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Letting Kids Be Kids: Employing a Developmental Model in the Study of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking

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Domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST), the exploitation of American minors through such activities as pornography, commercial sexual acts, and stripping, constitutes an egregious human rights violation. Though estimates are imprecise, it is likely that in the United States alone over 100,000 American minors engage in such activities each year.¹ Minors are recruited young; the average age of entry into sex trafficking is 12-14 and this average indicates that individuals even younger than 12 are recruited.²

As American society has begun focusing increasing attention on the plight of sex trafficked American children, a corresponding appreciation of the enormous risk of childhood exploitation has emerged. Whereas the rhetoric of delinquency and willing participation was common throughout the 1990s, in recent years attention has shifted to the victimization of children.³ Rather than seeing these children as consenting, even eager, participants, society now views trafficked youth as vulnerable minors who are ill-equipped to battle the myriad social ills—including poverty, rampant abuse, and parental neglect—to which they are exposed.

Yet, in order to truly grasp these children's victimhood, a larger understanding of the developmental liabilities that leave children uniquely susceptible to recruitment and exploitation is essential. Understanding the psychological state of early adolescents helps explain why they, and not older individuals, are targeted. This article will not only elucidate these developmental liabilities and the corresponding increased risk for psychological distress among adolescents but it will also reveal the unique developmental advantages that facilitate growth and healing among adolescents.

This article aims to shed light on the developmental struggles that early adolescents, the most common age group to be recruited and thus the most vulnerable, are experiencing. This information will reveal why pimps and traffickers, keenly attuned to the perverse benefit of exploiting innocence, calculatingly target young, immature, and impressionable boys and girls. As an anonymous vice president of a child advocacy organization noted, traffickers recognize the developmental process and are thus "the most brilliant child psychologists on the planet."⁴ While this article will focus primarily on those who are under pimp-control, the majority of whom are female, the pertinent developmental issues also relate to individuals who engage in survival sex, who were not recruited by a pimp, or who operate independently within the world of commercial sexual exploitation.^{2,5,6}

The impetus for this review article is the great lacuna of empirical research related to victims of exploitation. Because of the hidden and isolated nature of exploitation, concern about studying minors, and the practical and ethical considerations of researching such a vulnerable and traumatized population, very little is known about this population. This article aims to present sound findings despite the paucity of empirical research; thus, reference will be made to traditional sources, including quantitative and qualitative studies, as well as to such non-academic sources as government and agency reports, a memoir (*Girls Like Us*), and a work of fiction based on over 300 survivor interviews (*Renting Lacy*). Traditional sources were identified through databases, including Social Sciences Full Text, MEDLINE, ERIC, and PsycINFO, and through a review of reference lists. Search terms included “minor sex trafficking,” “teen prostitution,” “commercial sexual exploitation of children” or “CSEC,” and “child prostitution.” This review privileged articles that have been published within the past fifteen years focusing on US-based child sex trafficking. The goal of this preliminary analysis is to raise awareness about this important topic with the hope of spurring research that will point the way toward developing effective treatment protocols for this highly vulnerable population.

It is important to note here that I will use the female pronoun throughout this review due to the fact that the majority of identified victims of sex trafficking are female.^{7,8} The constraints of the English language necessitate this linguistic concession and are in no way meant to discount the fact that boys, too, are at incredible risk for exploitation.

Age Increases Vulnerability

As Rachel Lloyd, the founder and director of GEMS: Girls Educational & Mentoring Services, a non-profit organization serving commercially sexually exploited children, asserts in her memoir *Girls Like Us*, “children are vulnerable just by virtue of being children.”⁹ Consider a twelve-year-old girl, a physically maturing teenager who displays newfound bravado and boldness. She may see herself as a young adult, seeking greater independence and autonomy; because of her physical maturation, others might see her in this way as well. She is in the throes of extraordinary emotional, cognitive, physical, and sexual growth, experiencing the natural metamorphosis from childhood to adulthood. Yet, in many ways, she is still a girl who craves parental coddling. It is this child, on the cusp between childhood and young adulthood, who we will examine, considering the exceptional growth process and the natural growing pains—identity and interpersonal struggles, neurological and cognitive

growth (and attendant limitations), and degree of emotional maturity—that place her at increased risk for entry into commercial sexual exploitation; these same risk factors no doubt make her vulnerable to other forms of sex trafficking but the relationship is less well-researched.

