



# Dealing with Issues of *Sexual Exploitation*



A guide *for* Parents



Advancing the needs and issues of B.C.'s youth

The McCreary Youth Foundation would like to acknowledge the support of the Ministry of Children and Family Development, Province of B.C. Thanks to their generous donation, we have been given the opportunity to work with community organizations throughout B.C. to deal with the issue of the commercial sexual exploitation of our youth.

The McCreary Youth Foundation is a non-profit organization whose vision is to ensure that B.C. youth have an active say in issues pertaining to their lives, and that broader policies include the perspectives and needs of our young people. As high-engagement grantmakers, the Foundation works to advance the needs and issues of B.C. youth's, while encouraging positive youth development.

Dealing with Issues of Sexual Exploitation: A Guide for Parents was written by Kathy Powelson, with assistance from Roger Tonkin and Lisa May.

© McCreary Youth Foundation, 2004

Contact Information  
3552 E. Hastings Street  
Vancouver, BC V5K 2A7  
604-299-1609

[info@myfoundation.ca](mailto:info@myfoundation.ca)  
[www.myfoundation.ca](http://www.myfoundation.ca)

McCreary Youth Foundation Board of Directors

Cynthia Morton	Co-chair
Opreet Kang	Co-chair
Barbara Oates	Secretary
Judith Hall	Treasurer
Roger Tonkin	Managing Director

Opinions express are of the McCreary Youth Foundation and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

# Dealing with Issues of **Sexual Exploitation**

A guide *for* Parents

## Acknowledgment

This guidebook addresses a very serious and devastating issue—the sexual exploitation of our children and youth. I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to all the parents, caregivers and youth who openly and candidly shared their experiences with me. I am humbled by your strength and resilience.

Thank you to Diane Sowden from Children of the Street Society and Catherine Williams-Jones from NOW Canada Society for connecting me to all the wonderful people who have made this project possible by sharing their experiences with me. Also, thank you for supporting me through this process.

Kathy Powelson  
McCreary Youth Foundation

## Preface

As an adolescent medicine specialist, I have spent countless hours trying to help adolescents and their parents cope with some very trying and challenging problems, and have found that improvements eventually happen, but not overnight. I have learned that, even though parents have a key role to play in bringing about a successful outcome, they often feel frustrated by an apparent lack of progress. Faced with a difficult, elusive teenager, parents can be too quick to give up or to call in experts. This handbook is intended to help you feel that you are not alone, that there is hope, and that the simple, practical things you can do make a difference.

Roger S. Tonkin, MD

## Table of Contents

### Introduction

<b>What is sexual exploitation</b> .....	3
<b>Why do Youth get involved in the sex trade?</b> .....	3
<b>A number of factors have influence</b> .....	3
Abuse can be a factor .....	4
Popular media images .....	4
School, teachers and peers .....	5
Sense of identity .....	5
Seductive Environment .....	6
Mental health issues .....	6
<b>Find the right balance in parenting</b> .....	7
<b>Set consistent boundaries</b> .....	7
<b>Learning appropriate responsibility</b> .....	8
<b>Struggling to exit the sex trade</b> .....	9
<b>How can you help your child get out of the sex trade?</b> .....	9
Don't give up .....	9
Youth must feel ready to leave .....	10
If you have to close the door, don't lock it .....	11
<b>Five steps to protect and support youth</b> .....	12
Recognition .....	12
Resolve .....	12
Relocation .....	13
Rehabilitation .....	14
Reconciliation .....	15
<b>Taking care of yourself</b> .....	16
<b>Pointers for parents</b> .....	17
<b>Resources</b> .....	18

## Introduction

The sexual exploitation of young girls and boys for profit is a complex social issue, and is particularly distressing for the parents of these youth. This guidebook is intended to provide support, hope and helpful advice for parents who are trying to cope with this crisis in their families, as well as caregivers such as guardians and foster parents.

The information in this guide reflects what young people who have exited the sex trade and their parents told us helped and what didn't when they were trying to cope with the situation. We interviewed youth who have been involved in the sex trade, and mothers, fathers and one grandmother of youth in the sex trade. Interviews were conducted during a focus group held with the New Opportunities for Women (NOW) Canada Society in Kelowna. NOW Canada operates a continuum of services for sexually exploited youth in B.C. In addition, we held one-on-one interviews with parents in different stages of the process: some who just found out their child had entered the sex trade, some in the middle of the process, some whose children had exited, and a couple of foster parents. We made these connections through the Children of the Street Society, which provides support for parents in the Tri-Cities area whose children are being sexually exploited.

