

Human Trafficking Training

Part 2 Transcript

[Jessica Evans]: So when we're thinking about youth populations that might be particularly vulnerable to trafficking, there are a wide variety of things that might make a youth vulnerable to trafficking. If you think about where they might live, where they're from, who they live with, what they're doing before and after school, who they're friends with, their living situations. There are so many reasons that someone might be vulnerable to trafficking. In our work at Allies, one of the things that we see that puts someone at the highest risk of being vulnerable is the lack of positive relationships in their life.

[Jessica Evans]: If you think about the teenagers that you see in your life or in school, every single one of them is looking for love and acceptance and friendship and belonging. And if they don't get that at home or in their friend group or in their family, they're gonna find a place that they feel like they belong and that they're valued somewhere. And traffickers are keen to that and they know that. And so they create a space where teenagers are seen and heard. And they feel pretty and they feel accepted and needed. And in that space, these youth can then start making a connection with someone. And that's what we all wanna do as humans, we all wanna connect with someone. That's what we're wired for in our brains as human beings, is to connect with someone. And that connection is really powerful. Whether it's a positive or a negative connection, they wanna be connected with somebody.

[Jessica Evans]: So one of the biggest vulnerabilities that we see in teenagers is that they wanna be connected, with each other and with someone who makes them feel special and valued. And traffickers will pounce on that opportunity and create a space where they feel that way. So feeling lonely, feeling disconnected, feeling like they might be on the margins in some way is a really good example of vulnerabilities.

[Jessica Evans]: We've seen girls in our organization that come from somewhat wealthy homes. And we've seen girls that have been out on the streets and on the run and couch surfing, be victims of human trafficking. Although poverty plays a role, right? So if you see someone that doesn't have a stable house, doesn't have stable adults in their life, doesn't have someone that's providing for their basic needs. They're gonna be at higher risk for someone taking advantage of them. But certainly, someone who comes from a home where they don't feel connected to their parents, they might have a roof over their head, they might have food to eat, they might be involved in extracurricular activities, but they're looking for someone to connect with and to make them feel like they belong. And that is a vulnerability that we see almost across every single girl that we've ever served in our mentorship program.

[Jessica Evans]: When it comes to vulnerabilities in youth, we talk a lot about like financial poverty or other types of poverty. But we talk a lot about the poverty of relationships being one of the biggest contributors to someone being susceptible to trafficking. Because they're looking for that love and connection somewhere and they just don't have it in a healthy place. By the time we interact with many of the girls in our mentorship program, a large percentage of them are living in a residential facility. So they've been removed from their home because of their trafficking or because of other situations. And so many of them are living in a residential facility, isolated from family, from friends. And so it's really critical that they find a way to connect with someone. And so as they are matched with a mentor in our mentorship program, we're able to walk alongside them and provide kind of a friendship. And a mentor in their life when they don't really have anyone else.

[Jessica Evans]: Not only are they in a residential facility, but many of them, their family, and their home is not a safe place for them to go. A lot of them are foster care kids, who have bounced around from home to home. Or their parents participated in their exploitation, and are just not in a healthy place to be able to have them in their home. So they don't have what we would consider family. So I don't know, many of you teachers may have experience with kids in your classroom who are bouncing from home to home or foster family to foster family. And you might notice that they don't connect well with you, or they might kind of hold back. And that's their defense mechanism coming up because they're trying to protect themselves from further hurt and further damage.

[Jessica Evans]: But as we are able to walk alongside them as they're navigating where placement is, and who is their family? And who can they trust in their life? Significant milestones might come up in their life, whether that's birthdays. Or we've had a couple of girls in our program be pregnant and they didn't have anyone to throw them a shower. They didn't have anyone in their life that was investing in them and celebrating with them. And so we were able to come alongside them and do that. They didn't have mom, dad, aunts and uncles, or cousins that were walking with them and even showing them how to be a mother.

[Jessica Evans]: We walked with a girl this year, as she graduated from high school and applied for college and was accepted to college. And she was the first one in her family able to do that. And would never have walked down that path if she didn't have a mentor or people who believed in her and challenged her to try for something that seemed a little bit scary and to take that chance. And so we were able to help her with that. And so just having that one person in her life, just in the day-to-day, as someone that she could trust and walk with her was really important.

[Jessica Evans]: And so again, you as a teacher, even if it's just one or two students that you can identify that might need that person in their life. You don't know, you might be able to change the trajectory of their life as you encourage them and are friends with them. And just guide them in a healthy direction.

