

What Youth Say Works

CSEC victims can tell you what has and has not worked in their lives. The following is a list of interventions and interactions that youth had with various allies. The youth remember these people and experiences as being meaningful and effective when they were struggling with leaving the commercial sex industry.

What kind of support helped you when you were in “the life” and struggling to exit?

“I could talk to my counselor without nobody calling me names. I could tell them how I feel for the day, what my goals are and what I want to achieve, and they’ll help me achieve it.”

“The cop told my judge that I needed somewhere to go to be away from him [my pimp] instead of getting locked up.”

“When I was beat up in the hospital, the nurse gave me a hug for a really long time. It was the first time in a long time that someone had been kind to me.”

“He [the judge] acted mad interested in my life. So now, even if I have a good court report I go anyway, just so he can see I’m doing good.”

“My counselor is like my second best friend. Without her, I don’t think I’d be doing what I’m doing right now—going to school, getting ready to get a job, and trying to work it out with my family, which is not easy right now.”

“He [my lawyer] helped me clear up my record from my charges. Now I can get into the housing program I want to live in with my daughter.”

“A space [a youth program] where I can be myself. I don’t have to impress anybody. I don’t have to act different in front of nobody because it’s like they don’t judge me on things that I do or things that I’ve done in the past.”

“She [a cop] treated me like I was a real person. She even used to call me on weekends just to check on me and make sure I was doing good.”

“They [the youth program] have showed me what my talents are. My favorite is poetry.”

“I feel good that when I come in I could get a hug, something that I can get from my counselor that I can’t get from my own mother.”

Service Provision Tips 101

TIPS FOR THE SERVICE PROVIDER

Be non-judgmental

Judgmental reactions, comments, or body language from an adult can shut a child down and ultimately close another avenue for exiting the life. Process your own feelings about the issue prior to working with a CSEC victim.

Work on your own comfort level

Youth will tell you about their experiences in their own words. It is important to be comfortable with the language they use while at times providing a new perspective, and at times new language to name and reframe these experiences.

Have patience with the process

It can take anywhere from months to years for a child to process his/her experiences and actually exit CSEC and establish an independent stable life. Don't give up on the child or show frustration with them.

Be conscious of transference/counter-transference

CSEC victims may direct their feelings of love, sexual attraction, rage, anger, etc towards you. It's important to help the child fully process these feelings and redirect them. It's also important to be fully conscious of your own feelings, to not try to 'rescue' or save a child, and to ensure that you maintain appropriate boundaries.

Practice good eye contact & body language

Your body language can communicate whether you care about a child, are uncomfortable with what a child is telling you, or if you are distracted.

Show consistency & reliability

CSEC victims have been regularly abandoned, manipulated, and lied to by adults. They may expect this from you. It is your role to prove through consistency and reliability that they can rely on you for support.

Practice good self-care

Processing trauma with a child can be emotionally overwhelming or even triggering for care givers. It is important to ensure that you have good support networks and self-care strategies to avoid secondary traumatization.

CHALLENGES TO SERVICE PROVISION

The stages of change

Most children will not simply want to leave. For them to recognize sexual exploitation as a problem is often a complex process. Weighing the impact of CSEC on their lives and working through ambivalence can then set the stage for initial steps toward exiting.

Effects of trauma

Victims of repeated trauma rely upon a combination of defense mechanisms to survive. Expect defense mechanisms such as dissociation, projection, denial, etc to present challenges in counseling and case management.

Addiction to lifestyle

CSEC victims may feel 'addicted' to certain elements of the life, such as the attention, drama and 'excitement'. This does not mean that they enjoy abuse, but rather that due to their abuse and trauma they have become accustomed physiologically and psychologically to adrenaline and crisis.

Mistrust of authority

Many CSEC victims have had negative interactions with authority figures, such as parents, law enforcement, foster care workers, etc. CSEC victims often feel that you as a professional 'don't care', are just doing this work 'for a check' and that you will ultimately hurt/abandon or betray them and will push boundaries constantly. Remain consistent, supportive and truthful in order to slowly gain trust.

Codependency

CSEC victims present myriad needs and some children can become quite attached to the person who attends to these needs. This is something that puts them at risk for CSEC in the first place. It's important to set appropriate boundaries for yourself and the child and balance attempts to protect the child and empower them to make their own decisions.

