

Human Trafficking

We now have evidence to support what many of us have suspected all along — that foster kids are the number one target for those involved in the business of human trafficking. Yes, I said “business.”

It appears that the trafficking of people for sex and labor has become more lucrative than selling drugs or arms. Sandie Morgan, director of Vanguard University’s Global Center for Women and Justice says that gangs and organized crime concerns are turning to human trafficking because once you sell drugs or guns, your inventory is gone. But when you sell a person, your “reusable asset” returns to be sold over and over again. And this heinous activity isn’t limited to some far off country. It’s happening right in your state, perhaps even within driving distance from your home.

As if all this wasn’t egregious enough, there is a subsection of human trafficking that specifically involves children. Law enforcement officials refer to the trafficking of children younger than 18 as Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children or CSEC. Ernie Allen, CEO of the International Center for Missing and Exploited Children, told me in a recent interview that the average age of children sold for sex in the United States is 13 years old. That’s the average age.

Allen went on to say that more than 60 percent of rescued trafficking victims report having been in foster care. Anyone who has worked with foster children who have been sexually abused knows that these children typically see themselves as worthless and often engage in inappropriate sexualized behaviors. It is easy to see how victims of sexual abuse are easily lured into sex trafficking.

The ICMC estimates that 164 current and former foster kids are lured into trafficking every single day in the United States alone.

And surprisingly, most of the foster kids who go AWOL from care providers are never listed with law enforcement as missing persons. In fact, the ICMC reports that only 10 states in the United States have laws that require the reporting of missing foster children. Imagine being entrapped by someone who is profiting from your serial rape and knowing that absolutely no one is looking for you.

The good news is that every foster parent, relative caregiver, mentor, coach, teacher and concerned citizen can play a role in preventing this most heinous of crimes.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children is, what we call in the insurance industry, “preventable and foreseeable.” We can learn the signs, take advantage of the resources available to us, educate the kids within our influence so that they’re better able to take care of themselves, and finally, in the case of the worst possible scenario, we can upload a missing child’s photo to the national database, to increase the chances that the child we care about will be rescued.

To help you protect the kids within your influence, here are five tips every foster parent should know:

1. KNOW THE SIGNS — BE SKEPTICAL OF:

- A friend who “dominates.”
- A friend who spends too much time with your child.
- Obsession by your kids of a friend.
- Inappropriate, expensive or too many gifts from a friend.
- Texting/sexting.
- Changes in behaviors or attitude toward you
- Unwillingness to communicate with you.
- Predators can approach through phone, computer and gaming. Check and monitor activity. (Be aware that locking your Internet doesn’t stop them from accessing a neighbor’s wifi.)

2. KNOW WHAT TO SAY

- In nearly all cases, rescued victims report having been “tricked” into trafficking by someone they know. Help kids to ask themselves “what’s in this for my friend?” Learning to ask the right questions helps kids with the critical thinking process and with discerning underlying motives.
- Traffickers are often seen as “the ticket out.” Help teens visualize positive transition by reminding teens that they don’t need a boyfriend or “daddy” who promises to love and care for them. Make your best case for you, your family, teachers, social worker, therapist, CASA and others, being the best ones to protect him or her while transitioning into successful independent living.
- This guy who says he wants to be your “boyfriend” may want to “use” you as a slave... a “re-usable asset” in his “business.” If this conversation is too difficult to have with your teen, consider using one of the video resources in Tip #4.
- Tell teens they have a finely tuned “weasel meter” and should USE IT to gauge the character of all their friends. This will serve them well in life.
- Ask what others think of the potential predator. Others may say he’s “bad news.” In the case of friends thinking the possible predator is OK, guide your teen through the concept of taking advice from those who are worthy sources of wisdom.