All these parents spoke out with the hope others in similar situations might learn from their experiences. The youth hoped to empower themselves and further reconcile their experiences. We hope this guide gives voice to their experiences and shows respect for their personal struggles and resilience. The guide discusses:

- What sexual exploitation is
- Factors that influence a youth's entry into the sex trade
- Information on parenting approaches that can have positive or negative impacts
- What helps and what doesn't in the struggle to exit the sex trade
- Five steps to protect and support youth as they exit
- How parents can take care of themselves as well as their children
- A list of resources for parents to find information and support

*“A sense of humour is helpful in getting messages across to your children”*

*B.C. foster parent*

## What is sexual exploitation?

Sexual exploitation has many different forms, and doesn't always involve the exchange of sex for money. Sexual exploitation can also involve the exchange of sexual favours for drugs (including cigarettes), food, a place to stay, and acceptance into a peer group.

The Province of Manitoba defines sexual exploitation as the act of coercing, luring or engaging a child, under the age of 18, into a sexual act, and involvement in the sex trade or pornography, with or without the child's consent, in exchange for money, drugs, shelter, food, protection or other necessities.

In addition, very few youth look like the stereotypical sex trade worker working on the street, that most people picture. Because of this misconception, youth often do not recognize or acknowledge they are being sexually exploited. But sexual exploitation does not only occur on the streets, and the visibility of the sex trade diminishes away from big cities. But a lack of visibility doesn't mean sexual exploitation is not occurring, nor does it make it any less harmful. Sexual exploitation happens in massage parlors, karaoke bars, trick pads (either empty apartments or hotel rooms controlled by a pimp), private homes, public docks, back alleys, parks, truck stops and fishing boats, particularly in small towns.

## Why do youth get involved in the sex trade?

Commercially sexually exploited youth come from all types of backgrounds and families. Parents, caregivers, youth themselves and helping professionals all want to understand why a young person gets involved in the sex trade. We were told there is no simple cause or explanation, and many factors can influence a youth's entry into the sex trade.

## A number of factors can have influence

Significant influences include feelings of self-esteem and self-worth, images in popular media, the school environment, teachers, peers, feelings of acceptance, romantic relationships, cultural identity, and the parent-child relationship.

Critical influences may be positive or negative but usually involve a mixture of family, peer, and school factors. For example, relationships with peers and teachers at school can have a powerful impact on self-esteem.

Low self-esteem can make youth more vulnerable to entering the sex trade, while developing a stronger sense of self-esteem helps youth exit the trade. Media can have a positive impact on raising awareness, while highly sexualized images of young people in popular culture are confusing to youth. Romantic relationships and parent-child relationships can be supportive and loving, or inappropriate and even abusive.

## Building Self Esteem

I am often asked to help improve a teenager's low self esteem. Parents are in the best position to help their children with this issue. After all, parents know best what their child is good at, what their strengths are, and what comforts them. By building on this knowledge, parents can find many small, simple things that can comfort and encourage their teenager to try some new skill or face some challenge in a more positive way. It is so easy to point out problems, but creative parents will seek out opportunities to build and reinforce positive developments.

R.T.

### Abuse can be a factor

Sexual abuse often makes youth more vulnerable to high risk behaviours, but sexual abuse is not always the most important or only cause, and not all youth who end up in the sex trade have been abused.

Whether or not sexual abuse is a contributing factor, by the time youth have been in the sex trade for awhile, all have been abused and devalued and their self-esteem undermined.

Sexual abuse has a devastating effect on a youth's self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. Still, parents and youth with sex trade experience point to other factors that also have a tremendous impact on self-esteem.

### Popular media images

Sexually exploited youth say one of the most influential factors is the media's preoccupation with sex. Popular culture portrays glamorized images of highly sexualized women, which create a world of contradictions and misconceptions for female youth. Youth have difficulty trying to make sense of these sexual images and understanding how they should dress and behave.