COUNSELING/CASE MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Validate feelings

Feelings of love, attention, and validation through CSEC are very real for youth. These feelings need to be taken seriously by service providers and not minimized to support the victim in processing these feelings. Allow the child to fully express themselves and recognize their feelings as real and important without condoning abuse/exploitation.

Meet immediate needs

Taking care of needs related to identification, medical attention, housing, etc. will take care of basic survival and make counseling possible. Being reliable in taking care of the practical needs allows the victim to see that you mean what you say and that you are concerned about their total welfare.

Be a strong advocate

CSEC victims are often not used to adults fighting for them or protecting them. Prove to the child that you are truly on their side by ensuring that their needs are met within various systems and that you will 'go to bat' for them.

Know when to confront denial

Youth should express ambivalence before you gently push for change. Resistance and defensiveness are common reactions to being pushed to do something one is not ready to do. Ensure that you have developed a relationship of trust with the child prior to beginning to address their denial. Do it gently and with full empathy.

Use motivational interviewing

Help the child work towards ambivalence. This signals an opportunity for change. Validate the child's feelings of ambivalence as well as their strengths and ability to move forward.

UNDERSTANDING THE EXITING PROCESS

Create a safety plan

Even if the child is not 'ready', provide support by developing a safety plan with them in the event that they are in immediate danger/want to escape. Address plans for practical needs such as clothing and housing so that the child begins to believe that he/she has options even if they are not fully ready to utilize them.

Understand 'hitting bottom'

Often a crisis or external event precipitates a child's decision to exit the life. It's important to be available, provide crisis care during this phase and support the child as she/he begins to address the realities of their situation. This is often the stage where denial is no longer fully possible and can be extremely overwhelming, however it's also an important opportunity to support the child in leaving.

Understand withdrawal process from abuser

Much like the cycle of domestic violence, breaking the bond with the abuser is fraught with fear, guilt, loss, anxiety, and loneliness. These feelings should be validated and processed in counseling. Constantly reassure the child that the feelings are normal, but that feelings of loss or love do not necessarily have to be acted upon.

Likelihood of relapse

In all examples of behavior change, relapse is part of the process and should be anticipated. Discussing triggers and strategies for dealing with them prior to relapse is important. However if relapse does occur, reassure the child that you are not angry/tired of them but that this is an opportunity to reassess support needed and develop stronger coping mechanisms to deal with triggers.

Recognize exiting and support as an ongoing process

Exiting from the commercial sex industry is often done in stages, not all at once. While the goal may be to leave the commercial sex industry completely, each level of exiting should be validated and used as encouragement for the next. The cycle of exiting and relapse happens more than once before achieving stability. To maintain stability, support must not stop at exiting. CSEC victims will need the ongoing support all children require, as well as additional protection, patience, and love.

SUPPORTING HEALING & RECOVERY

Providing holistic services

Recognizing that trauma affects a person's body, mind, and spirit, good services address healing in all of those areas. Psycho-educational groups, art therapy workshops, yoga classes, and recreational opportunities are all excellent tools for addressing the 'total person'.

Replacement: people, places, things

Being in "the life" can seem to a child to provide shelter, income, community, an identity, love and attention. After exiting, these voids must be filled with healthy and positive alternatives. Help the child to recognize unhealthy people, places and things in their life and support them in finding a sense of community, developing strong relationships, and identifying new activities and places to go.

Rebuilding self-image; positive reinforcement

CSEC victims have often been trained to see themselves as solely sexual objects. Help CSEC survivors to recognize themselves as creative, competent and complex individuals by providing opportunities to develop skills, interests, new abilities. Recognize their small and large accomplishments and continually reaffirm their worth.

Education & empowerment

Youth benefit from understanding CSEC as a social justice issue, in understanding systems of oppression and tools for activism. Within this framework they can understand their own experiences, make connections to broader issues, and see how their experiences can be transformed into the leadership to make change. Serving as leaders and role models can be a healing tool when youth are at an appropriate stage in their own recovery. Provide youth with legitimate and safe opportunities to advocate for themselves, support their peers and find power in their own voice.