

What is familial trafficking?

Familial trafficking is the hidden process of exchanging a family member for goods, substances, rent, services, money, or status within the community. Familial trafficking does not just include a parent selling their children, rather across the USA there have been cases documented of grandparents trafficking grandchildren, aunts and uncles trafficking their nieces and nephews, cousins selling other cousins, and brothers and sisters trafficking siblings, which means that familial trafficking does not fit in one mold.

Not bound by social class, ethnicity, or demographics, familial trafficking often starts at a much younger age than other forms of trafficking (e.g., commercial sexual exploitation, labor trafficking, and domestic servitude). Furthermore, there are typically generational patterns presented within familial trafficking cases—which means there are typically multiple layers of polyvictimization and oppression that are seen upon escape and recovery.

Red Flags Used to Help Identify Victims of Familial Trafficking

To accurately identify victims of trafficking, please note that 3-5 five red flags need to be present. One or two of these red flags does not mean that you are witnessing a trafficking situation. If a trafficking situation is suspected, please do not approach possible traffickers or deal with the situation yourself. Instead, reach out to your local police department if a potential victim appears to be in immediate harm or danger and/or call the National Human Trafficking Hotline (1-888-373-7888) to make a report and get support. Also, please note that there are red flags specific to each profession (e.g., medical providers, police officers, etc.) and that this is simply a broad guideline. Reach out to BridgeHope for your future training needs.

- Never alone (might be with other family members all the time)
- Might appear to be in a controlling environment
- Isolated from other people, peers, and “normal” situations
- Symptoms of domestic violence and intimate partner violence
- Debt bondage (child talks about having to make money to pay for things within the family system)
- Abnormal loyalty to the “family” system
- Compartmentalization, dissociation, and other trauma responses
- Ritual Abuse
- Poor working/living conditions
- Lack of formal education and isolation (some survivors of familial trafficking do very well in school though simply because it is the one safe place that they are not being abused)
- Mind control and programming
- Lack of opportunities that most children have the ability to participate in
- Inability to “grow up”
- Fear of medical providers and other helpers
- Might appear to be the “keeper” of the family secrets
- Secrecy around the house (e.g., areas that are off limits to outsiders)
- ID has been withheld
- Other trauma’s including sexual, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical abuse
- Lack of understanding about one’s changing body and developmentally/age appropriate things
- Substance dependency within the familial system without an obvious means to pay for it
- Attachment disorders (including struggles to get close to other people)