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# Shining Light on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: A Toolkit to Build Understanding

Developed by: *Wichita State University Center for Combating Human Trafficking* // In Partnership With: *MANY*

## TOPIC: The Importance of Language in Anti-Trafficking Work

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# The Importance of Language in Anti-Trafficking Work

This resource is one of several topics addressed in the [Shining Light on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: A Toolkit to Build Understanding](#). The toolkit is designed to be a resource for multidisciplinary professionals, policy makers, volunteers, faith communities, and others involved in anti-trafficking work. While the information provided on each topic is in no way exhaustive, you will find additional resources to facilitate further study.

Each topic is addressed in three sections. First, the “**what?**” – what we know about the topic which includes a review of what we know from both research and the field. “**So what?**” addresses what this means – the reason this information is important to understand and how it will enhance our response to trafficking. “**Now what?**” considers the implications of this information in practice – how the information can be used to enhance our response to human trafficking. This includes specific implications for mentoring relationships, when applicable.

## What?

Language is a powerful tool. It has the amazing ability to build up and encourage, but it also has the power to tear down and defeat. In regards to social justice movements like human trafficking, language impacts the way people think about and respond to an issue. Unfortunately, the words commonly used to describe human trafficking further perpetuate stereotypes, muddle the definition, and ultimately can prevent victims from accessing much needed services. When a newspaper reports on a story about a “child prostitute,” few will read that story and see the young person described as a victim. Rather, they see a willing participant, a criminal, and someone unworthy of services and support. But if that same newspaper writes a story about a child victim of human trafficking, the response will substantially change. If we approach language with intentionality, it can be used to help individuals more intimately understand the issue of human trafficking and move them toward action.

## So What?

- **Language can perpetuate stereotypes.** How we talk about a person influences whether we see them as a victim or as a survivor. This ultimately has an impact on a survivor’s ability to access services (*Countryman-Roswurm & Patton Brackin, in press; Salvation Army, 2016*).
- **Language often sensationalizes exploitation and abuse.** Far too often we hear of the gruesome details and graphic content of exploitation. These details do not positively impact survivors or move the cause forward. Rather, they serve only to shock the audience (*Beck Turner, 2014; Countryman-Roswurm & Patton Brackin, in press; Lloyd, 2013*).
- **There are a number of different words or phrases that are used interchangeably to describe human trafficking.** Not all of these terms are reflective of the true definition of human trafficking. Many exclude victims and create categories of worthy and unworthy victims (*Countryman-Roswurm, 2015; Raben Group & Rights for Girls, nd; US Department of State, 2014*).
  - Certain language can result in the isolation of victims. Generally, there is a focus on female victims of sex trafficking. The language used often excludes male victims, LGBTQI victims, adult victims, victims of labor trafficking, and others. (US Department of State, 2014).
- **Language used to describe trafficking is often victim-blaming (ex: prostituted vs was exploited)** (*Love 146, 2016*).
- **Survivors are more than what has happened to them.** Language often reduces survivors to their circumstances rather than emphasizing their amazing power to survive (Lloyd, 2013; Love 146, 2016).

### General Practice Implications

#### *Individuals*

- **Become familiar with the definition of human trafficking.** Using terms that are outdated or terms that do not reflect the true definition of human trafficking creates confusion and causes harm (*Beck Turner, 2014; Raben Group & Rights for Girls, nd; US Department of State, 2014;*).

— Remove terms like “child prostitute” from your vernacular. By definition there is no such thing as a child prostitute (*Raben Group & Rights for Girls, nd*).

— Be inclusive of all survivors and their experiences. Acknowledge that victims come from all backgrounds and that each situation of human trafficking is unique (*Beck Turner, 2014; US Department of State, 2014*).

#### *Service Providers*

- **Do not sensationalize abuse and exploitation by sharing jarring details.** This often re-traumatizes survivors and is nothing more than a shock tactic. [Consider how best to include survivor voice](#) without re-exploitation. Speak about the fact that human trafficking exists and provide steps for combating it (*US Department of State, 2014*).
- **Avoid language that blames the victim.** Recognize that no one chooses to be trafficked and identify the exploiter/trafficker as responsible (*Love 146, 2016*).

#### *Community*

- **Hold media accountable for how they report on human trafficking.** The media plays a significant role in determining how stories about human trafficking will be framed. How the media shares information regarding human trafficking can and does impact societal paradigms and public response (*Tiegreen & Newman, 2008a, Tiegreen & Newman, 2008b*).

— Demand that reporting on human trafficking is victim-centered, focused on facts, does not re-victimize survivors, and accurately portrays the issue. Connect media personnel interested in doing a story on human trafficking to resources that will help them communicate the issue of trafficking skillfully (*Countryman-Roswurm & Patton Brackin, in press*).

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### Mentoring Practice Implications

#### *Individuals*

- **Focus on using language that is empowering and builds up your mentee.**
- **Help your mentee identify language that might be triggering.** Discuss ways to positively cope when they are triggered by language.
- **Talk about the impact of language with your mentee.** Your mentee may use language that is disempowering simply because they have heard others use it (either in reference to themselves or others). Encourage them to speak kindly to themselves and to others.

#### *Service Providers*

- **Strive to be victim-centered and survivor-led.** Incorporate survivor voice into programming as much as possible. Ask for feedback on language used in program materials, being certain to compensate survivors adequately for their time and expertise (Countryman-Roswurm & Patton Brackin, 2016).
- **Be open to feedback and recognize that you won't always get it right.** Accept criticism with an open mind and strive to do better next time (Countryman-Roswurm, 2015).

#### *Community*

- **Talk about how the media portrays trafficking.** Is it done well? How could it have been done better?

### Resources

- Countryman-Roswurm, K. & Patton Brackin, B. (in press). Awareness without re-exploitation: Empowering approaches to sharing the message about human trafficking. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, DOI: 10.1080/23322705.2016.1201374
- [Rights for Girls: No Such Thing Media Recommendations](#)
- [US Department of State: Media Best Practices](#)
- [Love 146: Language and Media Guide](#)



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