

# Building a Strong Team Response to High Risk and Trafficked Youth

## Key framework for effective use of tool

The current literature and existing reports on commercially sexually exploited (CSE) youth unanimously identify key areas of engagement essential for providing effective care to impacted youth. This framework includes:

- Genuineness in our relationships and approaching each situation without judgment
- Addressing underlying/holistic needs outside the context of CSE
- Consistent use of validation and affirming language
- Reframing how we understand and react to youth actions/behaviors
- Seeking, including, and valuing youth voice and experience in the process
- Allowing youth to choose from reasonable options whenever possible

Users should also be mindful of the following while using this assessment<sup>2</sup>:

- Internal and external barriers to youth moving “forward”
- The ability to measure and count short incremental gains
- What options exist to adopt a philosophy of “safer” when “safest” is not a realistic option
- The ability to shift away from trying to change youths’ minds about their actions/behaviors; and instead help them come to their own conclusions about decision making and the role of natural consequences
- Recognize the goal of meeting youth where they are at is to do just that and does not require or expect “forward” movement. Rather, acknowledges implementation of skills and strategies to enhance engagement as an intervention of its own

Sources: 1.) For complete list of references consulted, visit: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/aht/toolkit> 2.) California Department of Social Services Harm Reductions Series for Social Workers, Notice No. I-28-19 3.) Nichols, A.J., Edmond, T. & Heil, E.C. (2018). Social work practice with survivors of sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation (pp. 51-69). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

## Do you have ...

### 1. Full picture of risk:

- WI Indicator & Response Guide
- Immediate needs and/or physical safety considerations
- Full scope of trauma history
- Needs outside of CSE/trauma history

### 2. Awareness of available resources to target identified areas of risk:

- Local teen resource card
- 2-1-1 or local task force
- County/state based agencies
- Local crisis response agencies

## Engagement

- Stay curious and open to hearing any response vs. questioning for certain responses or “accuracy” (i.e. “tell me more about what you meant by that;” “I can tell you’re having a hard time staying here. Can we talk about what’s going on so we can maybe figure out some other options or how to make this better?”)
- Offer personal connection through appropriate self-disclosure or shared experience; look for common ground in past or present that might resonate with a young person
- Prioritize basic needs before expecting further connection: when did the youth last sleep, eat, shower, or use the bathroom
- Take youth to new places, show them new things, spend time together, etc.
- Get to know youth outside of their involvement in high risk behavior/trafficking, trauma history, or other adverse situation due to which you became involved

## Options

- Allow simple choices: Timing of visits/appts, where to go for meal together, who they prefer to take them to appt, opportunity to decline something but choose an alternative, etc
- Create non-consequential options that aren’t ultimatums. For example, instead of: “if you choose not to go to school, I won’t take you to group afterwards;” try something like: “don’t forget I am picking you up after school for group today. Would you like me to get you right from school or at the group home?”
- Input on bigger decisions: “I know this group home isn’t working out for you and we need some time to figure out what other options there are. While we figure that out together, do you have any thoughts on people or places I should be looking into?”

## Affirming Language

- “I noticed you \_\_\_\_\_, & did not \_\_\_\_\_. I could tell you were \_\_\_\_\_.”
- “When you *\_(positive action)\_*, it really made \_\_\_\_\_ feel included”
- “You showed commitment by coming here today”
- “I was really happy when I saw you at \_\_\_\_\_ the other day”
- “I noticed you haven’t been spending as much time with/at *\_(negative influence)\_*. You’re clearly prioritizing your safety.”
- Acknowledge a difficult decision that was made even in a typically undesirable context: “I know how hard you’ve been working on cutting weed & that put you in a tough spot when your friends invited you to smoke. It took courage for you to be honest with me about it.”
- Recognition for return (pos. action/behavior), rather than disappointment for leaving (neg. action/behavior).

The ability to respond to and support youth dynamically at their varying stages of readiness; recognizing this as **fluid**, not linear<sup>3</sup>, is an essential next step in the engagement process and may present: **1) outside the “cycle” of change 2) contemplation of the concern 3) preparation for change/leaving 4) action: the initial stages of exit 5) maintenance/cont’d support 6) relapse/return: normal part of a longer process that still requires support and validation of strengths and growth**

see back for next steps

# Actions to Support Engagement

The goal of meeting youth where they are at, or in their current *stage of readiness*, is to do just that. It does not require “forward” movement. Implementation of the following skills & strategies should be considered a form of intervention.