Identity Formation

A hallmark of early adolescence is the entrée into a second individuation process¹⁰ when adolescents emotionally and physically distance themselves from parents and previously-trusted authority figures. At first, as a result of the early adolescent's relative emotional immaturity, the process occurs unevenly. Adolescents assert their independence but still crave and require parental acceptance, comfort, and support.¹¹ Adolescents act much as toddlers do during the first individuation process: they vacillate between distance and closeness, a process that allows them to begin to see where their parents end and where they, as individuals, begin. Toddlers gain an understanding of the physical boundaries while adolescents explore the emotional boundaries of who they are separate from their parents. Since identity can no longer be principally defined in relation to parents or family, this process necessitates the asking and answering of personal and existential questions such as “who am I?” and “who do I want to be?”¹² While this process is essential to adolescent and later adult development, it can be anxiety-provoking and unsettling for the adolescent.

Traffickers/pimps often recruit girls who are experiencing this struggle, inhabiting the emotional void that is created by this natural distancing from parents/guardians. They provide an “easy” answer to the arduous, unnerving question of identity formation: “who am I?” In this way, girls can latch onto a new identity, a new self-image, one formed around their sexuality, the most salient aspect of their day-to-day life¹³; as one survivor noted, “I see myself as a prostitute now.”¹⁴ This identity even has an air of maturity, especially for the undiscerning teenager. Victims earn money (though they often must turn it over to the trafficker), work until the wee hours of the morning, and are not subject to the judgment of parental figures disapproving of their “grown-up” decisions.

Pimps artificially accelerate this identity-formation process by renaming the girls: “her old name is discarded. She is now Lacy, Star, Cherry, Sugar, or some such.”¹⁵ In this way, victims literally trade in their old selves for a new name and a new identity. Pimps know that once this transformation occurs, victims adopt their new identity as the only adult self that they know, and this will powerfully heighten the girls' dependence on them. Girls will now fear leaving the “life”—the term used for the

experience of commercial sexual exploitation—for what lies beyond is no longer their former girlish lives but rather the terrifying unknown.¹⁴

Traffickers not only fill the emotional void but they also fill the material void. Pimps generally provide the basic needs like food, shelter, and clothing that parents previously offered. Adolescents, and particularly runaway adolescents, are rarely able to consistently and legally acquire these on their own. Traffickers will also maintain a victim's drug habit, a habit that the traffickers often establish to further tether the victims to them.^{2,16} In so doing, traffickers allow these children to continue to *feel* independent from parents/guardians, even as they become increasingly dependent on a new master.

Pimps' jobs are even easier when a child's parents or guardians are (or had been) inconsistent or absent figures or when a child is a runaway or throwaway.^{17,18} Because such girls often have learned to expect little of their caregivers, they are easily impressed by even the smallest gestures of kindness. Lloyd describes a girl who experienced a simple dinner at Red Lobster as a declaration of her boyfriend's love.⁹ Additionally, in these cases, the separation from caring parental figures may have predated recruitment into trafficking by years, leaving these girls with little allegiance to adults in their lives and with few individuals who will miss them when they disappear from their former lives. Such girls commonly express a sense of disillusionment and cynicism about parents; often this disenchantment is broader, encompassing child welfare and legal systems that have promised, but largely failed, to save them.¹⁵ Yet, the persistent human need for closeness and love reminds us that the desire for parental attention endures despite continued disappointment.

