



## REMEMBER

- Teens initially see the 'love' and relationship offered as real, and anyone speaking against their new relationship is seen as trying to keep them from what they have been longing for. For teens who feel insignificant, being pursued in this way is exciting and fulfilling.
- Educating vulnerable teens to understand how exploitation can happen and that it doesn't need to, is an important form of prevention.
- Social media opens up an entirely new world for self-exploitation where some young people exploit themselves in exchange for social attention.
- Creating places of belonging for teens is a powerful protective force; connecting them to the God who pursues them and values them unconditionally is a strong defence.



## RECOGNIZE

- Sexual exploitation happens when someone solicits sexual activity from or with a person 18 years of age or younger in exchange for something - clothing, a ride home, money, drugs, food, a place to stay, or anything else the youth values. It is a crime.
- Teens who deeply long to be known and belong can be identified and targeted by "groomers" who befriend and establish an emotional connection with the teen. Sometimes groomers are a well-liked, articulate and flashy "boyfriend"; sometimes they are peers who are also victims; sometimes they are trusted adults/family members. Groomers focus on a process of separating their victims from those who might protect them, establishing a "special" and secretive relationship, and desensitizing the teen to touch and sexual talk. Groomers select targets from those who seem most vulnerable.

### So who is at risk?

- Youth who have been in government care, indigenous youth, LGBTQ+ youth and females are all at higher risk for exploitation. The average age for recruitment is 13/14 years old
- Lonely teens with low-self esteem or those who question their sense of security or belonging, especially if they are new to a school or community
- Teens who have been the victim of sexual, physical or emotional abuse or trauma in the past or have engaged in or been exposed to drug or alcohol abuse at a young age
- Teens with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, learning difficulties and attention deficit disorder

### **Things to watch for:**

- Sudden change in typical behaviour, dress, demeanour, sexual language
- Unexplained "gifts" or possessions (leading to a sense of being indebted and without alternatives)
- Becoming withdrawn, secretive, flippant or reckless about safety
- Strong connection to someone who is exerting unusual control/decision making influence in the teens life



## RESPOND

- **Notice.** Seek more information about the things you notice that don't feel right (eg. 23 year old man "dating" a 13 year old girl; teen acquiring new clothes/cell phone from "nowhere"). Initiate a curious rather than confrontative conversation.
- **Ask clarifying questions.** Rather than telling them what to do, help them see their current life situation through different eyes (eg. "I'm confused. Does it seem odd that an adult is choosing to date someone who is in middle school rather than another adult?" Or "If this was happening to your best friend, would you have some questions for her?").
- **Expect resistance.** This may be the most "special" they have ever felt and you are threatening that. When they try to push you away, mention that teens being exploited will be pushed to cut off healthy relationships. Could that be happening for them?
- **Tell them the truth about themselves.** Tell them about the value you see in them based on who God has created them to be and how he feels about them, not what they have to offer.
- **Call the police.** Follow your gut if you have suspicions. Offer whatever information you have including description of groomer/exploiter, car driven, places frequented, or anything else you can find out.
- **Find help.** Teens who are deeply enmeshed may not feel that leaving is an option. Connect them to resources that can help.



## RESOURCES

- **www.needhelpnow.ca** - Info on how to remove and report images from online platforms and apps while also learning how to support exploited teens.
- **childrenofthestreet.com** - An non-threatening site for youth to direct youth to if they are open to getting more information.
- **defenddignity.ca** - A free online video training package about sexual exploitation for youth workers with an accompanying youth curriculum called "Exposing Exploitation".