



COVID-19:

PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM VIOLENCE, ABUSE, AND NEGLECT IN THE HOME

Photo courtesy of UNICEF/Vincent Tremeau /Burkina Faso 2019

Introduction

While the world has experienced many crises, COVID-19 presents unprecedented challenges. António Guterres, Secretary General of the UN, suggests that the coronavirus pandemic is quickly turning into a “broader child rights crisis”. Media coverage indicates an increase of domestic violence and violence against children. It is abundantly clear that risk factors for violence, abuse, and neglect are on the rise for children under containment. At the same time, some COVID-19 prevention measures have abruptly cut children off from positive and supportive relationships they rely on when in distress, including at school, in the extended family, and in the community. Children’s rights to safety and protection as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action are threatened.

This technical note, which is informed by reports from the field, examines issues that children may face as countries implement lockdowns and stay-at-home orders to curb the spread of COVID-19. Protective prevention and response strategies are then outlined with the goal of strengthening the protection of children in all types of homes.

1. Violence, abuse, and neglect of children in the context of COVID-19

All children - that is, people who are under 18 years of age - can be vulnerable to violence, abuse, and neglect. Such violations can take place in a home environment under the care of parents and other family members. All children, particularly girls are at high risk of sexual violence. Children are also at risk outside of the home. This is especially true for children who are deprived of their liberties or who are living on the street, in institutions, associated with armed forces or groups, engaged in child labour or living in situations of conflict and fragility as well as refugee, internally displaced, migrant and stateless children.

Home should be a child's first line of defense and protection. Stressors related to COVID-19 are threatening that defense. Households worldwide are struggling to cope with new restrictions on travel and work, concerns over health, food security, financial instability at personal and global levels, and conflicting information on a range of issues.

Furthermore, millions of children are living in places that have instituted some form of confinement, including lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. These measures have disrupted the formal and informal protective systems that generally identify and respond to children's risks. Schools and communities are over-taxed and/or unable to support children and families' well-being. In a confined space, caregivers must now manage their children's schooling as well as their own work and caregiving responsibilities. Unpredictable and sudden events such as family deaths can shift care duties. Children, especially adolescents, may face mounting pressure to help provide for their families.

Common risk factors for violence, abuse and neglect associated with COVID-19 include:

- increased poverty and food insecurity due to the loss of jobs and incomes;
- the inability of children to access education either in person or online;
- an increase in children's digital activity and a decrease in caregiver monitoring, which exposes them to greater digital risks;
- an absence of nutritious meals previously provided by schools and care programmes;
- the disruption of peer and social support networks for children/caregivers;
- the disruption of community and social support services for children/caregivers;
- a breakdown in routines for children/caregivers;
- increased alcohol and/or substance use by adolescents/caregivers; and
- *ad hoc* child care arrangements.

Any and all of these factors can increase the risk of harm to children who are already trapped in abusive and neglectful situations. But they can also increase the potential for over-stressed caregivers to become violent or abusive. These new stresses are occurring at a time when children are less visible to individuals and professionals who are normally engaged in their protection, and child and family welfare services are over-stretched and disrupted.

2. Prevention of and response to violence, abuse, and neglect of children during COVID-19

Protecting children from violence during the COVID-19 pandemic requires all sectors to undertake coordinated measures. The table below presents possible actions.

Prevention
<p>Influence social norms and related behaviours to better safeguard children at home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify positive and <u>negative coping mechanisms or behaviours</u> that are strengthened and exacerbated by the pandemic (e.g. <u>alcohol use</u>).• Develop culturally and age-appropriate messaging to reinforce positive behaviours and discourage negative ones.• Disseminate messages through context-appropriate low- and high-tech media, including online, text messaging, local radio stations, loudspeakers, and other solutions.• Work with community and religious leaders to raise awareness and influence positive behavior.• Include information on the protection of children from violence, abuse, and neglect during COVID-19 in general public health messaging, educational platforms, and within existing programs. <p>Provide access to positive parenting resources</p> <p>Provide parents and caregivers, including those who are the hardest to reach, with a variety of accessible <u>resources that support positive parenting</u>, non-violent discipline, and positive coping and stress management skills.</p> <p>Strengthen the role of schools and education actors to support children in distress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Help children to re-establish a sense of their <u>education routines</u> through remote <u>schooling</u> and by working with public and private entities to provide children with access to educators and virtual learning platforms (e.g. internet access, laptops/tablets, etc.)• Provide children with continued access to school-based counselling through telephone or online support where face-to-face contact is not possible, while enabling counsellors or other relevant school staff to continue to monitor the well-being of children in at-risk families.• Encourage school counselors to work with <u>at-risk children</u> to develop personal safety plans.
Identification and reporting
<p>Strengthen and adapt child helplines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide additional resources to adapt and strengthen <u>child helplines</u> to operate in the context of COVID-19, including enhanced capacity with child-friendly, COVID-19 counsellor training, and adapted and relevant referral strategies. <p>Raise the awareness of a range of professionals on their roles in identifying and reporting signs of abuse or neglect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Alert professionals who may have contact with children despite social distancing measures (e.g. pharmacists, medical personnel, school staff, police, first responders) on their roles in identifying and reporting signs of abuse and neglect.