3. KNOW YOUR RESOURCES

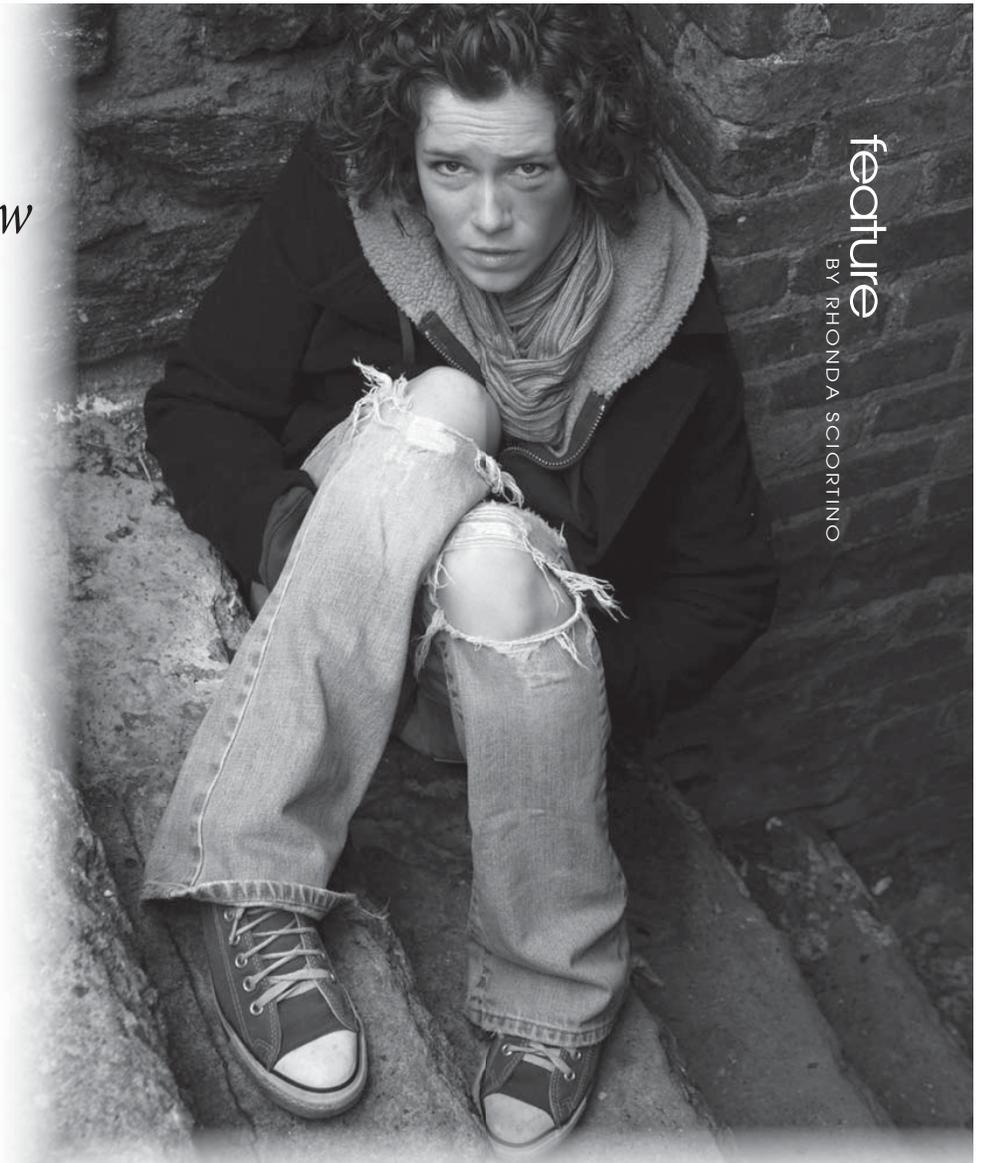
- Contact your local law enforcement office for resources available in your community.
- Educate yourself and the children within your influence with the videos available at www.netismartz.org. These videos are free, and were created by the International Center for Missing Kids and the FBI Innocence Lost team. There are videos for kids, tweens, teens and adults. Take advantage of this excellent resource.

What You Need to Know

- Review the Child Safety and Prevention information at www.missingkids.com/safety. This is excellent information for family meetings.
- Review the following videos for possible showing with your teens:
- Show teens the Shared Hope International documentary CHOSEN, the shocking story of girls targeted and trapped in the violent sex industry <https://sharedhope.org/2012/12/18/chosen-to-be-released-in-2013/>
- Bring Polaris Project trainings to your community at www.polarisproject.org.
- Show your teen Carissa Phelps's documentary <http://carissaphelps.com/documentary/>, and give your teen her book, "Runaway Girl."
- Show your teens the stories of rescued trafficking victims like "Rachel" at [http://www.salvationarmyusa.org/usn/www_usn_2.nsf/0/3517458C7BE89B06852579E300550AC2/\\$file/SA_Anti-TraffickingBrochure%20-%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.salvationarmyusa.org/usn/www_usn_2.nsf/0/3517458C7BE89B06852579E300550AC2/$file/SA_Anti-TraffickingBrochure%20-%20FINAL.pdf)
- If you suspect ANYTHING, call the national hotline at 888-373-7888.

4. KNOW WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT A PREDATOR

- Remain calm. Reassure your kid that you are there to help him or her.
- Do not scold him or her — this plays right into the approach of traffickers.
- Build self-esteem by pointing out his or her good characteristics. Kids whose self-esteem is built by a loving family won't be as susceptible to the compliments of a predator.
- Make time for individual "face time." Listen more than you talk. It's amazing what we can learn from kids when we're able to resist the temptation to jump in with advice and guidance when the kid begins to open up. Learn to make a mental note of the teaching opportunities you want to come back to after you've heard him or her out.



feature
BY RHONDA SCIORTINO

5. BE PREPARED FOR THE WORST CASE SCENARIO

- In the event that your foster child goes missing, immediately follow the protocol of the placing agency and notify the police.
- File a report with the International Center for Missing and Exploited Children at 1-800-842-5678.
- Upload a recent digital picture of your foster child to the national database of missing children at www.cybertipline.com. By doing this, the amazing photo recognition software in use by the FBI Innocence Lost team will attempt to match your photo to any digital photo of your child that turns up on the Internet. Many children have been recovered throughout the

world because of this database. Give your foster child a fighting chance by keeping an updated digital picture in your computer and phone.

Thank you for all you do to change the lives of the children within your care. ✿

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rhonda Sciortino, author of *Succeed Because of What You've Been Through*, is the National Child Welfare Specialist for Markel Insurance Company. Sciortino is a foster alum who chairs the Successful Survivors Foundation and serves as a spokesperson for Foster Care Alumni of America. Her weekly radio show can be heard at www.rhondasradioshow.com.