Parents can help by monitoring and interpreting the contradictions portrayed in media messages. For example, the sexual expectations implicit in media portrayals are adult oriented and do not reflect what is considered age-appropriate behaviour for youth. From an early age, parents can provide a stabilizing influence by encouraging realistic expectations of body image and healthy attitudes towards sex and sexuality.

### **School, teachers and peers**

The school setting and teachers were identified as critical influences on a youth's development of self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. Peer-groups have a strong influence as well.

While all youth search for acceptance, feelings of belonging are more difficult for some youth to achieve. For example, a youth's level of academic performance, relationships with teachers and peers, experiences at home, or experiences with bullying can impact their sense of acceptance, competence and connection. Youth who are recent immigrants may also feel less connected.

Youth who experience deeper feelings of isolation and insecurity have a much greater chance of becoming involved in a "deviant" peer group, becoming involved in risky behaviours such as skipping school, taking drugs, getting into trouble, using sex to gain acceptance, and having a lot of sexual partners. For example, one youth felt she was always searching for acceptance and found a sex worker as a role model.

For many youth who have been sexually exploited, an intimate relationship played a part in leading to risky behaviour. In some cases, risk taking began after a significant romantic relationship ended, while in others, risky behaviour began during and/or because of the relationship. In addition, a relationship break down can be a vulnerable time for someone who has recently left the sex trade and they could be lured back into the lifestyle, depending on their ability to cope.

### **Sense of identity**

Identity defines who we are and how we perceive ourselves. A positive, confident sense of self-identity commands respect and generates feelings of acceptance. Conversely, a negative sense of self-identity or a lack of self-identity greatly increases a youth's vulnerability to risk taking and involvement in the sex trade.

Cultural identity plays a powerful role for Aboriginal youth, who are over-represented in commercial sexual exploitation, due, in part, to a lack of connection with their cultural identity. For example, one youth grew up feeling her family did not have an identity although they were close. Her mother's experience as a child in a residential school left her unable to teach her daughter about her Aboriginal ancestry. At the same time, her father's European family did not accept her and her mother because they were Aboriginal. A major part of the healing process for Aboriginal children is often found in reconnecting with their ancestry and traditions.

Sexual identity issues are also very important, especially for boys. Boys who do not feel it is safe to be gay in their home and/or community are at higher risk of sexual exploitation. Confusion about sexual identity can also make a youth vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

## Identity

Many adolescents do not have a clear idea of who they are, and this feeling is a normal part of development. But young people who feel left out, do poorly at school, or are traumatized by abuse or violence frequently turn to drugs and the street scene as a way of “belonging.” Still, these youth usually maintain some degree of connection to their family, school, or community, which means their identity still includes their family. By accepting that these connections continue in spite of negative behaviour, you can take advantage of every phone call, brief visit, or meeting over coffee to reinforce the feeling your teenager is still cared for and belongs in the family.

R.T.

*“The excitement and chaos diverts us from the initial thing that made me feel like shit”.*

B.C. youth

### Seductive Environment

The sex trade can appear as a seductive environment that offers money, clothes, drugs, and being cared for by a pimp who expresses love to entice youth, particularly girls, into the trade. Youth with few skills may feel skillful for the first time. Boys may be seduced by the ability to explore their sexuality, particularly if their home or community environment does not accept homosexuals.

### Mental health issues

Undiagnosed mental health issues can often be the cause of risky behaviours such as drug use, defiance, staying out late or not coming home at night. For example, one youth’s struggle with undiagnosed bipolar disorder played a significant role in her risk taking and an addiction to crystal meth. However, since her diagnosis she is living at home again, is off drugs, and is working toward getting a job and returning to school.

The transition into and through adolescence can be a difficult time for some youth and their parents. Different ideas about what is normal adolescent behaviour can make it hard for parents to distinguish whether their child is going through a difficult transition or is actually dealing with more serious mental health issues. Trust your instincts if you sense something is wrong with your child’s behaviour, and consult a medical professional for an assessment.

## Mental Health

It’s hard to get a teenager to accept they have a mental health problem, even if they are addicted, self mutilating, eating disordered, or even suicidal. Avoid giving your child the idea you think they are crazy because youth hate that word. If your instincts tell you a real mental health disorder is involved, help your teenager to get an independent, confidential assessment by a knowledgeable professional. Remember, an assessment may be more to reassure you than your teenager, and does not imply that treatment will occur.