[Whitney Cloin]: And so all of these vulnerabilities are the things that recruiters and traffickers are looking for. These vulnerabilities in individuals, and then they are able to identify those things and then use those things to groom them for trafficking and exploitation.

[Darcy Wade]: Grooming is an intentional process where someone identifies a potential victim, and builds a relationship of trust and emotional connection with them. So that they can manipulate, exploit, and abuse them. Grooming relationships can be of many kinds. Some examples are mentor, friend, and romantic partner. The person being groomed is made to believe that these are real relationships. Groomers may also build relationships with family and friends. Grooming is a process that takes place over time and can take from weeks to years. Absolutely anyone can be a groomer, regardless of age, race, or identity. They can be strangers, families, friends, faith leaders, coaches, and educators. Grooming also occurs in person and online.

[Darcy Wade]: Grooming has a pattern. It begins with victim selection. Then the groomer gains access to the victim and isolates them. They develop their trust. And sometimes there are secrets, which makes the victims feel like the relationship is special and the abuser is caring. Next is desensitization to touch and discussion of sexual topics. This means that at first, touch can appear harmless, such as hugging, tickling, or wrestling. But then it can escalate into increasingly more sexual contact. Abusers may also share pornography and engage in sexual discussions with the victim. This is an attempt by the abuser to make this behavior normal and natural. And it allows them to avoid suspicion and detection.

[Darcy Wade]: Grooming begins with the identification of needs. When a victim is identified, their needs are identified and then used to exploit the victim's trust and reduce the groomer's risk of being caught. Groomers, through this, can coerce victims into agreeing to abuse. Many times the victims are unaware that they are being groomed. There may be complicated feelings involved like love, admiration, and loyalty, which are normal feelings in a relationship. But there may also be fear, confusion, or distress. Groomers make their victims feel dependent on them, sometimes through the meeting of a need. And sometimes through control tactics like blackmail, guilt, intimidation, and shame.

[Darcy Wade]: There are some signs of grooming to be aware of. A power imbalance in the relationship, such as age or status, being gifted trips or holidays, being gifted items and/or money, sharing secrets and secretive behavior, over-sexualized behavior and/or desensitization to touch, and also substance use.

[Darcy Wade]: Grooming happens through a process of recruiting. Recruiting can take on many forms. Older youth can befriend younger youth. There can be gang involvement or gang connection. A recruiter may be selling the dream or promising the victim a better life.

There may be promises that the victim will be taken care of. Excessive loyalty and devotion, as well as isolation of the victim to turn them against their family and friends. These relationships and behaviors may be secretive where there's the exchange of private information, which makes the victim feel like they are special. A recruiter and a groomer will likely have a dominant personality, create occasions to be alone with the victim, and also, this heir of secrecy around the relationship. Lastly, a relationship built in reciprocation. Like I'll show you mine if you show me yours.

[Darcy Wade]: Grooming also occurs online, especially as our online presence has expanded over the years. Online grooming occurs on social media sites, apps, online games, chat rooms, text messages, messaging apps, emails, and video chats. Like in real life, groomers take the time to build relationships with their potential victims. Groomers can also use online platforms to build rapport with potential victims that they've actually met in real life. Often this involves adults creating fake profiles and posing as peers, or really posing as anyone other than themselves. This is the idea of catfishing.

[Darcy Wade]: Shame is based on feelings of worthlessness, self-loathing, self-condemnation, and failure. Shame involves thoughts or emotions towards an entire self, rather than towards a specific event or action. This stems from a belief that a social norm has been violated, and social norms come from social and cultural stigmas, which then further feelings of shame. Shame can come from embarrassment of behaviors, such as sharing explicit photos or engaging in sexual behavior. Shame comes along with feelings of humiliation and guilt. "I made them think I wanted this". "I did something wrong". "I deserve this". "I am not worthy of love or kindness". Shame can also come from the idea of being a "willing participant in criminal activity".

[Darcy Wade]: Blame and self-blame go along with shame. Blame is very powerful. In the theory of blame, the victim is made to believe that they had a choice and then willingly participated in or invited their victimization. The victim is blamed for their behaviors and actions that occurred within the scope of their abuse. Self-blame is not uncommon and comes from the idea that "the world is fair. So good for the good and bad for the bad." Self-blame can then lead to feelings of control and safety for the victim.

