



CSEC In-Service

Learning about CSEC and How to Advocate for Exploited Youth

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What is CSEC?

CSEC stands for the “Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children”, or “Commercially Sexually Exploited Children”. CSEC within the United States is sometimes also referred to as Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST).

Using Appropriate Language

At CASA of Los Angeles, we want to be mindful and intentional regarding the language we use for the youth and families we serve. [People-first language](#) is strongly recommended, which emphasizes the person before the label. For example, you can use phrasing such as, “a youth experiencing CSEC” rather than referring to a youth as “a CSEC”. Also, referring to a youth involved in CSEC as a “prostitute” is not appropriate. You can learn more about the “No Such Thing as a Child Prostitute” Campaign [here](#).

AWOL (absent without leave) is a military term that often leads to the criminalization of youth and does not accurately describe situations. It is strongly encouraged that CASAs state a youth has “left placement/home without permission” or is “away from home/placement)” when necessary.

Red Flags

Predators and potential traffickers may look for high-risk factors in the youth they exploit. Do not to jump to conclusions. If a youth is in an intimate relationship with an older partner, that doesn’t necessarily mean they are being trafficked. It may be appropriate to ask the youth how they paid for an expensive item or for more information about their boyfriend, but do not interrogate them. Asking directly about potential CSEC activity may offend or alienate the youth. Every youth and CASA relationship is unique. If you suspect CSEC activity on your case, discuss it with your Advocate Supervisor to figure out the best next steps.

IMPORTANT: The presence of one or more of these “red flags” does not guarantee CSEC involvement. These “red flags” may show risk of CSEC activity, but they may also represent typical teenage development. Making this discernment can be difficult at times, so context needs to be consistently considered.

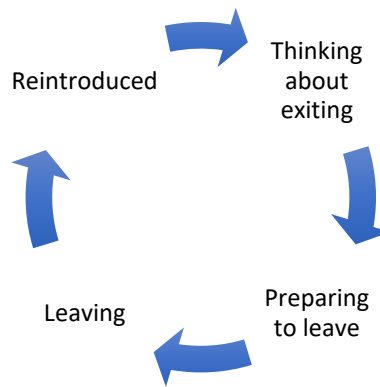
Stages of Exiting CSEC Involvement

It is important to understand that while CASAs and other case parties such as CSWs, attorneys, mental health teams, etc. would like to keep youth away from this life, there are many complex layers as to why youth choose and remain in this life.

While some youth are forcefully coerced into CSEC activity, others may willingly enter or engage to fulfill an unmet need, such as a consistent person in their life or financial support. This can make it especially hard for youth to leave this life.

Similar to the cycle of violence in cases of domestic or intimate partner abuse, breaking the bond with the abuser can be fraught with fear, guilt, loss, anxiety, and loneliness. Youth in the “CSEC” life may have identified their trafficker as one of their only support systems. This individual may have filled a need such as a parent figure, a romantic partner, or simply someone that meets the youth’s basic needs for material gifts and love. It is important for positive support systems (such as the CASA) to validate and process these feelings of loss with the young person, while also reassuring them that these feelings do not have to be acted upon (i.e. they do not have to return to their trafficker). In order to maintain stability, support must not simply stop at exiting – the young person will need ongoing support as well as patience and understanding as they navigate the cycle, which may include relapse.

Exiting from the commercial sex industry is often done in stages, not all at once. While the goal may be to leave the commercial sex industry completely, each level of exiting should be validated and used as encouragement for the next.



PLEASE NOTE: A main challenge once a youth has been identified as CSEC involved is that the youth does not consider themselves to be a victim. Youth involved in CSEC may be taught to distrust others or made to feel accountable for their situation by their trafficker. As a coping and/or survival skill, they may also develop bonds and positive associations toward their trafficker. In fact, in some cases the youth may show extreme loyalty to their trafficker, and therefore try to protect the trafficker from authorities. As such, it is important for CASAs to remain open-minded and non-judgmental when discussing these topics.