Erikson asserted that the reward for the successful resolution of the conflict between identity and role confusion is the attainment of a sense of fidelity to friends, family, and significant others.¹² For those who are commercially sexually exploited as teenagers, their identities may be determined by the life and thus their fidelity can prove unwavering. Several authors have noted this transformation: "the more they become a part of the prostitution subculture...the more they come to regard themselves as prostitutes."¹³⁽⁸⁰⁾ Yet, this fate is not inevitable, particularly for the early adolescent. Since early adolescents construct multiple compartmentalized abstractions about themselves, they are uniquely chameleon-like in their capacity for discrete and disjointed identities.^{19,20} Therefore, an adolescent victim of sex trafficking has a distinct advantage; because she does not inhabit this identity at all times, she may not be wholeheartedly and irrevocably loyal to the life. She could likely revive and reconstitute an alternate identity upon her exit from the life.

Psychosocial Development

The process of identity formation and individuation, though seemingly an individualistic process, is deceptively collaborative. While this process is heralded by the separation from parents, a corresponding dependence on friends occurs. Just as a child's identity is defined largely in relation to family, the adolescent's identity is initially dictated to a great degree by friends and significant others.^{11,21} Noam stressed this relational aspect of identity, emphasizing additional questions that adolescents ask such as, "Where do I belong?" "What am I part of?" "Who accepts me?" "Who likes me?" "Who provides me with self-esteem?"²² Erikson also stressed this interplay between the personal and the social: "for the young individual must learn to be himself where he means most to others."²³ As children grow apart from parents, they begin forming the relationships that will become foundational to an adult identity.

Even if parents are present, loving, and attentive, early adolescents still seek out peer relationships to provide a sense of belonging and acceptance, to aid with identity formation, and to serve as antidotes against the sense of isolation that the emerging cognitive and emotional maturity of adolescence often creates. Early adolescents frequently form intense but fleeting friendships,¹¹ relationships that become increasingly intimate and sophisticated throughout adolescence. They work hard to fit in, conforming to the fads and styles of middle school and choosing to surround themselves with individuals with similar values and personalities who will help them feel accepted.²⁴ This intense bonding with friends serves to support the separation-individuation process, providing the sense of belonging²² and sense of self-worth²¹ that the family no longer exclusively provides.

Capitalizing on this need for acceptance and belonging, pimps create an appealing community for the girls who enter the life. This larger "second family"²⁵ consists of the trafficker and "wives-in-law." This "family" forms a clever parody of the child's "first family," or at least of idealized elements of the child's family of origin. For example, victims are often encouraged, even required, to call their pimps "daddy," the head of a new household. Pimps may "brand" their victims with special tattoos (the trafficker's name or symbol), a disturbing play on family crests or coats of arms. Pimps may even hold "family meetings."¹¹ Though this structure is clearly an ersatz family based on deceit, coercion, and often violence, "the desire for a family is so strong and so overpowering for most children that it doesn't take much to create that illusion."⁹⁽⁵⁶⁾ Particularly since many of those who are trafficked lacked a model of caring, reciprocal love in their

families of origin, they eagerly embrace what the pimp offers, and may even see violence and coercion as part and parcel of normal interpersonal relationships. Rachel Lloyd quotes a former trafficking victim who notes that the sense of family—the home, the shared dog, the nightly dinner—was, for her, “the best part.”⁹⁽⁵⁸⁾

The sense of acceptance is illusory, of course. Traffickers feed on girls’ insecurities and fears. Not only do their victims fear judgment from the world outside the life, but they often feel so ashamed of their own actions that they expect rejection and ridicule from anyone outside the life: “I’m too ashamed to really go back and see my family.”¹⁴⁽⁵⁾ Another victim similarly came to believe that there was no alternative because “I never think that a man would want to touch me or actually love me.”²⁶ Pimps confirm these fears, warning the girls that no one else, not even their families, will accept them for who they are.¹⁵ Through these declarations, traffickers substantiate girls’ dread that their identities are now synonymous with their recent behavior rather than their underlying character; thus, when the trafficker declares that he will accept girls for “who they are,” he is articulating exactly what the girls need to hear, that he accepts them despite “what they’ve done.” It is this sense of belonging, the permission to avoid one’s own sense of shame and disappointment, that is so hard to leave; since the rest of their new family has also engaged in commercial sexual relations, the girls don’t need to fear uncomfortable questions or judgment.¹⁴

