

# Five Core Principles for Working with Sexually Exploited or Trafficked Youth

Working with trafficked or sexually exploited youth is a rewarding endeavor, but it can also be challenging. It is important to think about the values and assumptions we bring to this work and consider how we can formulate our approach to better support youth victims/survivors. To ensure that our efforts are helpful and not harmful, we can utilize the five core principles identified in the [Safe Harbor Protocol Guidelines](#). In working with and responding to youth who have been sexually exploited or trafficked, we should be: Victim-Centered, Trauma-Informed, Youth-Centered, Strengths-Based, and Culturally Responsive.



## VICTIM-CENTERED

To be victim-centered is to recognize victims/survivors as the “experts” in their own lives, meet them where they are, and provide them appropriate resources to meet their current needs.

A victim-centered approach is focused on what is best for the victim/survivor instead of what is best for a system or process, such as the criminal justice process. A criminal justice response to sexual exploitation and trafficking is focused on the safety of our communities, but its goals (arrest and prosecution) are not always aligned with the victim/survivor’s needs. Being victim-centered means understanding this tension and redefining what success looks like based on the needs of the individual youth with whom you are working.



## TRAUMA-INFORMED

Sexual exploitation is highly traumatic and victims/survivors often encounter trauma from other sources as well. It is crucial that professionals who work with exploited youth understand the effects of this trauma. Being trauma-informed shifts the approach from “What is wrong with you?” to “What has happened to you?”



## YOUTH-CENTERED

Being youth-centered means recognizing the strengths and personal agency of youth. In society, we often view children and adolescents as unable to care for themselves or make informed decisions. Centering youth requires us to respect the youth's expertise and work *with* them rather than doing things *for* them. This leads to positive long-term outcomes for sexually exploited youth.



## STRENGTHS-BASED

At its core, strengths-based means focusing on the potential of a youth. With this approach, youth are “assets and resources, not problems to be fixed or prevented.” They are also more than the sum of traumatic things that have happened to them. Each youth brings unique context, interests, strengths, and skills that have helped them survive trauma. It is crucial to draw upon and honor these strengths. Young people who have experienced sexual exploitation and trafficking have remarkable resilience, and it's important to acknowledge this when working with them.



## CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE

An equitable response to sexual exploitation and trafficking means providing culturally responsive services to *all* youth in the community. Culturally responsive services are designed to improve accessibility and tailor services to the needs of individuals as well as groups. Examples may include language access, materials that reflect diverse populations or cultural groups, and processes that offer multiple, culturally specific options for victims/survivors to get the assistance they need after experiencing sexual exploitation and/or trafficking. Being culturally responsive also requires that service providers work to address bias within their systems and build proactive plans to provide equitable services.

For more information on these five core principles and how to incorporate them into your response to trafficked and exploited youth, visit [mncasa.org/sexual-exploitation-trafficking](https://mncasa.org/sexual-exploitation-trafficking) or e-mail [svji@mncasa.org](mailto:svji@mncasa.org).