Likelihood of Relapse

In all examples of behavior change, relapse is part of the process and should be anticipated. It is important to keep in mind that not all youth may not be equally motivated to disengage from CSEC activity.

Discussing triggers and strategies for dealing with triggers prior to relapse will be important in conversations with the young person. Should a youth return to their trafficker, it is important to keep in mind that a relapse is not a reflection of your efforts as a CASA. It will be essential for you to remain a source of support and acceptance and reassure the youth that your main priority is their safety regardless of their choices.

CASA Role and Expectations

It is important to recognize that most children will not follow a linear path from initial identification to leaving their exploitative relationship or situation. Commercially sexually exploited children may cycle through stages of exploitation before they are able to maintain a life outside of exploitation. In order to be effective, CASA must strive to be youth-centered, strengths-based, and culturally sensitive. Each child's needs will differ depending on a variety of factors.

Collaboration with Case Parties

While on a youth's case, you will be working closely with multiple individuals. It is important to keep an open line of communication with these parties, especially if a youth is officially identified as being CSEC-involved. Some of the most important parties are listed below:

Case Party	Role Duties/Notes
Children's Social Worker (CSW)	Assigned by DCFS. CASAs will collaborate with CSWs to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children in the dependency system.
CSEC CSW	A secondary, specialized CSW that is added to a case once a youth is identified as CSEC.
Dependency Attorney	Children's Law Center (CLC) and/or other contracted attorney who provide legal advocacy for children and youth in the dependency system.
CLC4 CSEC Unit Case Manager	Case Managers are part of the CSEC Unit and work closely with the youth's attorney. They call and visit youth, and connect them to resources. They tend to be focused on youth in crisis. Call CLC 4 to learn who your youth's CSEC Case Manager is.
Juvenile Justice/Defense Attorney	If a youth is dually involved in the juvenile justice system as well as the dependency system, they will be assigned a defense attorney. It is important for CASA to make contact and introduce themselves, attend juvenile justice hearings as deemed appropriate, and provide a

	written strengths-based advocacy statement if requested by the defense attorney. Please consult with your Advocate Supervisor if your youth becomes dually involved.
CSEC Advocate (e.g. Saving Innocence and ZOE International)	Once a youth has officially been identified as CSEC-involved, he/she will typically be connected to an CSEC advocate, who are peer advocates with lived experience in human trafficking. It is important to note that most SI advocates will not communicate with CASAs without first receiving an authorization form.

Advocacy Activities

Advocacy activities for youth involved in CSEC include addressing needs regarding permanency, safety, and wellbeing. CASAs are encouraged to consult with their Advocate Supervisor to determine appropriate advocacy activities.

Harm Reduction

The harm reduction approach reflects a paradigm shift in service delivery, allowing for youth to be the curators of their own safety, including how they define safety. It involves promoting self-determination and essentially assisting youth in gaining, or re-establishing, their own sense of power. <https://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/BTB25-3E-01.pdf>

Utilizing a harm reduction approach acknowledges that change is difficult, and that it may take a period before a youth is willing or able to leave their current situation. Employing the harm reduction approach acknowledges that unsafe behavior will continue while a youth is engaging in services. This allows service providers to begin exploring why youth are leaving care, what needs remain unmet and what structural barriers exist that impede youths’ progress. By identifying these reasons, both CASAs and service providers can begin addressing the young person needs.

Legal Advocacy

Youth involved in CSEC may have varying legal needs. CASAs work directly with the dependency court; however, a youth will likely need an advocate regarding other legal issues. A CASA may be able to assist by providing courtroom support, writing a statement, assisting with transportation arrangements, confirming court dates, and so on. The following information further explores different legal areas that may pertain to CSEC-involved youth.

