



PROTECTING CHILDREN DURING THE PANDEMIC

The Bottom Line

Children and youth are at increased risk for abuse, internet exploitation, and mental health challenges as a result of COVID-19. Service providers and caregivers must provide appropriate information to young people about COVID-19 and internet safety, while still being provided opportunities for interpersonal connections.

Increased Risk of Child Abuse

The closure of schools, childcare centres, playgrounds, and other services limits the available supervision of key adults who support children and report suspected abuse. Other individuals like neighbours, friends, and family are not able to keep as close of watch over children. Additionally, the closure of agencies that offer support and services to families and communities limits how, when, and if support is sought.

Caregivers may experience added stress from increased parental responsibilities and socio-economic stressors accumulated through COVID-19. This may lead to violent outbreaks within the home. These variables may be especially felt by families who already face poverty and marginalization. Increased time spent with harmful adults as well as online may lead to negative outcomes (e.g. maltreatment, abuse, and sexual exploitation of children).

Possible Responses

- Speak with children about COVID-19 in an age-appropriate manner. Children may be overwhelmed with the information they are receiving from online outlets, heightening their fears and anxieties. They may also be given misinformation in an attempt to control them. They may be silent if they are receiving virus-related threats, such as being told that if the child discloses abuse they will be taken away from their family and placed in a home where they will contract COVID-19. Provide concrete information to children to help them understand what is actually occurring.

Possible Responses (Continued)

- Assess risk and modify safety plans. Review safety plans and family case loads regularly and adjust them given new circumstances of family safety and evolving health and safety measures. The increased stress on families may lead to new or increased substance use and/or violence that may be different or more escalated than what has happened in the child's home in the past.
- Work with families during these abnormal times. Families may require extra support and resources while juggling many roles. Women are particularly vulnerable to this as they tend to undertake the majority of caregiving roles. Work with families to identify strategies for well-being in their living and employment situations.
- Support children to maintain positive mental health. Children may need help self-regulating their emotions. They will be experiencing sudden changes to their routines, and may be experiencing past or on-going trauma, fear for loved ones, and anxiety about the future. Help children cope by ensuring the continuation of social connectedness (writing letters, video chats, telephone calls), provision of regular routine and sense of predictability, reassurance that they are safe and so are their loved ones, and acknowledgement of their feelings as valid and important as well as how to cope with those feelings (breathing exercises, smudging, grounding techniques).
- Connect with families on a frequent basis. Try doing the same things with children over video chat that are usually done face-to-face, like reading or colouring, to allow them to become more comfortable with this communication platform. Children may feel reluctant to say anything negative about their home life with their caregiver(s) nearby in the home. Try asking simple questions to provide a glimpse into what life is like for the child right now without probing for information.
- Speak with children about online safety. Children who have been bullied or abused are more at risk for online exploitation. Explain the risks of the online world to children, such as adults posing as children the same age as them to persuade children into sharing sexually explicit photos or to form a bond in hopes of one day meeting the child. During this pandemic, relying heavily on technology is important, but not without risk.

For original sources and documents, please visit: www.childtraumaresearch.ca

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