

# Reconnecting

# with

# Your Child

Building Relationships After  
Suspected Sexual Exploitation



This project was supported by:

American Legion  
*Child Welfare Foundation*



# Be Patient



## What do I do first?

Listen, comfort, be patient. You want answers and information, but your child needs to feel safe and protected first.

### What is OK for me to say?

I'm glad you're here. I'm happy to see you. I'm ready to listen.

### How do I get my child to talk about what happened?

Avoid "why" questions which may sound like blame. You want to know what happened and help your child now. Finding out "why" can wait.

### What does my child need?

Try asking your child how you can help them. Trauma is a person's response to a deeply upsetting event, and they may be figuring out how to sort through many feelings and don't want to talk about what happened. Trauma may show up as confusion, anger or worry. Be patient and supportive. Give them choices during conversations.

### How do I find out what happened?

Try not to question over and over. Let them have control when possible. Details may be difficult to hear, and you may be very angry. These feelings may be hard to hide, but try not to show them when talking with your child. Remind them that none of this was their fault. Protect and comfort your child when you can.

DO



Be Patient



Ask "what"



Listen

DON'T



Push for Answers



Ask "why"



Interrogate

# Learn



## What is sexual exploitation?

Sexual exploitation is the abuse of a child through sexual acts and may include child sexual molestation, online enticement of children, taking photos/videos of sexual abuse, sending or posting photos/videos of sexual acts without permission, or the exchange of sex for something like food, shelter, or drugs.

## What do I need to know?

Learn what makes children vulnerable to sexual exploitation. **MissingKids.org** may be a good place to start. You can also reach out to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's Team HOPE, a network of peer support volunteers who have similar experiences and can help you through this journey. Call **866-305-HOPE (4673)** to talk to a Team HOPE member.

## What is the connection between sexual exploitation and children running away from home?

When children are missing, they often need help finding food, shelter and protection. At NCMEC, we see kids at risk for many things while trying to meet those needs. Sexual exploitation, self-harm, recruitment into gangs or child sex trafficking, and drug and/or alcohol abuse are a few.

## How does this happen?

Children can be preyed on by people seeking to exploit them. Exploitation can also happen when kids seek love, affection and acceptance. Children are especially vulnerable due to their age and dependency on others. They are also naturally curious to meet new people and try new things. For older children and adolescents, this curiosity is combined with a desire for more independence. People who want to exploit children will manipulate and take advantage of these needs by targeting and tricking them.

DO



Learn



Think

DON'T



Punish  
First



Assume

# Connect



## How do I deal with this situation?

Moving forward isn't quick and it's not easy, but you can heal. Take everything moment by moment, piece by piece. Ask for help and know you aren't alone.

### Who is there for our family to rely on?

Find people focused on supporting you and your child. NCMEC provides support for victims and their families. To learn more about these services email [familysupport@ncmec.org](mailto:familysupport@ncmec.org) for help or call **1-800-843-5678**. NCMEC can help connect you with therapists who are trained to look for troubling behaviors and help families figure out how to focus, communicate and heal.

### How do I connect with my child again?

Try not to rush or force connection. Be ready to listen, learn and love unconditionally. Trust your gut; you know your child best and when something is wrong.

### What if I feel lost, in shock or angry about what happened?

Shock and anger are normal, expected, and tough to deal with. Being honest with yourself and your loved ones is important. Focus on today - tomorrow will come.

### What if I need support?

Something traumatic has happened to your family. It is hard to take care of yourself when you are taking care of others. Try to find family and friends who can help. Talk to someone so you don't feel alone.

### What should I expect from my child?

Your child may seem different. Maybe you can't really figure out why, but you know something's changed. Children sometimes don't know how to talk about their trauma, so instead of words, they use behaviors. For children who have been sexually exploited, sudden emotion, confusion and worry are common reactions. A trauma response can also be physical, like a racing heart, tight chest or sweat. If you see these, figure out what happened just before that was upsetting. Then you might be able to identify "triggers" and predict situations that may cause these uncomfortable reactions again in the future. Look for what's changed and seek professionals who can help with communication and focus.

DO



Rely on Others



Move Forward

DON'T



Soldier on Alone



Get Stuck

# Reassure



## How do I help my child?

Ask what your child needs and be honest when you don't have the answers. Make sure your child knows they matter, and you stand behind them no matter what. Give your child choices and a sense of control when possible. There are also many support programs that have sexual exploitation survivors as leaders and group sessions are used to help youth feel like they aren't alone. If you need help finding where to start, NCMEC's Family Advocacy Division may be able to help: [MissingKids.org/ourwork/support](https://www.missingkids.org/ourwork/support)

### What do I do when my child needs specialized help?

A child who has been exploited may show increased anger, frustration, depression/anxiety, or use of drugs and alcohol. They may also want to hurt themselves or others. Pay attention to any changes in behavior and know when to ask for professional help. Search for a provider you feel comfortable with and ask them about their experience helping children who have been sexually exploited.

### What if I don't fully know what happened?

Information may come in pieces and you may still feel lost and confused. Make sure you are ready to listen only. When you need to ask questions, make sure they are gentle and supportive. Explain to your child that law enforcement and therapists need to know everything so they can help.

### What if my child refuses to open up or accept the help that's being offered?

With time and compassion, your child may change their mind. Be the person that never gives up on your child. NCMEC can help you make a plan for connection and communication with your child. Call **1-800-843-5678** to reach NCMEC's Family Advocacy Division.

### What can we do together?

Fight for justice, healing and support. If your child's images/videos were shared online, they have rights. NCMEC can help get these images removed – go to [MissingKids.org/gethelpnow](https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow) for assistance. You are an important piece of your child's recovery, and they need you now more than ever.

DO



Adapt



Reassure

DON'T



Stay in the Past



Blame



# Do's and Don'ts for Connecting with a Child After Trauma

**DO**

 Adapt	 Ask "what"	 Be Patient
 Learn	 Listen	 Move Forward
 Reassure	 Rely on Others	 Think

**DON'T**

 Ask "why"	 Assume	 Blame
 Get Stuck	 Interrogate	 Punish First
 Push for Answers	 Soldier on Alone	 Stay in the Past



**Hope is why we're here.**

For more information, please visit **MissingKids.org**  
or call **1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)**

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