Though the rootedness of friendship and family are essential to keeping girls in the life, it is often the romance that first ensnares victims. Early adolescents are frequently preoccupied with potential romantic partners, though they are more likely to be fantasizing about, rather than interacting with, them.²⁷ When relationships do form, they begin as unstable, short-term commitments, averaging five months.²⁸ While it is often assumed that these relationships begin to blossom in response to pubertal changes,²⁹ such changes are only one factor among many. Social and cultural influences play an equally important role in the formation of romantic relationships at this time.^{30,31,32} Having a boyfriend, and a popular boyfriend at that, is a powerful symbol of social status, particularly in early and middle adolescence,³³ and peer pressure exerts a substantial influence on both dating behavior and engagement in sexual intercourse.^{30,34,35}

Early adolescents want to be “in love”,³⁶ in part a reflection of their internalization of society’s idealization of romance, passion, and love.^{37,38} Many early adolescents crave this so badly that they report having been in love even if they had little or no contact with the object of their affection,^{39,40}

only later, in middle and especially late adolescence, do teenagers come to realize that the feeling they had experienced was not, in fact, love. This perceived experience of being “in love” is powerful, greatly influencing sexual decision-making. Teenagers, and especially females, feel that sex is permissible both when one is in love^{34,40} and when one is trying to gain a partner’s love and ensure commitment.⁴¹

Once again, pimps recruit girls by initially fulfilling their wish for a boyfriend. Most first-person accounts describe a teenager who meekly confesses that at first, she was convinced that her pimp was actually her boyfriend. He did, after all, act in ways suggestive of romance: showering her with compliments, displaying affection, buying her expensive items.^{2,10,15,17,42} While these behaviors sound like innocent courting, within trafficking they are calculated elements of the “grooming” process during which pimps perform the part of perfect, caring, and attentive boyfriends. By fulfilling a girl’s yearning for acceptance and by granting the girl bragging rights to an older, rich boyfriend, the pimp lulls his victim into a state of complacency in which she ignores or overlooks the warning signs. Then, within a matter of days or weeks, the pimp reveals his true colors, and the “seasoning” begins. This process, which involves inducing the girl to enter and remain in the life, includes psychological manipulation or the threat or use of violence and rape.^{26,43}

Thus, while the trafficker-trafficked relationship is powerful, it is the artifice of love that actually entraps these girls.⁶ Love is a powerful tool of manipulation; once the pimp secures the girl’s love—in part by convincing her of his love—the pimp can be confident that she will act in uncharacteristic and even self-destructive ways to maintain that love.^{17,44} As discussed above, love is used both as a justification for sexual intercourse and to maintain connection. The pimp knows this, a fact that allows him to “insist that she have sex with others *for him* as proof of her love.¹⁷⁽¹²¹⁾” Just as with other early adolescent relationships, these girls generally do not stay in love with the same person/pimp forever,¹⁷ but they remain with him long enough to decimate their sense of self and their faith in reciprocal, egalitarian love. As Martin, a former pimp, writes, pimps are aware of the teenager’s basic human need—as per Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Human Needs”—for love and belongingness and they use this to their advantage.⁴⁵

Thus far, we have discussed trafficking of a child by a stranger or an acquaintance. Yet, it is important to note that children are also trafficked by family members. In so-called familial trafficking, a substance-abusing or otherwise abusive parent may traffic a family member as a way of earning money.^{1,6} The girl’s needs are subsumed, even obliterated, by

the parents' or adults' needs; in an attempt to maintain connection, a sense of belonging, and even a roof over her head, a teenager with no real alternatives may decide that her body is worth the cost of preserving her familial relationships or her home. In fact, it is quite hard to imagine an eleven- or twelve-year-old being able to cognitively or materially make a different choice. As previously noted, love, and the illusion of love, is a powerful motivator and even teenagers struggling to individuate still retain a deep desire for parental approval, connection, and love.