Child and family welfare services

Support families in distress

- Provide emergency cash assistance to vulnerable families to mitigate disruptions due to COVID-related livelihood shocks.
- Strengthen the capacities of the social service workforce to support children and families facing special challenges, such as a caregiver's mental illness, disability, drug dependency and/or domestic violence, which may have increased due to the pandemic.

Designate and support child protection as an essential service

- Support child protection authorities to meet their statutory duties throughout the COVID-19 response.
- Support para-social workers and other community-level child protection workers to deliver child protection services in fragile contexts and humanitarian crisis.
- Empower social service providers to effectively assess the risk of face-to-face versus telephone/online support (for both pre-existing and new cases) with due consideration for the safety of children at risk of violence, and to conduct home visits when necessary.
- In situations where social service workers have face-to-face interactions with sick individuals or their direct contacts, they should be provided with the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment as per WHO guidance or nationally mandated.

Ensure the continuity of child and family court services

- Ensure child and family courts function as an essential service while also adapting to public health measures.
- Continue to hold emergency hearings and execute court orders for the care and protection of children who are at an immediate risk of neglect or abuse.

Specialised services for children and families

- Adapt and continue the delivery of services that mitigate risk factors for violence, abuse, and neglect (e.g. caregivers' mental health, substance misuse, domestic violence, etc.).
- Adapt and continue key child protection interventions in pre-existing humanitarian settings that support children, families, and communities and promote family unity.
- Scale up the capacity of the family-based alternative care system to prevent unnecessary recourse to residential care during the pandemic.
- Provide children who are experiencing trauma with virtual specialised mental health and psychosocial support when public health measures preclude face-to-face contact.

3. Contextual considerations

To be effective, policy and practice recommendations must be appropriate to the national and/or local context and be guided by the principles of 'the best interests of the child' and 'do no harm.' Suggested actions found in this technical note will need to be contextualized. Where possible, adaptations should be made in consultation with children, families, and communities with careful consideration of the following factors:

- **Phase of the outbreak response in your context:** The incidence of violence, abuse, and neglect as well as the ability to prevent and respond to them are influenced by the measures used to control the spread of COVID-19. The pandemic response is a dynamic process which can include preparedness, response, and recovery. The novel nature of COVID-19, and our continuously evolving understanding of it, demands that child protection actors rapidly adapt and change readiness and response planning that is focused on essential child and family welfare services. Protection activities will vary across the following *non-linear* phases:
 - *Preparedness:* Mitigation measures are expected but not yet in place.
 - *Response (mitigation):* Strict control measures are in place (e.g. lockdowns, social distancing, restriction on movement, etc.).
 - *Recovery:* Strict mitigation measures are lifted at once or in phases.
- **Pre-existing conditions:** Any strategies to respond to violence in the home must be informed by pre-existing risks and vulnerabilities related to the:
 - prevalence, incidence, risk factors, and drivers of violence in the home and community;
 - existing policies, procedures, and institutional arrangements for child protection service delivery;
 - existence and degree of humanitarian crises; and
 - availability of financial and social resources.
- **Connectivity and other appropriate communication mechanisms:** Digital access can facilitate virtual educational, financial, and social support. It can support the continued provision of social services and statutory functions of the government, such as case conferences or children's hearings. It is important to advocate for digital access, in terms of equipment and internet access. It is also important to advocate for non-digital solutions (e.g. educational radio programmes, text message services (e.g. RapidPro), and loudspeaker systems) to accommodate those without digital access.
- **Using data to drive action:** Rapid situation analysis and drawing on pre-existing or new data, coupled with ongoing surveillance and monitoring, can ensure that response measures are relevant and indicate the effectiveness of interventions. Data should be disaggregated by age, gender, disability and other locally-relevant factors (e.g. socio-economic status, race) to better understand the unique needs of children. Where possible, multi-sectoral assessments and children and family's participation should be considered. The analysis of administrative data from helplines, notifications, case management, and other service provision is vital to informing responses.

Resources

Technical notes and annexes

Technical Note: Protection of Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic

<https://alliancecpha.org/en/COVID19>

Technical Note: COVID-19 and Children Deprived of Their Liberty

<https://alliancecpha.org/en/child-protection-online-library/technical-note-covid-19-and-children-deprived-their-liberty>

Protection of Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Children and Alternative Care

<https://alliancecpha.org/en/child-protection-online-library/protection-children-during-covid-19-pandemic-children-and>

Agenda for Action

<https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/news/agenda-action-8-united-nations-entities-launch-roadmap-protect-children-violence-response-covid>

Policy notes

UN Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children

<https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-impact-covid-19-children>

COVID-19 resource hubs

The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action - Child Protection and COVID-19 pandemic

<https://alliancecpha.org/en/series-of-child-protection-materials/protection-children-during-covid-19-pandemic>

Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children COVID-19 Hub

<https://www.end-violence.org/protecting-children-during-covid-19-outbreak>

Global Social Service Workforce Alliance resources page

<http://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/resources/database>

International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) COVID-19 resources

<https://www.ispcan.org/covid19resourcepage/>

Parenting in the time of COVID-19

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/healthy-parenting>

Together for Girls COVID-19 Resource Page

<https://www.togetherforgirls.org/covid-19/>

UNICEF pages on the coronavirus

<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19>

WHO Country & Technical Guidance - Coronavirus disease

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance>

