

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF YOUTH

A missing child is every family's worst nightmare. Learning that your child may have been sexually exploited while on the run is one of the most frightening and traumatic times in a parent's life.

Child sexual exploitation is the sexual abuse of minors and involves youth being manipulated into exchanging sexual favours for money, shelter, clothing, drugs, food, transportation, love or acceptance.

The sexual exploitation of teens can take many forms: prostitution, pornography, stripping, dancing topless, escort services and erotic massages. It is important to note that all forms of sexual exploitation are illegal under the Criminal Code of Canada and should be reported immediately.

Victims can be of any age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic background or religion. Exploiters target and prey on the vulnerability of young people and groom them by gaining their trust and promising a better and glamorous life.



What is Canada's age of consent?

The age of consent for sexual activity is **16 years-old**. It was raised from 14 years-old on May 1, 2008 by the **Tackling Violent Crime Act**.

However, the age of consent is **18 years-old** where the sexual activity "exploits" the young person - when it involves prostitution, pornography or occurs in a relationship of authority, trust or dependency (e.g., with a teacher, coach or babysitter). Sexual activity can also be considered exploitative based on the nature and circumstances of the relationship, e.g., the young person's age, the age difference between the young person and their partner, how the relationship developed (quickly, secretly, or over the Internet) and how the partner may have controlled or influenced the young person.

Possible Warning Signs My Child is Being Sexually Exploited

While the following indicators aren't necessarily proof of involvement, they may serve as red flags of possible victimization:

- Dramatic change in attire, appearance and attitude (clothing, hair style, makeup, staying out late or not respecting authority)
- Sudden presence of expensive items (cellphone, clothing, jewelry)
- Unexplained school absences
- Hypersexuality
- A sudden change of friends or companions
- Presence of older friends or older boyfriend
- Chronic running away
- Maintains a high level of secrecy and is reluctant to share where they have been or with whom

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While some of these behaviours may seem characteristic of a typical teenager, they should still be noted and discussed with your child.

Why Do Youth Fall Victim to Sexual Exploitation?

In order to help our youth, we must first try to understand the root cause. Keep in mind that exploiters exercise control over their victims by exploiting their unmet core needs such as love, affection and a sense of belonging. The teen may be:

- 1 Looking to escape an abusive or intolerable situation /issue;
- 2 Experiencing conflict or abuse within the home or school: eg: mental or physical illness, physical or sexual abuse, a feeling of being unloved, unaccepted or abandoned, strict rules, lack of freedom, bullying, etc.;
- 3 Seeking to feel accepted, cared about and valued;
- 4 Looking for financial autonomy;
- 5 Sense of belonging to a group;
- 6 Looking for love, affection and attention;
- 7 Struggling with poor self-esteem and body image during adolescence: many young female teens come to value that their self-worth is based on physical attributes. Therefore, how they are perceived by others matters greatly at this time.



How Can I Prevent My Teen from Becoming a Victim of Sexual Exploitation?

Help teens gain a sense of self-confidence

- Spend quality time every day with your teen by engaging in activities that suit his/her age and interests, remember to use this time for conversation and not confrontation. Shared experiences (meal times, going shopping together, etc.) help to build trust and respect that form the basis for open communication. Your teen will learn that you are available to listen, not only when he is having a problem, but when things are going well;
- Model the type of behaviour you expect from your teen. If you want honest expressions of feelings, you must be prepared to do the same;
- Use active listening with your teenager. Pay careful attention to the emotion behind the message and try to determine what your teen is saying by rephrasing it in your own words;



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- Encourage your teen to succeed and help him to work through his differences and struggles;
- Create opportunities for your teen to learn how to make positive decisions about his life;
- Teach your teen about healthy boundaries and relationships;
- Protect your teen from feelings of loneliness and isolation;
- Defend your teen against harassment or feelings of loneliness or verbal abuse;
- Offer praise for tasks well done and if your teen falls short, suggest positive ways in which to improve. Make sure you don't criticize his behaviour;
- Discuss what your teen's dreams are: Where does s/he see herself/himself in five years from now?;
- Set realistic boundaries and be consistent in applying them.

Communication is key! Be vigilant and never hesitate to discuss any concerns or unhealthy behaviours you notice. It is not necessary to walk on egg shells about the subject as chances are your children already know more than you think.

Always let your teen know that you are their number one supporter, even if you are initially rejected by them. S/he needs to feel as though s/he can always count on you, and if they fall, you will be there to catch them.

If Your Teen Is Being Exploited:

- 1 Try to remain calm and keep in mind that s/he is the victim.
- 2 Listen carefully. Let your teen express what s/he is thinking, feeling and seeking to experience.
- 3 Put her/his emotional needs before your own.
- 4 Take the time to get to know your teen again - during this period, your teen met new people and frequented new places. Your teen is no longer a little child.
- 5 Try to avoid finding/placing the blame on those individuals responsible for your teen's predicament, but rather focus your energy to look for solutions so that you can support your child in his/her recovery.
- 6 Seek help for your child in a way that reflects their unique needs.

Remember to Take Care of Yourself and Your Family

It is essential to take care of yourself as you will need all of your energy to help your child when s/he returns home. Knowing that your child was the victim of sexual exploitation may leave you feeling many emotions such as sadness, anger, guilt or anguish. These emotions are completely understandable. Don't blame yourself and don't try to ignore your feelings because they risk becoming more intense. Don't think you are alone living this situation and, above all, don't isolate yourself. If you do not feel well, never hesitate to seek professional assistance. There is no shame in asking for help.

Remember - you are not alone! If you have any concerns regarding your child's behaviour or interactions with others, please contact our offices at 514 843-4333. All calls are confidential.