Peer Pressure & Risky Behavior

While peers serve a critical function during adolescence, supporting individuation and the search for personal identity, they can serve as unreliable guides who sometimes sway each other to engage in risky and reckless behaviors. This process occurs in direct ways when adolescents act in response to ill-advised suggestions or expectations but the desire to fit in can be so overwhelming that it can lead adolescents to attempt to anticipate peers' desires and to act in ways that they imagine will garner approval and even admiration.⁴⁶ As children mature into adolescence, they experience significant cognitive advances that afford them impressive regulatory control over the growing paralimbic, emotion-focused areas of the brain. However, this cognitive control is still tenuous; the regulatory effectiveness of the developing rational and logical brain networks is hampered when adolescents are with peers or are emotionally aroused.⁴⁷ A nervous and tentative teenager in a group of peers may respond to these intense emotional reactions by acting dangerously and uncharacteristically rather than by reasoning her way to the right course of action. A clear example of the unique influence of peers is illustrated by the typical pattern of adolescent criminal behavior: while adults are more likely to commit solo crimes, youths are far more likely to co-offend, to commit crimes in groups.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the influence of peers can be limited. Consistent adult supervision and monitoring significantly decrease the likelihood of adolescent engagement in risky behaviors.⁴⁹

Pimps capitalize on this heightened influence of peer pressure to recruit and psychologically manipulate trafficked girls. Though the victim's support network prior to recruitment will likely disapprove of and discourage involvement in trafficking, the trafficker creates an alternate reality in which the environmental influences, and the direction of peer pressure, change. Accounts often describe the traffickers' attempts to isolate their victims—and a process of temporarily cutting girls off from their entire social world does occasionally occur.^{15,26,50} But this phenomenon could more accurately be described as isolation from one

social network and a corresponding introduction to a new, peer-centered, trafficking-focused network. To accomplish this aim, pimps often initially encourage, even demand, the distancing from family and friends and they may physically move victims from their hometowns.^{9,15} Once the previous social support network is discarded and/or devalued, pimps introduce a new peer network that sanctions and encourages sex for money and criminal activity. As one survivor stated, “all my friends are involved in prostitution.”¹⁴⁽⁶⁾ Often, it is these new “friends,” the more seasoned victims, who teach girls how to entice men and fool them into believing that they are enjoying themselves.¹⁵ Without the pressure exerted by the old social network, these teens lack alternative explanations or a culture of dissent. Instead, they are at the mercy of the persuasiveness of their new “friends.” At times, half of the pimps’ work has already been done for them: a runaway girl or one who has grown up in the foster care system may already feel isolated from anyone who could influence her.¹⁷ A pimp need only convince her of the love and acceptance of this new peer group.

Some traffickers take this one step further, fostering a family culture that encourages engagement not only in risky behaviors that are fundamental to sex trafficking, like unsafe sex, but also in criminal activities. This emerges as a distinctive tactic unto itself. As Flowers describes, pimps use a panoply of retention techniques, including “getting prostituted girls to sell drugs or commit other crimes.”¹⁷⁽¹²⁴⁾ Once the girls have a criminal record, the likelihood that they will seek help from the police decreases. On the contrary, their mistrust of the criminal justice system increases, because they assume that if they were to go to the police, they would be arrested and charged rather than assisted. The compulsion to act criminally also serves to make these victimized girls “less credible,” setting up a situation in which “even if the child does rat them out, no one will believe them.”⁴⁽⁶⁸⁾ Traffickers are masters of emotional manipulation, using peer pressure and a desire for love to induce teenagers to act in ways that will further chain them to the life.

