



Holly Smith

WASHINGTON, DC, June 5, 2012 - Last month, Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell signed into legislation the [SB 259/HB1188 bill](#). This bill requires the Board of Education and the Department of Social Services to collaborate and provide awareness and training materials for local school divisions on human trafficking, including strategies to prevent child trafficking.

Child traffickers target teens and preteens who are vulnerable, those whose lack of guidance and support has led to decreased self-confidence and a growing depression, among other things. Teachers have the opportunity to fill this gap for children. As a survivor of child trafficking, I am a strong advocate that [prevention strategies begin early](#).

The following strategies are recommended for any elementary or intermediate school in America and should be aligned with basic programs designed to support a child's transition through middle childhood. The goal is to support children in order to sustain their self-confidence and to develop their character and their awareness of the world around them. Fortunately, many schools have already started to work on programs which include these goals or have already instilled some of these ideas into their curricula.

Educate Children about Media and Advertising. First and foremost, media literacy programs must begin early! Advertisers have hired child psychologists and other professionals to help target children with brand marketing and to distort their perceptions of morality and necessity. We must educate our children to understand that images in the media and advertisements are not reflections of reality.

Discuss personal health and etiquette issues like personal hygiene and social manners. A child who lacks this type of guidance at home is often bullied at school.

Instill programs which cover bullying, self-defense, and coping skills. Kids must be prepared to recognize peer pressure / bullying and must be equipped with ways to deal with it. Coping strategies can include meditation, reading books, journaling, channeling energy into sports/hobbies/music, and self-defense classes. A child who is confident about defending him or herself is less likely to buckle under bullying.

Include nutrition education in health classes. The basic elements for a healthy lifestyle must be instilled early; make healthy lunch and snack choices available to kids at school. Positive physical health helps to nurture and maintain positive mental health.

Explore different cultures. Knowledge is power; expose children to many aspects of the world in order to educate and engage them.

Create a sports tutoring program. Create space in the weekly schedule to have physical education instructors or tutors work one-on-one, or in small groups, with those kids who struggle

with sports. There are tutors for children who struggle with math, why not for those kids who struggle with catching or kicking a ball?

Expose children to a variety of role models. Today's role models for children consist mainly of movie actors and other television celebrities. This encourages children to aim for one goal: fame. Popularity becomes the definition for success. I strongly encourage educators to promote local young role models involved in music, sports, nutrition, advocacy, volunteering, politics, entrepreneurship, and other areas which promote positivity. Invite these community members into the classroom to speak, or take the kids on a class trip to learn more about the organization or occupation. If that's not possible, raise awareness for these role models and their efforts by hanging posters in school hallways.

Invite local volunteer-based organizations into the schools, especially organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters, Girls for a Change, and other similar child-focused groups. Teachers should get to know and have a working relationship with the leaders of these organizations; this way they can recommend connections to troubled kids or to parents of those children who are struggling.

Strengthen a child's self-esteem, self-confidence, and overall self-value with extracurricular activities. If you see a child struggling, encourage him or her to maintain enrollment in an extracurricular activity. This is most important in the intermediate school age years. Those children who identify with their strengths in intermediate school will be less likely to lose sight of their self-identity in middle school. If funding is limited for programs like art and music, create incentives for community members to donate their time, money, or equipment.

Connect troubled kids with school counselors. Identify children whose behavior/personality starts to change, and connect them with school counselors early! Such changes as a drop in grades, a change in friends, and a negative change in personality can indicate depression or other mood disorders. Watch for signs like bruises and cuts, social withdrawal, and running away. If this child is not receiving additional help outside of school, then help them to develop a long-term relationship with school counselors. It takes more than a few counseling sessions for a child to gain trust for an unfamiliar adult.

[Beth Jacobs](#), BSW, a child trafficking survivor and survivor advocate, also recommends that teachers *listen* to children. Often, children are speaking up, but the adults around them aren't paying enough attention. [Barbara Amaya](#), also a child trafficking survivor and survivor advocate, recommends that teachers discuss the issue of running away with students. Providing a list of alternatives to running away is also a good idea.

The building blocks for self-confidence and critical thinking must be laid in elementary school and must continue to build through intermediate school in order to prepare kids for the hormone-driven, self-identity-shaking middle school years. These are the years in which traffickers are looking for troubled teens. This concept applies most to those children missing this type of emotional nourishment and guidance at home. For additional tips for parents, please register on my website at www.HollyAustinSmith.com.

Holly Austin Smith is a survivor advocate, author, and speaker. She invites you to join her on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#) and to follow [her personal blog](#).