[Darcy Wade]: So what can we do to help? And how can we help as educators and in the school? So human trafficking is a unique situation for our schools to be involved in. Youth are in school between 30 and 35 hours a week on average. School is usually one of the main environments in which they participate. And they have many relationships at schools. Traffickers can use schools as a place to recruit. Students can recruit other students. Traffickers can contact students through texting and/or social media while they are at school. And also, traffickers can exist in schools. Also oftentimes, youth may still attend school while being trafficked. This is so that they can maintain an air of normalcy, and it allows the traffickers to not get caught.

[Darcy Wade]: So one of the most powerful things we can do is educate our students. Nelson Mandela said that “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. Education is a primary prevention. It allows us to be a catalyst for change. We understand that lack of awareness leads to greater vulnerability. So we offer things like trafficking prevention education, which promotes personal and peer safety, gives youth a language of safety, teaches them boundaries, and empowers them to be in control of their body, their feelings, and the relationships that they participate in.

[Darcy Wade]: Educators and school staff are in a unique position in terms of prevention. Most of the time, inaction on behalf of professionals is due to a lack of understanding and awareness of the issues. That's why it is vital for educators to participate in training that talks about risk behaviors, changes in behavior and emotional state, signs of abuse and neglect, red flags, and mandatory reporting procedures. Educators and school staff have a unique opportunity to identify and report. Because at school, youth are usually outside of their trafficker's presence. Educators and school staff can use their platform to educate on healthy relationships, risk behaviors, red flags, grooming, and online safety. There are special programs available, like the 'What Would I Do?' curriculum, that offer programming on these topics. Educator and school involvement is essential to trafficking prevention.

[Darcy Wade]: So let's talk a little bit about 'What Would I Do?' which is a trafficking prevention program for Indiana youth. 'What Would I Do?' is geared for youth in 4th through 12th grade. There are three age-specific modules that are designed to be delivered over the course of one or two days, an hour each day. There are core activities in each module that provide students the opportunity for open, honest conversation and connection to everyday life. These activities promote critical thinking about healthy relationships. They help youth recognize signs of grooming, help them develop proactive responses to harmful cultural messages, allow them to identify terms related to human trafficking, and allow them to identify action steps for responding to unsafe situations.

[Darcy Wade]: Some of the topics that are covered in the curriculum are healthy and unhealthy relationships, consent, types, and cycles of abuse. Age of consent and the Romeo and Juliet laws, social media safety, and online relationships. Sexting, catfishing, grooming and power imbalances, sextortion, social and cultural messages about sex and sexuality. Human trafficking definitions, red flags, and risk factors. And identifying action steps for unsafe situations.

[Darcy Wade]: Hosts of the program are given information on how to appropriately handle disclosures, and also on mandatory reporting. Parents of students participating in the program are able to opt their students out and in order for the program to continue to grow, be accessible and inclusive, hosts and students are both offered surveys at the end of the program. Also for educators, there is a Continued Conversation Toolkit, for further discussions after the program has been delivered.

[Darcy Wade]: As far as educator awareness is concerned, one of the biggest things we can do is identify red flags in the classroom. Some of these red flags are chronic truancy, chronic runaway, and/or homelessness. A student has an excess of cash or goods, a student having multiple hotel keys, multiple cell phones, or chips. Branding like tattoos or jewelry or scarification. The presence of a controlling or adult partner that may actually script or restrict their communication. Also sometimes can be in control of their ID and other paperwork. There may be signs of physical, sexual, or psychological trauma. A drop in grades and/or participation in the classroom. You can note a change in behavior like a student becoming withdrawn, volatile, angry, aggressive, or defiant. They may be unable to stay awake. Students may also exhibit sexual behavior that is age-inappropriate or would be considered high-risk.

[Darcy Wade]: It's also important that you are aware of words that you may hear in the classroom. While all of these terms are not exclusive to human trafficking, if you are already noticing red flags and hear these words, this is a time that warrants a report. Now we're gonna talk a little bit about reporting.

[Darcy Wade]: Educators are mandated reporters. This means that you are legally obligated to report any signs of abuse or neglect, suspicions of abuse, or the danger of abuse to the appropriate authority. In Indiana, the Indiana Child Abuse Hotline through DCS can be reached at 1-800-800-5556. And you must say that you suspect human trafficking. The National Human Trafficking Hotline can be reached at 1-888-373-7888. You can also text HELP or INFO to 233733 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and they also have English, Spanish, and over 200 languages available.