## 1. Youth is not currently engaged in process or responsive to adults

- Separate youth actions from personal work; establish one’s own support outlets through consultation and supervision
- Identify priorities as a team and best people to carry out **engagement**, including informal supports
- Re-affirm each person’s unique role and responsibility on team and with youth
- Identify traits of positive adult relationship(s) youth does have; consider ways to replicate traits across team members
- Determine alternative means of communication that exist within different roles (i.e. messaging)
- Identify where flexibility exists to promote **engagement**: short term vs. long term placement options, non-placement adult/relative supports, utilize non-traditional supports
- Take a full shift towards harm reduction<sup>2</sup> approach: safer vs safest; recognize how youth may choose to meet needs without alternative **options**
- Offer youth **options** in each [attempted] interaction
- Listen to what youth is saying
- Incentivize meeting with team member(s)
- Always keep the door open for youth to return/call; consistently message this

## 2. Youth is responsive to team members/ adults

- Consider what needs are likely met through exploitive situations; explore other **options** that exist to fill certain areas of need: physical safety, emotional safety, independence, love, companionship, money, substance use/ self- medicating, hormones, etc.
- Increase contact/outreach attempts
- Start safety planning with youth: ask about things they are doing to stay safe/reduce risk of harm
- Validate/**affirm** youth decisions and feelings
- Continue to incorporate use of **options**
- Begin increasing/exposing youth to opportunities
- Offer medical care routinely; assist youth in connecting to appropriate primary care provider they are comfortable with

## 3. Youth sometimes reaches out independently to team/adults

- Consistently offer resources and services, even ones youth has previously declined
- Help youth make connections to community based agencies and informal supports, such as an advocate, mentor, and other credible adults
- Work with youth to develop their own insights about their lives/situations
- Learn from youth about what prompts their leaving home/placement (i.e. leaving something, going to, or both)
- Negotiate (within reason) youth wishes and preferences
- Acknowledge and **affirm** shift of youth beginning to reach out to you/team members on their own
- Work to understand why youth may have chosen the person(s) they have to begin reaching out to. Can these types of connections be replicated in other areas in their lives?
- Continue exposures to opportunities (increased time together or engaged in pro-social activities results in less time to be on the run or engaging in high risk situations)

## 4. Youth expresses awareness of their situation; shares insights

- Make more intentional efforts around connections to an advocate and community based resources: youth drop-in spaces, shelters, street outreach, safe recreational spaces like Boys and Girls Clubs, etc.
- Begin to explore with youth needs currently met through exploitive situations; address what you can tangibly provide to offset needs
- Offer formal support/service **options**: evidence based therapy (TF-CBT, EMDR) or evidence informed group work (Ending the Game, My Life My Choice, other curriculums offered locally)
- Thoughtfully explore with youth barriers/ambivalence to follow through on a choice, commitment, or goal they made, but may be having a hard time with. What do they need to take the next step forward (internal & external motives)?

## 5. Youth is both aware of situation and ready for change to occur or already in process

- Pro-active outreach with advocate/community based agency to assure effective collaboration on youth needs
- Explore with youth where they are at with technology/cell phones and realistically what kinds of support or boundaries are needed to promote safety (i.e. utilizing location/tracking, adjusting privacy settings, deleting accounts/apps, turning in phone at night, limited use of phone, giving up phone entirely, etc.)
- Actively address needs youth has identified as being met through exploitive situations (tangibly and with support services)
- Assess with youth totality of treatment/intervention needs; together prioritize where to start: AODA, mental health stabilization, homelessness/severe family conflict, trauma symptoms, acute medical needs, legal issues, etc.
- Partner with youth to promote success in the options they have chosen; actively address anything that may be interfering (internal & external factors)
- Observe and **affirm** youth beginning to create distance between themselves and an exploitive person or situation
- Recognize this is as a highly vulnerable and fragile stage in youth readiness; awareness of the imminent chance of relapse

## 6. Youth has had period(s) of incremental change, but is currently experiencing a setback

- Recognize setbacks as normal part of transition out of the life; unconditionally support youth through these periods
- Normalize to youth this experience and **affirm** their continued commitment to change. Consider sharing normalizing facts and data about relapse
- Draw from other areas of readiness to respond to relapse, re-vamp engagement strategies, allow flexibility in case planning, understand exit/behavior change as a fluid, non-linear process
- Appreciate that this is a long term journey for high risk/ trafficked youth with expected setbacks, lapse in **engagement**/ readiness, integral need for current team members to maintain involvement throughout, and requirement of warm handoffs as team members change and other transitions occur