Neurological & Cognitive Development

Underlying the adolescent social and emotional development considered above are the normal patterns of adolescent neurological and cognitive growth. Brains mature extensively throughout adolescence, resembling adult brains in many key areas of functioning by late adolescence. Adolescents exhibit improved impulse control and gain the ability to think abstractly, logically, and planfully^{51,52} as a result of such brain changes as synaptic pruning and increased myelination. Their brains become more efficient and integrative,⁵³ allowing them to seamlessly switch between

Facebook on their phones and physics in the classroom and to consider their similarities and differences. These neurological changes serve as a prerequisite for the myriad domains of adolescent development described above. For example, separation from parents requires that teenagers, equipped with enhanced and increasingly efficient critical-thinking skills, abandon the idealized versions of their parents from childhood and see their parents as the imperfect adults that they are.

Despite these impressive developments, early adolescents' brains are still quite vulnerable when social and emotional demands are high.⁵³ Adolescent brains are less efficient than adult brains,⁵⁴ and thus teenagers struggle to plan strategically⁵¹ and to inhibit responses.⁵³ Furthermore, adolescents' basic metacognitive skills are underdeveloped⁵⁰, leaving teenagers at a disadvantage as they attempt to manage their learning and experiences. In sum, early adolescents' brains cannot yet make adult choices. This effect is compounded by the fact that adolescents often lack the experiential knowledge—the gut reactions—to make wise, well-informed decisions.⁵⁴ Despite this fact, adolescents are at an advantage as well, making fewer irrational decisions based on experience alone.⁴⁸

Just as with risk-taking, studies have found that emotional arousal hampers one's ability to make reasoned, well-planned decisions, and adolescents are particularly susceptible to this vulnerability due to their still-developing decision-making systems.^{53,55} These liabilities place adolescents at increased risk for making impulsive decisions in every context, including when being recruited for trafficking. Intense emotional arousal is a cornerstone of trafficking and feelings of love toward one's pimp are soon accompanied by feelings of desperation, fear, pain, sadness, loneliness, and hopelessness.^{10,15} Thus, teenagers who may struggle to maintain good judgment and response inhibition may be easily duped by seemingly loving "boyfriends." While one can easily imagine this happening during a face-to-face encounter, a similar dynamic occurs with Internet recruitment. Some traffickers target adolescent girls by posting seemingly legitimate opportunities online such as dancing. Adolescents often don't know how to keep themselves safe on the internet and may not see the harm in sharing personal information with strangers. However, by posting such information, they increase their risk of being recruited into the life.⁵⁶

No matter how they are recruited, all adolescent girls who enter the life are compromised by their underdeveloped cognitive systems. Individuals of any age, but particularly adolescents, possess brains that may be strained by, or unprepared for, the substantial decision-making that must occur each and every day. For example, one 14-year-old girl

who could not physically protect herself, appeared unable to cognitively process her experience as well, dispassionately describing being raped at knifepoint.¹⁶

Liabilities & Benefits of Adolescence

Current conceptualizations of adolescence describe this period of life as the second most critical developmental stage, surpassed only by childhood.⁵⁷ Adolescence is a time of immense opportunity when youth experience considerable hormonal, physical, sexual, cognitive, and neurological growth.⁵⁸ As a result of these changes, adolescents begin to assert their independence, learn to better regulate and modulate their emotions, become sexually interested and active, reflect on their environments more critically and abstractly, and build the interpersonal relationships that will support them throughout adulthood.¹¹ However, because of the considerable changes that occur and interact with each other, adolescents are also particularly vulnerable to psychological disorders. Many mental health issues first emerge in late childhood and adolescence, with more than half of all mental disorders emerging before age fourteen.⁵⁹ This trend results in an estimated 20-25% annual prevalence rate of mental disorders among American adolescents.⁶⁰

This psychological vulnerability that places all adolescents at increased risk for psychiatric disorders means that teens trafficked during early adolescence likely experience an additive (if not multiplicative) effect of trauma. In addition, trafficking victims of any age are at increased risk for developing psychological disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and somatic complaints.^{17,26,61} It is thus possible and quite likely that these two vulnerabilities interact to place these trafficked adolescents at heightened risk for both current symptomatology and lifelong psychological distress. However, it is also conceivable that the direction of the causal relationship is reversed. Girls' psychological symptomatology—depressive feelings, social anxiety, or substance abuse—may predate the trafficking experience, serving as yet another factor that makes these girls susceptible to being recruited in the first place.^{2,17} However, even with these girls, it is likely that the experience of trafficking causes further harm to their psychologically compromised psyches.