## Finding the right balance in parenting

In retrospect, some parents felt their absence at home was an important factor in their child's risk taking, which ultimately led to their exploitation. Some parents felt they were overprotective and did not provide their child with opportunities to learn how to make appropriate friendships and socialize with positive peer groups. As a result, their child's lack of social skills increased the risk of destructive behaviours. And some parents could not identify anything they should or would have done differently that might have stopped their child from being exploited.

Some youth mentioned the influence of a domineering father as a contributing factor. These youth grew up perceiving normal male behaviour as domineering and controlling, and were vulnerable to being treated this way by pimps and other men as a result. In other cases, youth said their father's absence contributed to their inability to form and maintain healthy relationships with men.

According to youth, the most common outcome of an unhealthy relationship with their father was an overwhelming feeling of the need for male love and acceptance. When the father was absent, youth often said they searched for a father figure in their intimate relationships. Many sexually exploited male and female youth have a history of intimate relationships with partners much older than them.

In addition, parents and youth said conflicting expectations for the youth's abilities (or lack of abilities) negatively affected the youth's capacity to develop healthy relationships, particularly with men, and increased feelings of low self-esteem.

## Set consistent boundaries

Many behaviour problems begin at home, with youth testing boundaries and not wanting to abide by the rules. They don't come home for dinner, they stay out past their curfew, and sometimes they don't come home at all. Compromising on rules in the hopes of maintaining a good relationship with your child does not address the real issues. Some parents said trying to appease children actually made the situation worse, because their child thought they didn't care.

Youth need parents to provide a structured, non-judgmental environment with clear boundaries to make them feel safe and give life a sense of normality. Boundaries and structure at home must remain consistent to create stability and protect your child from risk, for your other children, and of course, for you.

Parents told us there needs to be a fine balance between providing enough structure, rules and boundaries, and simultaneously creating an

environment of support for children during times of need. Youth said they did not want their mothers to be their best friend, because this expectation pushes them into responsibility for a more adult role with their mother, and out of being a kid. However, youth do need to have a close enough relationship with their mother to feel comfortable talking to her about issues in their lives. Children need to know they can talk to their parents about problems and trust them to respond and cope, without judging or overreacting.

For example, one youth called his mother in the middle of the night to confess he was addicted to drugs. Although his mother felt terrified inside, she responded calmly and took him to the hospital to arrange detox. The way she handled the situation was a pivotal moment for the youth; he knew he could count on her for help without being blamed or having to manage her emotional response.

### Learning appropriate responsibility

Youth also expressed the importance of being taught responsibility, but cautioned that too much responsibility can be overwhelming and create unnecessary stress and anxiety. Being allowed and supported to take on responsibility increases feelings of competency and self-worth and instills a sense of accountability toward others. Youth become more aware of how their actions affect other people. As a result, learning age-appropriate levels of responsibility helps protect youth from risk taking. However, being asked to take on too much responsibility has a negative impact and can make youth feel they are required to make decisions they're not ready for.

Learning responsibility can also help youth trying to exit the sex trade develop a stronger sense of self esteem.

## Being Responsible

All parents wish their adolescent would be more responsible. In fact, most parents know teenagers are quite responsible about the things that matter to them. Early adolescents (those under 14) are often impulsive and short sighted in their choices, because they still think in very concrete terms and their psychological makeup is not yet future oriented. As a result, questions and decisions that require them to think about the future or the consequences of their actions are answered in immediate terms. Parents can adjust to this developmental stage by setting short term, enforceable limits or guidelines, and rewarding positive behaviours in tangible ways. For example, if you are worried about money going toward drug use, then provide non-monetary rewards your child will appreciate such as a CD or movie tickets.

R.T.

## Struggling to exit the sex trade

The struggle to exit the sex trade is even more difficult than entry, because young people face the challenge of reconciling their actions, making a major lifestyle change, leaving higher earnings for possibly minimum wage jobs, and in many cases, overcoming substance addiction. Generally youth are not drug users before entering the sex trade, but many develop a drug dependency as a way to alter their mood and cope.

In addition, many youth do not identify themselves as being involved in the sex trade, saying they use sex to obtain shelter, food, drugs or money, and do not recognize the need to exit as a result. The realization of involvement often occurs later, during recovery.