- **Dependency:** referring a transfer to DREAM court
- **Juvenile Justice:** information on STAR court
- **Crime victim advocacy:** A youth may need to testify or participate in criminal proceedings against their trafficker. CASA may support the youth through this

process by maintaining communication and understanding among case parties, most importantly, a youth's CSW and dependency attorney.

- **Immigration:** there are several forms of immigration relief that may be available to an undocumented, commercially sexually exploited child. It is critical that an immigration attorney with trafficking expertise screen a child to determine whether the youth is eligible for immigration relief. CLC has an attorney specialized and managing cases for youth with immigration needs. Please consult with your Advocate Supervisor to connect with an immigration attorney at CLC and ensure that your CASA child is set up with available legal services.

What if my youth left placement or their whereabouts are unknown?

There may be periods of time when a youth has left their placement without permission and/or their whereabouts are unknown. Some youth may not want or be ready to exit the cycle during a CASA's advocacy. Therefore, it is crucial for CASAs to respect a youth's mindset and maintain healthy boundaries. However, if a youth is not being responsive, CASAs should continue to message and/or call their youth to keep communication open. CASAs are also encouraged to explore opportunities for advocacy work and continuing education.

- Continue monthly check-in's with parties to share information and updates
 - CSW
 - Family members
 - Law enforcement
 - Attorneys
- Complete continuing education opportunities (i.e. research, read, listen to webinars, go to trainings to inform yourself about best practices with CSEC youth)
- Ask you Advocate Supervisor about participating in short-term advocacy projects

What if my youth returns from leaving placement?

Safety Planning - Safety planning is a set of techniques used to help reduce risk for a youth who may be actively engaged in or at risk of CSEC involvement. A simple safety plan can help the youth identify risky behaviors as well as assist a youth in identifying supportive people and services to call upon when unsafe circumstances arise.

CASAs and services providers cannot stop a child from running away, however they can give them the resources they need to reduce the possibility of harm.

Prohibited Activities

If a youth left placement without permission and contacts you, CASAs should not be picking up their youth. CASAs should redirect to the CSW to make arrangements. Remember, CASAs are not first responders and do not provide crisis intervention services. CASAs should not initiate or have any communication with a youth's trafficker. Also, CASAs are prohibited from investigating allegations of abuse or neglect and should not investigate allegations of CSEC (e.g. researching your youth online).

Self-Care

Advocating for youth facing CSEC challenges is difficult work. CASAs are strongly encouraged to take care of oneself and discuss challenges with your Advocate Supervisor. CASAs can access the following for additional supports; EAP program, share & support.

Court Report

As with any court report, CASAs must make sure that their reports are objective, supported by evidence, and strengths-based. As such, it is important that CASAs to not disclose any incriminating information that may lead to a negative perception of the youth or violate their confidentiality. Some information to not disclose in a court report include:

- CSEC status unless it has been confirmed by DCFS/the court (i.e. there is a CSEC unit assigned or youth has openly disclosed to team)
- Pregnancy status if youth has not disclosed to CSW
- STD's or sexual health history
- Substance use/abuse.

Potential Recommendations

As with all court reports, the CASA should make sure to review recommendations with their Advocate Supervisor. Based on the sensitivity of certain information for youth involved in CSEC, it may be inappropriate to recommend certain services before a youth has self-disclosed.

Many of the recommendations CASAs would typically make for a non-CSEC case may apply regarding visitation, suitability of placement, education needs, and more. There are also some recommendations that CASAs can make specifically for CSEC-identified youth. These include:

- **Restoration Funds:** These are funds that can be requested to support CSEC-identified youth. Examples of uses for the funds include self-defense classes, extracurricular activities, getting hair done, etc. In addition to adding this recommendation to court reports, CASAs can request the dependency attorney to complete an attorney order for these funds as well.
- **Secondary CSW:** (ROU, Office of Child Protection (OCP), etc.)

For more information on how to structure your report, please refer to the [CASA Court Report Handbook](#).