

STOP, THINK, FOCUS:

WHAT DO I DO FIRST?

You want answers and information. Before asking questions, listen to your child and comfort him/her. Create a space where they can share. Patience is key.

What is OK for me to say?

I'm happy you are here. I'm happy to see you. I want you to be protected. I'm ready to listen.

How do I get my child to open up?

Ask "what" questions instead of "why" questions, as those can imply blame. Ask your child what they need and tell them you want to help. Don't ask why they did what they did.

What does my child need?

Every child is different, but all of us want to feel love and acceptance from their loved ones. Ask your child how you can help. They are processing their trauma and need time and space. Be patient and supportive. Let them decide when or if they want to discuss what happened.

How do I find out what happened?

Let them share as little or as much as they are comfortable with. Any details they share are likely very difficult for you to hear. You may be angry with the person who harmed or put your child in danger. As best you can, be careful not to let that show in your voice, word choices, or facial reactions. Your child may misinterpret that as how you feel about them so remind them that this was not their fault. Protect and comfort when you can.



Hope is why we're here.

For more information, please visit MissingKids.org
or call 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)

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RECONNECTING WITH YOUR CHILD



Building Relationships
After Suspected
Sexual Exploitation

A Guide for Parents and Other Caregivers

DISCOVER, UNRAVEL, LEARN:

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW?

Educate yourself about what can make children vulnerable to sexual exploitation. [MissingKids.org](https://www.missingkids.org) is a good place to start. Our Team HOPE peer support volunteers who have been through similar situations, can help you move forward. Call 1-866-305-HOPE (4673) to reach them.

What is sexual exploitation?

Sexual exploitation is the sexual abuse of a child and may include child sexual molestation, online enticement of children for sexual acts, the creation of child sexual abuse material, or the exchange of sex for something like food, shelter, or drugs.

What is the connection between sexual exploitation and children running away from home?

We see that when a child goes missing or runs away they are at greater risk for many things, to include sexual exploitation, self-harm, gang recruitment, child sex trafficking, and substance abuse.

How does this happen?

Manipulation happens while kids seek love, affection and acceptance. Children are vulnerable due to their age and dependency on others to have basic needs met. They are also naturally curious to meet new people and try new things. For older youth this curiosity comes with a desire for more independence. Those looking to sexually exploit children take advantage of these vulnerabilities.

What should I expect from my child?

Your child may struggle in different ways within your family and with peers. Children who have been sexually exploited may react with extreme emotion, a sudden change in behavior, or in a way that is completely different than from before their trauma. Work with a professional to re-evaluate setting boundaries for appropriate behaviors within your home.

UNDERSTAND, ACKNOWLEDGE, GROW:

HOW DO I ACCEPT THE SITUATION?

Surround your child and family with people focused on support of your child's progress from victim to survivor.

Who is there for our family to rely on?

Coping with the trauma of having a missing or sexually exploited child demands courage and determination from all involved. NCMEC provides a range of support services for survivor families including peer support, reunification assistance, and mental health referrals.

To learn more, call 1-800-843-5678.

How do I connect with my child again?

Try not to rush or force moments of connection. Be ready to listen, learn and love unconditionally.

What if I feel lost in disappointment or shock about what happened?

Expect that you will and be honest with yourself about what you need. Focusing on the "right now" will help you keep moving forward.

How do I help my child feel better when I'm devastated?

Managing your own emotions and of those around you isn't easy. Take good care of yourself during this time as well so you can be fully present and better able to help your child. Try seeking mental health services to process your own reactions. Show compassion and certainty that your family will get through this and forgive yourself and others.

SUPPORT, ACT, CARE:

HOW DO I HELP MY CHILD?

Advocate for what your child needs, knowing these needs may change. Be honest about your limitations as you search for the right support. Keep telling him/her that they matter, and know you are not alone. Rely on trained professionals to help your family identify the best path forward. For help with where to start, contact NCMEC at [MissingKids.org/ourwork/support](https://www.missingkids.org/ourwork/support).

What do I do when my child needs specialized help?

A child's response to trauma may include behaviors that could be harmful. Negative coping mechanisms (also called maladaptive behaviors) may include increased substance abuse, anger, frustration, or self-harm (i.e. cutting). Awareness of this and identifying local specialized, professional treatment is key.

What if I still don't know fully what happened?

Your child will need more support as pieces of the experience come to light. Being proactive and positive aids healing.

What if my child refuses to open up or accept the help that's being offered?

Be the person that offers unconditional love and hope. Model what you want for your child.

What can we do together?

Fight to overcome, persevere and heal. Draw close to your child. You are important to your child's healing and recovery.