## How can you help your child get out of the sex trade?

The devastation and trauma of knowing your child is being sexually exploited is probably only comprehensible to parents who go through the experience. Parents describe the pain as a hell worse than hell and compared the experience to living in a war zone.

*“This is a hell worse than hell”.*

*B.C. parent*

### Don't give up

We asked parents what they found most and least helpful when trying to get their child out of the sex trade. This was the most difficult question for parents to answer, because each child and family is different and influenced by the circumstances of their lives. However, the strongest message from all parents was not to give up on your child. Parents were always willing to be available for their children and ready to respond if a crisis arose. For example, one father and mother strongly believe the knowledge their daughter could come home at any time most likely saved her, and was particularly important when her situation got really bad. Both parents had a clear and consistent message: anytime, any place, we will pick you up.

Never stop talking with your children about what's going on. Even if they continue to shut you down, do what you can to let them know you are there for them when they need support. Being their best advocate is essential.

Try contacting schools counsellors, youth workers, support groups, police liaison officers, physicians and other professionals for support and to learn more about actions you can take. For example, parents attending the NOW Canada Society focus group said without the support services provided by the agency, their efforts would have been ineffective. Both parents and youth agreed these programs were successful, in part because they were available when the youth was ready to leave the sex trade. NOW Canada provides a continuum of services for sexually exploited youth in B.C., from a homeless shelter to longer term housing and ongoing support and

training programs to help youth recover and achieve independence.

*(See the resource list on page 18 for more information on groups to contact for support or information.)*

### Youth must feel ready to leave

No one can force youth to leave the sex trade; youth have to make the choice themselves. In fact, the most successful recovery happens when someone is ready to leave.

Nevertheless, youth remember and treasure healthy, positive connections along the way. For example, girls participating in an equine therapy program in Kelowna have developed strong bonds with the horses they ride, which have become the motivation for some girls to leave the sex trade. Connections with parents and other caring adults also make a difference and help facilitate exiting, although it usually takes time for youth to build resilience and make the change.

Like most adolescents, youth expressed contradictory emotions towards their parents' involvement in their lives. Sometimes they felt angry when their parents would try to find them and/or help them. At the same time, they felt their family's unconditional love and support was essential. For example, one youth who was able to get out of the lifestyle before being sexually exploited said much of her survival and safety was due to the fact her mom never gave up and was her best advocate.

*“Any time, any place, we will pick you up”.*

*B.C. parent*

## Ready to Leave

It's incredibly difficult for a parent to stand idly by when something risky is going on. Harm reduction strategies such as supplying condoms or taking your teenager to a street clinic can limit negative outcomes, but don't stop the behaviours that worry you. The best you can hope for is to keep your child as safe as possible for as long as possible. So don't give up! If you persist, changes for the better will start to happen, but it may take up to 10 years.

R.T.

One of the most frustrating issues for parents is the lack of power or resources they have to place their child in a safe and secure environment. Even though parents want to take their children off the streets to save them, ultimately the choice is up to individual youth under our legal system, unless a child is in government care. In addition, youth addiction treatment centres and support services for youth in the sex trade in B.C. are limited in numbers and accessibility.

What motivated youth to want to leave the sex trade was the combination of a personal desire to have more in life and hitting rock bottom, when

their situation became so bad they couldn't stand it any longer. Another youth reported that her resolve to exit emerged when her mother became very ill. Once she reached this point in her life, knowing she had the love and support of her family was essential to her recovery.

### **If you have to close the door, don't lock it**

Many parents felt betrayed, manipulated and used when, after much hard work, sacrifice and support, their child returned to former, risk taking behaviours. It's important to remember that leaving the sex trade is a recovery process and leaving for good often requires a number of attempts. Youth return to the sex trade for different reasons, including drug issues, because it's what they know best, or to be part of a familiar peer group or relationship.

Although this experience can be devastating, parents and youth stressed that a "tough love" approach—telling children they cannot come home until they change—does not work. One parent said kicking her daughter out made things worse; her daughter felt abandoned and her risk taking and drug use escalated.

Parents need to let children know they love them very much, but don't like what they are doing. Help your child understand the difference by responding to their behaviour, rather than reacting as if something is wrong with the child.

If safety issues are involved, parents may feel they have no other option but to ask their child to leave. When you cannot allow your child to live at home, ensure the lines of communication still remain open. Make sure your child knows that when they are ready to try again, the door is open, and each time they want to try, the door will be open.

