



Child-Friendly Spaces for Survivors of Human Trafficking

The needs of child trafficking victims and the related legal reporting requirements differ significantly from those of adult victims. Government authorities and service providers should take special measures to ensure appropriate and tailored support and care are available to them. Children should receive immediate support and assistance in a safe and comfortable setting that is not intimidating or retraumatizing. Child-friendly spaces are an essential component to holistic victim-centered and trauma-informed care for child survivors of human trafficking.

Child-friendly spaces have traditionally been used in refugee camps or after natural disasters, but increasingly those in the anti-trafficking field are using them to provide comprehensive assistance and support to child trafficking victims in other settings. These spaces, which can be a separate room or even just a corner of a regular interview room, are typically located in existing structures such as police stations or hospitals and are administered by the government or an NGO. The use of child-friendly spaces reflects a multidisciplinary approach, providing a place for children to feel safe in the wake of trauma and for social workers, medical professionals, law enforcement, and others to conduct victim interviews, psychosocial counseling, and medical care all in the same location. In addition to putting a child trafficking victim at ease by providing a safe and structured environment for play and learning, such spaces also can help facilitate the prosecution of human traffickers by offering critical support to children as they provide information to law enforcement to help hold perpetrators accountable.

While they may look slightly different depending on their particular function, the country in which they operate, or the level of resources available, effective child-friendly spaces often share common features that can be replicated as promising practices.

First, child-friendly spaces provide a calm and reassuring physical environment. This is accomplished by providing age-appropriate furniture and decorations, painting the walls in calming colors, and displaying children's artwork or murals. Toys, art supplies, and age-appropriate books are also provided. A comforting environment and informal play can assist survivors in expressing their feelings of fear and distress while also supporting their resiliency.

Second, ensuring that a child feels safe is crucial, which means that the physical space must be easily accessible, ideally through its own entrance and exit, and separates the survivor from the perpetrator to prevent further trauma. A safe space affords children privacy so they can talk about their experiences more freely. Staff and relevant stakeholders should be able to observe the child from a separate room, where appropriate.

Third, a multidisciplinary child-friendly space provides survivors with an array of comprehensive services and referral networks in one place. In addition to addressing immediate needs by providing food, water, and sanitary facilities, a child-friendly space should address longer-term needs through the provision of medical screening and services, psychosocial counseling, referrals, and information about legal proceedings. Receiving various services in one place and during the same timeframe shields the survivor from having to repeat the story of what happened to them multiple times.

Finally, all services provided in the space should be trauma-informed, age-appropriate, and culturally and linguistically sensitive. This means that service providers can recognize signs of trauma in individuals and respond by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, practices, and settings. This approach considers the vulnerabilities and experiences of trauma survivors and places priority on restoring a survivor's feelings of safety, choice, and control. Service providers should make sure children understand their rights and are empowered to make decisions about their own care, where appropriate. A trauma-informed approach should ultimately build trust and transparency between survivors and service providers, and it must also be responsive to gender, age, ethnic, and cultural differences. This last component is crucial, as interviewing and service provision that is not trauma-informed or in the best interest of the child can be retraumatizing and inhibit a successful recovery.

Given constraints around physical space and financial resources, service providers and NGOs may need to develop creative ways to establish a child-friendly space. If a separate room is not available, a child-friendly corner of a larger interview room can also serve as a designated section that is welcoming to children. When assessing needs, a child-friendly waiting room might take priority.

The COVID-19 pandemic increases children's vulnerability to trafficking for several cross-cutting reasons. Families may require children to find work due to lost income, government and NGO protection services may be reduced, and children might not be attending school where they have access to trusted adults. Because of this increased vulnerability, establishing and maintaining child-friendly spaces is critical to prioritize during the pandemic; they can even be a safe place where children learn about public health protections such as social distancing, mask wearing, and proper hygiene.

