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Protecting Children from Sexual Abuse and Exploitation During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing measures to stop the spread of the virus, the added stress to a family is undeniable. During this time of crisis, the risk of child sexual abuse and exploitation could escalate while children are home from school and families are navigating new circumstances.

Parents working in essential industries may have fewer options for reliable childcare and may need to make decisions for their family they wouldn't ordinarily make, like trusting children to stay home alone at a younger age or relying on a neighbor to babysit. In addition, children and teens are spending more time online, where they may be at an increased risk for solicitation and exploitation.

For some children, home is not a safe place to be.

It is important to remember that sexual abuse is usually committed by someone the child knows and trusts. Perpetrators are often family members or close friends of the child's family. Abusers can also be older children, including housemates or siblings, and during times of extreme stress, some people may act out in ways they ordinarily wouldn't – sometimes, even in sexual ways. Young children and teenagers who are victims of abuse may be trapped at home with their abuser and may have fewer opportunities to ask for help from a trusted adult.

Now, more than ever, adults need to take action to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation and to recognize warning signs.

Here are some useful tips to help you protect your children and the children in your life from sexual abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Talk to Your Children:

It is vital to have open, ongoing, and honest conversations with your children about the realities of abuse and sexual exploitation (in age-appropriate ways). [Click here](#) for more tips on preventing child sexual abuse and talking to your child about it.

Recognize the Signs:

Learn the signs and symptoms of sexual abuse. Look for red flags, such as regression to an earlier stage of development, knowledge of sex beyond what would be expected for the child's age, withdrawing from usual activities, changes in behavior, self-harm, or attempts at running away. While some of these signs could indicate abuse is happening, it is also important to recognize that this is a difficult time for everyone, including children, and some of these signs may simply be a response to stress, change, or isolation. That is why it is important to create an environment where children feel safe and comfortable talking about their feelings and experiences. [Click here](#) for more information about the signs of abuse.

Notice Your Child's Behavior:

Children may not feel comfortable disclosing abuse or telling you if a family member or close friend makes them feel uncomfortable. Notice if your child avoids certain areas or family members in your home. It could be that your child is trying to limit interactions with the abuser. Ask questions. Create a space where your child feels comfortable and supported speaking up.

Ensure Children are Safe Online:

Now more than ever, children are spending more time online – completing their homework, playing video games, chatting, and interacting on social media. Be mindful of their communication online. Perpetrators might use technology and social media to lure and gain access to your child through online grooming. Use parental protections on their devices and lock your child's ability to download or delete applications. Be engaged in and aware of your child's social media presence.

Engage with Childcare Providers:

With childcare options more limited right now, parents who work in essential industries may be faced with exploring new childcare options. For many parents, asking relatives, neighbors, or acquaintances to provide care for your child during this time may be the only solution. However, parents should remain cautious about who they trust to care for their child. Check references for new childcare providers and talk with them about your expectations. If possible, check in by phone throughout the day, and talk with both your child (if age appropriate) and the caregiver about their interactions with each other and how they spend their time.

Look Out for Other Children in Your Life:

We need parents, neighbors, relatives, and all adults to help protect the children in their lives during this time of crisis. Take notice of the children in your neighborhood while going out on walks, at the grocery store, or in other settings. If you have reason to believe a child has been abused, you have a duty to report.

You are obligated by law to report suspected child abuse. If you suspect a child is in immediate danger, call 911. For all other cases in Texas, call the abuse and neglect hotline at 800.252.5400.

For more information, visit the [CACTX website](#), [Darkness to Light](#), & [NetSmartz](#)

For support, contact:

[The Texas Youth Helpline](#)

Call 1-800-989-6884 – Text 512-872-5777 or

Chat Online - https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Youth_Helpline/default.asp