*"My mom was my best advocate".*

*B.C. youth*

---

## **An Open Door**

The hardest part for parents is waiting for their child to be ready to leave and to understand their child must become motivated enough to leave. Leaving the sex trade doesn't happen overnight, but in stages. Sometimes youth go back and forth for years. Early on, you may not be convinced that changes are real or that continuing to hope is sensible. However, subtle signs and promising behaviours should help you keep the family door open. Only after your child has successfully exited will she/he acknowledge the important role you played. Their appreciation, when it comes, will mean a lot to you. If you lock the door, you may never get to hear this feedback.

R.T.

## Five steps to protect and support youth

Parents and youth described five steps vital to protecting and supporting children who are trying to exit the sex trade: recognition, resolve, relocation, rehabilitation and reconciliation.

### Recognition

Parents need to be able to look past their own pain, and accept and understand the pain their child is experiencing. Youth said their parents' recognition of their pain and suffering was important in finding the courage to seek help. For one youth, this recognition was the best thing her mother did and continues to do. A lack of recognition can make youth feel disconnected and isolated from their families. Recovery is a long process for everyone and constant, consistent recognition is critical to the healing process.

*“Any sort of success requires diligence”.*

*B.C. parent*

### Resolve

A crucial step for a youth exiting the sex trade is developing the resolve to change. Youth stressed that no one else could force them to reach this point. While the unconditional love and support of family members is very important in leading up to this stage, resolve emerges when the youth is ready. Then youth need immediate help and support to strengthen their determination.

So are parents just supposed to wait and hope their child resolves to exit before something terrible happens? No, but it is important to respect your child's boundaries and not to invade their privacy. For example, youth probably felt angry when their parents went looking for them because their freedom and control was threatened. Everyone needs to feel in control of their situation, so much so that youth may hold on to certain risky behaviours as a form of resistance to the pressure to change. Intense outside pressure to change can be very disempowering because the greater the pressure, the less choice youth feel they have.

Sometimes parents can do little things that mean a lot, such as providing praise, acknowledgment and appreciation. Provide positive opportunities that promote feelings of accomplishment in your child and make them feel better about themselves. For example, sports and physical activities can help kids build competency, self-esteem and better health. Horseback riding works wonders with some children. Increasing feelings of competence can help youth strengthen their resolve to change. Find out what your child is interested in and encourage them to participate or volunteer. These activities can also show youth they have other choices, are not stuck in their current lifestyle, and have the ability to succeed in different avenues of life.

## Relocation

Changing a youth's environment is important once a youth is ready to exit the sex trade. However, it is not as clear whether relocation is helpful for youth when destructive behaviours are just starting. Sometimes parents' first instinct is to remove their child from school to get them away from friends and place them in a new school, hoping they will make new, more positive relationships. But this approach may not address the underlying issues. Because the youth has already begun to engage in risky behaviours, they usually make friends who are involved in similar negative activities in the new school. In addition, some youth spoke of feeling insecure about being uprooted every time something went wrong. Consistency and structure seem critical when a youth is becoming involved in high risk behaviours.

## Relocation

Early adolescents who become involved in delinquent groups may benefit from relocation, even if they are not interested in it. Be prepared to discover that a bright, determined teenager can always find creative ways to get around your attempts to help them "straighten out."

Relocation is much more useful once an adolescent indicates a readiness to get out of the trade or to address an addiction. This strategy is more likely to succeed with an older adolescent who has grown beyond the stage of simplistic concrete thinking.

R.T.

However, taking your child away can create the opportunity for a physical and emotional break from their day-to-day experiences. Some parents who were able to take their child on a vacation felt the break was an important part of the healing process. Although children will often return to their former lifestyle when the vacation is over, parents felt the break from the day-to-day chaos helped:

- Remind their child of the good things in life.
- Connect parents with their child.
- Give parents an emotional break from the chaos.

Going away on vacations is not possible for all families. If a holiday is not an option, do not be hard on yourself, you can only do what you have the resources for. Still, you can try to find other creative ways to create a lifestyle break such as day trip hiking or cycling, a camping trip, visiting a museum or art gallery, or any activity that breaks with your usual daily habits.

