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# The Impact of Trauma on Child Trafficking Survivors

## FACT SHEET

### OFFICE TO MONITOR AND COMBAT TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

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Children who are victims of human trafficking often experience multiple forms of trauma, referred to as polyvictimization, including adverse experiences like witnessing criminal activity, war, or death; displacement as a result of natural disaster or conflict; loss of resources and income; encountering violence; lack of educational opportunities; and neglect or abandonment of a caregiver. This intersection of multiple traumas leads to complex trauma, making children more vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers through means such as psychological control, threats of or actual physical abuse, withholding food, or emotional and sexual abuse. Children who have been victims of human trafficking may have also experienced addictions, injuries from violence and dangerous jobs, and forced pregnancies, as well as chronic health conditions such

as increased likelihood of medical complications, somatic symptoms, impaired sensorimotor development, and hand-eye coordination problems, further adding to their trauma.

## Impact of Trauma on a Child's Development

The brain rapidly develops during childhood, with neural pathways forming based upon what a child is exposed to in their everyday life. For instance, a child who is given opportunities to engage in age-appropriate play, socialization, reading, and talking will likely experience positive brain growth and a calm nervous system. Alternatively, a child who is exposed to trauma and violence may experience adverse developmental implications, such as hypervigilance and increased anxiety. Without appropriate buffers and supports, a young, developing brain may be conditioned to expect betrayal, exploitation, and other harmful experiences. To survive inescapable pain, children may dissociate and feel disconnected from themselves and the world around them which is a subtype of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and, symptoms of both complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) and dissociative disorders.

Experiencing trafficking can have significant psychological implications on children, including struggles with regulating emotions and impulses, attentional difficulties, dissociation, and negative consequences to their self-perception and views about the world. Labor and sex trafficking of children often occurs in the context of relationships, where a person in a position of power exploits a child's vulnerabilities. This kind of relational trauma can disrupt a child's future ability to attach and form caring and responsive connections with people. Children who are victims of human trafficking often struggle to develop safe and healthy attachments after their victimization, impacting their ability to trust those genuinely trying to provide assistance and help. Survivors may also struggle with creating and maintaining boundaries, isolating as a coping mechanism, recognizing emotional cues, and expressing empathy.

## Cross Cultural View of Trauma

Child trafficking survivors can experience multiple, intersecting forms of trauma depending on their culture, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, and level of acculturation. For example, in some cultures, talking about sexual exploitation is considered taboo, which may perpetuate a victim's feelings of shame and isolation. Other communities might discriminate against labor and sex trafficking victims for a variety of reasons including believing that people

who are exploited in trafficking are in some way to blame for their victimization. This could include anything from believing that some supernatural force was punishing the child or their community or that a person's clothes led to their being exploited.

It is vital for people who work with children victimized by trafficking to have cultural humility, which is the practice of honoring the cultural beliefs and practices in the child's context and understanding the impact of cultural trauma without imposing one's own beliefs. Through culturally sensitive trauma-informed care, structural inequities and variations surrounding the subjective perception of trauma can be acknowledged. Furthermore, culturally specific healing and trauma recovery can be made available to child trafficking victims and, if children need to be removed from their biological families due to trafficking, they can be offered safe and empowering ways to connect with their culture.

## Providing Tailored Care and Treatment to Child Survivors

A variety of methods can be employed to support children healing from trauma, including accessing a mental health professional, strengthening the capacity of caregivers and other adults to provide trauma-informed care, and engaging the child in creative expression of trauma through art, writing, athletics, community-based agencies, and faith groups. When working with children who have been exploited in human trafficking, it is essential for service providers, including all program staff, educators, mental health providers, caregivers, and pediatricians, to consider the developmental trauma the child experienced throughout all stages of care. Seeing an abused child through the lens of their traumatic experiences, as opposed to only their symptoms or behaviors, allows for effective interventions and competent trauma-informed care. For instance, interventions may vary depending the age of the child, but could look like highlighting a child's strengths instead of weaknesses and/or intentionally calming their own nervous system to help the child co-regulate within a helping relationship. This co-regulation can look like modeling slow, deep breathing and inviting the child survivor to experience a state of calm. Additionally, service providers should allow the child to set the pace and rhythm for whether and when they want to talk; never push the child to share and be attuned to the child's needs.

A child's healing process may be further affected by their societal context. In individualistic cultures, where people often choose to heal privately, survivors may find meaning through agency, or feeling control over actions and their outcomes, including by learning to dream and

plan for their future and defining themselves apart from their abusers. In collective cultures where greater value is placed on community, such as a village or the well-being of an entire family, healing may be found in practices that involve other people, music, drama, dancing, and artistic pursuits. There is no right or wrong way to heal from trauma. All of these ideas can help restore a sense of identity that child survivors are so often robbed of during their exploitation, as well as provide them with healthy coping mechanisms to more easily navigate life.

While the trauma experienced by child victims/survivors of trafficking may negatively impact a child's development, it is important to note that children are also extremely resilient. Early and appropriate interventions for child survivors are crucial to their ability to thrive in the future. Through increasing awareness of how trauma impacts a child survivor relationally, psychologically, physically, and neurologically, service providers and other professionals can serve as a safe and stable person in a child's life. Healthy relationships are a key preventative factor against other forms of abuse and exploitation. Understanding and mitigating complex trauma resulting from child trafficking, therefore, allows service providers to help a child not only move forward and protect them from further victimization but also set them up for success in the future.

## Things to remember when working with children who have been subjected to human trafficking:

- ◆ Remember that the best interest of the child must be the primary focus.
- ◆ Seek the help of trained professionals who understand the impact of trafficking on children.
- ◆ Provide a safe and stable environment for children, including offering food security, opportunities to build and strengthen healthy attachments, predictability, and consistency.
- ◆ Be flexible with expectations and schedules of what will get done in a day; anniversaries of hard experiences and other triggers can present challenges, and it is okay to adapt.
- ◆ Assure the child that their exploitation was not their fault and that they are not responsible for it.
- ◆ Be patient. Healing is a process, and every child will respond differently to their recovery. For instance, some children might have positive feelings towards their abusers and express hate that you took them away from these individuals.

- ◆ Understand that children who have experienced trauma may have a dysregulated or imbalanced nervous system – the sympathetic system that controls the “fight-or-flight” response – and they might respond accordingly. When a child responds in a frustrating way, remember that their trauma is being triggered and it is most helpful to engage with calmness so the child can co-regulate and connect.
- ◆ Invite professional experts with lived experience of human trafficking to inform methods of engagement or directly engage with child survivors as well as share that healing is possible and that there is life beyond exploitation.
- ◆ Get training in trauma-informed and survivor-centered approaches.
- ◆ Provide access to education through scholarships or tutoring.

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