This relationship is further complicated by the fact that the vast majority of trafficking victims previously suffered significant psychological stress or trauma that is independently associated with increased psychological sequelae. For example, Williamson and Prior found that a staggering 91% of the trafficked girls they interviewed had been previously

abused²⁶ thus underscoring the strong relationship between previous trauma and current trauma. In particular, abuse that occurs at the hand of another individual, particularly at the hand of a family member or trusted adult, can decimate proper assumptions about trust and reciprocity in relationships.⁶² Thus, a childhood experience of such relational trauma, in which assumptions about relationships are disturbed and distorted, can set the stage for re-victimization as an adolescent and adult. McMullen quotes a woman whose history captures this dynamic: she was abused as a child by her brother and later became a victim of commercial sexual exploitation. She reflects that “my brother could do it; why not everybody else? Might as well *make them pay* for it.”⁶³

While developmental and psychological vulnerabilities are key risk factors in exploitation, no discussion of the topic would be complete without reference to the devastating role poverty plays as a risk factor for exploitation.^{2,64} Since 21.8% of children in the United States are living under the poverty line,⁶⁵ poverty leaves a frighteningly high number of individuals at risk for exploitation. While adults cannot easily bring themselves out of either poverty or an abusive relationship, for children and teens, this would be nearly impossible. They cannot legally get a job, and they rarely have the power over family finances necessary to make wiser choices about the use of money. They must also actively disengage from their families and/or living situations, and adolescents lack the external, and often the internal, resources necessary to do so. Not only are poverty and past abuse/neglect risk factors for exploitation, but each independently is a risk factor for adolescent and adult psychological symptomatology.⁶⁶⁻⁷⁰ Thus, current symptomatology of trafficking victims is not principally the result of adolescent angst and is not merely the result of the trauma of trafficking—though that would likely be enough to cause considerable psychological damage—but it also represents the cumulative effect of years of trauma that is often exacerbated by poverty.

Yet even for young women experiencing considerable trauma, symptomatology is by no means inevitable. Studies indicate that depression and suicidal behaviors are prevalent, but far from universal, among exploited adolescents.^{24,71} Resilience among children and adolescents who have experienced trauma is quite common,^{72,73} and adolescents, in particular, are in a unique position to adapt and grow from trauma. Adolescents are better equipped than they were just a few years earlier to cope with the stresses of life,⁷⁴ employing a wider range of coping strategies than children and remaining more aware and in control of their emotional states.⁷⁵ Adolescent brains are at an advantage in the other direction as well; in contrast to adult brains, adolescent brains

demonstrate considerable neuroplasticity and are thus more able to repair.⁷⁶ The single most valuable strength that adolescents maintain is their “potential for change” and growth.⁷⁷

Discussion

Early adolescents tentatively and unevenly transition from a parent-focused childhood into a peer-focused adolescence. At this critical point of maturation—when parents recede into the background and peers and friends are foregrounded, when hormonal and physical changes herald sexual and reproductive maturity, when brain systems are in the process of becoming more complex and more interconnected—traffickers coerce and manipulate these youth, using their innocence and immaturity against them. The traffickers are clearly aware of basic developmental and psychological concepts and use this knowledge to their advantage.^{9,15,45} They deliberately exploit teenagers’ fears, desires, and limitations.