Sometimes relocation is unavoidable for children in foster care. If the safety of other children in a foster or group home becomes an issue, the youth

will be moved to a different setting. The move may be disruptive and add to existing feelings of abandonment, but as a caregiver, there are limitations to what you can expect of yourself. A youth's relationship with their social worker is important to help them cope with this type of situation, because a consistent, caring adult presence will help ease some of the negative effects of relocating.

### **Rehabilitation**

The road to rehabilitation may be the most difficult because there is no straightforward set of steps everyone can take. Different approaches work for different people, and what may work best for one person may not be effective for another.

Many youth will not use services specifically geared for those working in the sex trade because of the shame attached to sex trade workers. In addition, many youth do not identify themselves as sex trade workers at all, so these services do not even seem relevant to them. For example, one youth said the entire time he was involved, he never once connected his life to the sex trade. Only after his drug recovery was he able to fully come to terms with his past.

Successful rehabilitation requires change. Change does not occur overnight, and people often try more than once before they can change certain behaviours for good. While no one can be forced to change, you may help motivate your children to initiate change in themselves by:

- Listening to your child, rather than telling them what you think they need to do. Chances are they know what they need to do, and developing an empathetic relationship with your child that validates their needs will be empowering for them.
- Distinguishing between what your child is doing and who they are. Youth need to feel that what they are doing doesn't make them a bad person and there are other choices they can make. Help them identify realistic goals.
- Not trying to get your child to change through arguments and confrontations. This approach will only push them away and shut down the lines of communication.
- Focusing on behaviours your child is willing and able to work on changing, if they resist changing other behaviours. The key is to reduce harm as much as possible as well as to help build their capacity and confidence to change destructive behaviours.
- Encouraging and supporting your child's belief they are capable of change. Hope goes a long way.

## Reconciliation

Coming to terms with their past is one of the most difficult challenges for youth who have left the sex trade. Their sense of shame is reinforced by the way society judges sex trade workers, making it very difficult for these youth to feel they could ever be accepted into mainstream society.

How much youth want to disclose about their past is up to them. Some youth have used their experiences to educate others. While this activity can be very empowering, it can also be harmful if people only identify them with sexual exploitation. On the other hand, many youth hide their past from all new relationships. Others disclose only to people they are developing very close and intimate relationships with.

### Parents and caring adults can support youth through the process of reconciliation by:

- Acknowledging and accepting what your child has done and making it clear you have not judged them. Your child needs to feel you love them, despite all the things they've been through.
- Giving your child a sense of pride about how far they've come. Recognize the accomplishment of leaving the sex trade. Acknowledge how difficult the process has been, how proud you are of them, and how strong they have been. How frequently your child needs this kind of dialogue and recognition will depend on the child.
- Asking your child what they need from you during this time. Give them the space to talk about what they need and allow them to feel safe about expressing their feelings. Be honest with them about how you are feeling, but also keep in mind the nature of your relationship. Your child needs you to be strong for them. Do not rely on your child for support. Find support with family members, friends and other parents who have gone through similar experiences.

Some youth have found reconciliation through spirituality. Spirituality cannot be forced and must be chosen by youth themselves. If this is a path that is helpful for your child, support them through their spiritual exploration and growth.

Reconciliation also happens through connections. Some youth reconnect with family and old friends or maintain important connections with people such as foster parents. Some build connections with new friends. Some youth who are not living with biological parents have reconnected with one or both biological parents. When this connection is not possible, a connection with another positive adult role model can help youth come to terms with their past.

*“I’m not sure I’ll ever completely heal; she is my baby”.*

*B.C. parent*

## Taking care of yourself

The healing process for parents whose children have been sexually exploited can be very difficult and painful. Finding a strong support network is absolutely critical to help you through this period. Feelings of isolation are common because of the sense of shame and fear of being judged by family, friends and helping professionals. Many parents also find it very difficult to take time for themselves. But if you are supported and well cared for, you will be more able to provide the support your child needs. Your health and well being are just as important.

Parents repeatedly identified friends as the greatest source of support, particularly friends who have had similar experiences. Some parents were very selective about how much they told other family members and friends, because they felt it would be very difficult for their child to recover if too many people knew. This approach works for two parent families, as they can rely on each other for support. But outside support is critical for single parent families.

Support groups also provide safe, supportive environments. In addition to receiving support from parents going through similar experiences, these groups provide a forum where parents can share information. It is not uncommon for their children to know each other and to have some of the same friends and hang outs.

