools and guidance



A FAMILY IN NEED

WE ALL NEED SOMEBODY TO LEAN ON

Action

In [this YouTube video](#), parents of a sex trafficking victim tell their story and explain how easily people can fall victim.



Find attorneys and advocates in your area trained to support trafficking survivors. The legal directory may be accessed [here](#).

REPORT HUMAN TRAFFICKING

NATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE:

1-888-373-7888

HOMELAND SECURITY INVESTIGATIONS TIP LINE:

1-866-347-2423



[The Parent Coalition to End](#)

[Human Trafficking](#) helps provide care at every stage of the unthinkable so that no parent or caregiver has to suffer alone. We offer support, and education to families who are, have been, or at risk of being exposed to human trafficking.

Please click [here](#) to view the webinar: *When it is Your Child: Supporting Parents of Exploited Youth*.

Parents of exploited youth often face crisis, confusion, and system involvement alongside their child. This session equips providers with tools to support parents, strengthen communication, and foster healthier family engagement that improves outcomes for youth.



Please click [here](#) to get expert, specialized guidance and file a digital report using the [NCMEC CyberTipline](#).

NCMEC is the nation's largest and most influential child protection organization. They lead the fight to protect children, creating vital resources for them and the people who keep them safe. Every child deserves a safe childhood.



[Shared Hope](#)

[International](#) is a non-profit, organization founded

in 1998 by former U.S. Congresswoman Linda Smith. It is dedicated to preventing sex trafficking, restoring survivors through trauma-informed care and safe housing, and advocating for stronger laws to prosecute buyers and protect victims. Resources for parents may be found [here](#).



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