In order to combat these traffickers and protect our children, adults from different agencies and perspectives—health and mental health service providers, law enforcement and criminal justice agents, and biological parents, guardians, and foster parents—must develop counter-strategies that will bolster mature adolescent impulses while quashing the immature impulses that still exist. One promising avenue for intervention is the cultivation of healthy relationships that can supplant harmful ones. This review demonstrates that despite teenagers’ attitudes and protestations, they often desperately seek connection, acceptance, and belonging. Although they may appear to pull away from parents, early adolescents in particular still need the emotional bolstering that parents provide, for they lack the ability for autonomous and consistent self-regulation.⁷⁸

Accordingly, parent-child bonds and family functioning must be strengthened; as adolescents more comfortably turn to their parents for support, the emotional void that traffickers notice will contract. Improving the relationship between an adolescent and her parent is also advantageous because feeling connected to one’s parents is protective against an array of destructive adolescent behaviors⁷⁹ and has been found to increase academic achievement.⁸⁰ In fact, facilitating contact with any competent adults—teachers, mentors, service providers—can nurture psychological well-being and competence⁷⁴ and increases the likelihood that adolescents will remain safe and supervised.⁸¹

Successful interventions lessen individual risk while simultaneously combating structural inequalities that increase vulnerability.⁷⁴ Thus, inequalities and injustices that contribute to adolescent hardship, including

poverty, family instability, lack of attractive and feasible alternatives, and community violence, must be addressed. Reducing student attrition rates and reforming schools can also reduce risk by creating mentoring opportunities and facilitating communication and problem-solving skills that are critical components of resilience.^{6,82}

To ensure success, intervention efforts must actively engage adolescents in their development and implementation.^{81,83} By immersing adolescents in the design, the program will be more likely to meet their needs and more importantly, the teens will feel more confident, empowered, and responsible when their contributions are valued and their decisions supported.⁸⁴ Within this supportive environment, adolescents can be taught coping and life skills, as well as provided with psychoeducation, that foster healthy development and relationships.^{77,83,85,86} While these aforementioned approaches—fostering adult-child relationships, building competence and life skills, and offering leadership opportunities—have been found to support thriving and healthy development,⁸⁵ the research demonstrates that the important ingredient in success is any program that is supportive, caring, and nurturing, regardless of the specific skills that it imparts.⁸¹

This article underscores the fact that development does not cause trafficking but rather that society fuels this crime through a proliferation of ever-younger pornographic images of children,¹⁵ an apparent normalization of paid sex with children,⁸⁷ and a predominant narrative in which prostituted children “are ‘bad kids’” who “‘asked for it’” or ‘like sex.’”⁸⁸ Moreover, American society politicizes, delegitimizes, and demonizes teen and extramarital sexuality, particularly among girls and women. There is little room within this discourse for a celebration, let alone an acceptance, of girls’ burgeoning sexuality.⁸⁹ Yet, the incredible demand for child sex trafficking and the fact that children have been sexually exploited throughout history poignantly demonstrate the tragic irony of public and vociferous adult disapproval.⁹⁰

Progress within individual, familial, and communal domains must occur alongside radical political change. As long as a sexual double standard exists in which girls must choose between being madonnas or whores, some measure of blame will fall unjustly on girls. They will be instructed to dress more modestly but to avoid prudishness even as the societal tolerance and abetment at the root of the problem will be ignored. Children live out this societal befuddlement through policies like abstinence-only education that fail to teach children the skills necessary to engage in safe, consensual, and egalitarian sexual relationships. Ultimately, the global elimination of sex trafficking hinges on an ideological

transformation. Sexuality must be decoupled from morality and from social status, and the emphasis within this field must transfer from *sex* to *exploitation*.

Simple solutions will undoubtedly fail. Traffickers have too much to lose—their livelihood, their social status, their freedom—and society is still too ambivalent. A thoughtful, collaborative, developmentally-informed plan is essential. Unfortunately, due to a dearth within the research literature, there is still much to learn about the experience, anguish, and resilience of exploited adolescents and about how best to provide effective prevention and rehabilitation services to our youth.⁹¹ Organizations, advocacy groups, government agencies, and academics must collaborate to identify how best to support survivors and combat trafficking. Adolescents have incredible resources at their disposal; with the support of competent and caring adults who are able to provide support and political will, they can mature into the physically and psychologically healthy adults that they are destined to become.

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