The daily stress and anxiety that result from this experience can put tremendous strain on relationships between partners. Couples stressed the importance of maintaining open communication, which can be your lifeline. Some couples sought counseling to help them cope with the experience.

## Self Help

A parent’s greatest needs are for personal space in which to grow and nurture important parts of yourself, and opportunities for self healing, free of your adolescent’s grief and your own anger, guilt, anxiety and depression. In some instances, people know other supportive parents who have been through similar experiences, but these people are not always ready to share experiences. Sometimes there are professionally led support groups for parents of troubled teens. More often, parents have a partner, friend, sibling, pastor or family physician, who is non-judgmental and will listen, but won’t let you engage in the blame game. Getting on with your life is an important, unselfish decision. The people you love will benefit when you do.

R.T.

## Pointers for Parents

1. Avoid the blame game. The situation is not anyone's fault.
2. Don't give up, become part of the solution.
3. Avoid simple answers for complex issues, but remember the simple things you do can make a difference.
4. Trust your instincts and become an active listener with your child.
5. Develop and maintain structure and mutually respected boundaries at home
6. Create safety for your child to talk with you or another caring adult.
7. Recognize and acknowledge the pain your child experiences and help them reduce the harmful effects of those experiences, including addictions.
8. Seek opportunities for your child to have respite, a lifestyle break, and a few personal successes that are not part of their life in the sex trade.
9. Change and exit from the sex trade occurs slowly and has many missteps, but with persistence it will happen.
10. Take time out to care for yourself and to nurture your other family members.

## **Resources**

### **New Opportunities for Women (NOW) Canada (Kelowna)**

250-763-3816

NOW Canada provides housing, programs and ongoing support for female youth who have been victims of sexual exploitation in the community and province. ASK Learning Centre and support, training and follow-up services for up to seven years.

### **Servants Anonymous Society (Surrey)**

604-576-1141

Designed as an original participant-centered approach to recovery for female youth aged 16 – 29 who choose to exit the sex trade. The program provides sexually exploited females with secure housing and a full-time education/life skills program called the ASK Learning Centre. SAS Surrey is designed to provide support, training and follow-up services for up to seven years.

### **Children of the Street Society**

604-777-7510

The Children of the Street Society provides information and support for parents and caregivers whose children are being sexually exploited.

### **Protect our Children Group**

604-219-1027

Toll free: 1-877-739-8925

Protect our Children Group provides parents who are trying to remove their children from high-risk situations with support and information.

### **The Magenta Pages**

604-294-7720 or 604-294-7299 for copies

The Magenta Pages is a resource list of services in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland for high-risk youth.

### **Ministry for Children and Family Development**

After Hours Line:

604-660-4927 (Vancouver, the North Shore and Richmond)

604-660-8180 (Lower Mainland)

1-800-663-9122 (Toll free anywhere in B.C.)

**RCMP Missing Children’s Registry**

1-877-318-3576

**BC Federation of Foster Parents**

1-800-663-9999

**Youth Against Violence**

1-800-680-4264

**Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Service**

1-800-663-1441

**Office for Children and Youth**

604-775-3203 (Vancouver)

Toll free: 1-800-476-3933

**Ombudsman**

1-800-567-3247

250-387-5855 (Victoria area)

BC Safe School Centre

604-660-7233

Toll free: 1-888-224-SAFE (7233)

**Youth Crisis Response Program (Port Moody)**

604-469-3232

**Detox and Treatment**

**Last Door Youth Program**

604-520-3587

**Odyssey and Nexus**

**Substance Abuse Services for youth and families.**

**Nexus**

604-660-5316

**Odyssey**

604-879-8853

**PLEA (Pacific Legal Education Association)**

## **Detoxification Services for Youth (Under 19)**

### **General Inquiries**

604-597-9002

### **Daughters and Sisters Program**

604-543-7892 (By referral only)

### **Waypoint**

604-543-9411 (By referral only)

### **Share Youth Alcohol and Drug Services**

604-464-3165

### **Vancouver Family Services Youth Detox**

604-872-4349

## Notes





3552 East Hastings Street  
Vancouver, BC V5K 2A7

Tel: 604.299.1609  
[www.myfoundation.ca](http://www.myfoundation.ca)