

Keeping Children Safe During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The impacts of COVID-19 and measures to address it have changed the day to day world of children and their families living in Canada. For many children, the result has been increased quality time with parents and siblings. However, some children staying home face increased exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV), along with co-occurring child abuse, sibling violence, and other adversities (e.g. exacerbation of parental mental health challenges and substance use). This increased risk is due to a number of factors, including:

- Closures of schools, childcare centres, playgrounds, and cultural, religious, and recreation centers that have limited the role of key adults who are able to support children.
- Government and community services that may be closed or operating at a limited capacity thereby limiting where and how support is sought (e.g. family programming, counselling support).
- Financial stressors such as the loss of one or more jobs in the home.
- Illness and separation of family members that can lead to increased contact with those who harm. For example, a parent may be sick in the hospital and her child is staying alone with a family member who inflicts abuse.
- Risks associated with increased time online (e.g. sexual exploitation of minors).
- Family members may be reluctant to report concerns about children's safety due to fears that removal from the home may put children at increased risk of COVID-19.
- Individuals (e.g. friends, family, neighbours) have reduced opportunity to recognize and respond to safety concerns.
- Parents who are essential workers may be out of the home more or need to self-isolate when home which could mean siblings are alone or without supervision more often.
- Older siblings may need to take on additional responsibilities if both parents are essential workers and may feel overwhelmed to do so.
- Increased stress experienced by parents attempting to juggle multiple roles with little or no respite (e.g. working from home, child-care responsibilities, home schooling, concerns about older or immunocompromised family members). For some families, the pandemic may exacerbate pre-existing factors such as poverty and marginalization.

Individuals caring for or working with children should continue to adhere to basic safety measures. However, additional strategies may safeguard children's physical and mental health in the context of the pandemic. Some of these strategies include:

1. Speak with children about COVID-19 in an age-appropriate and accessible manner.

It can be difficult for children to understand why their daily routines have changed and when things can go back to "normal." Just like adults, children are also likely to be exposed to an overload of information from social media, television, and the Internet, that can heighten their fears and anxieties. In some cases, misinformation about COVID-19 may be shared with children in attempts to control their behavior, frighten them, or discourage them from seeking help. For instance, children may be told that if they disclose abuse in the home, they will be placed into the care of a child protection agency where they could contract COVID-19 and fall ill. In some communities, children (and their families) may already have fears regarding child welfare authorities and stay silent to avoid being put into care.

Provide concrete information about COVID-19 to children to help them understand what is occurring and how they can protect themselves from getting sick. For additional guidance, please refer to this resource on [talking to children about COVID-19](#).

2. Assess risk and develop or modify safety plans, if necessary.

The living and working conditions of many families may be impacted by the pandemic. For instance, the loss of a job may lead to an increase in substance use. Such changes may in turn increase the risk of severe violence in the home. In other cases, new or co-occurring forms of abuse may emerge in the home (e.g. sibling physical abuse, parent-child abuse) that may not have been present before. In addition, children involved in formal or informal custody arrangements may not be returned to their primary home as a partner who harms may use COVID-19 as reason to keep the child with them. Ongoing risk assessment and safety planning is necessary to reflect evolving changes inside and outside of the home. This may require collaborative efforts with community organizers and faith-based leaders to conduct virtual check-ins with families at risk. For more information on risk assessment, refer to the [Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative](#).

Developing or modifying safety plans may be necessary in response to challenges imposed by the pandemic. For instance, the use of individuals (e.g. friends, coaches, teachers, Elders) as supports or resources prior to the pandemic may no longer be an option given the need for social/physical distancing. Review safety plans periodically as new public health and safety measures are announced.

3. Work with families to support their needs.

These are not normal times and parents may be juggling many roles at once: parent, teacher, friend, and more to their kids. It is likely these changes will disproportionality affect women who tend to [undertake the majority of caregiving and household chores](#). Family members may also be considered essential workers and continue to work outside of the home under very different conditions, while those working from home may face challenges of their own. In some situations, both parents may be home and navigating pandemic-related stressors, which can increase the risk of being abusive to children or missing signs of abuse taking place in the home by a sibling or other parent. Such stressors may be exacerbated for families who already face poverty, housing problems, social isolation, employment issues, and precarious immigration status.

Work with families to identify strategies for well-being in their living and employment situation. Finding safe places in the home, reallocating household duties, and limiting news intake (while remaining informed about important developments) are ways to support the well-being of all family members.

4. Support children's mental health and well-being.

Many children may struggle with the sudden changes to their daily routines due to the pandemic and fear for the safety of themselves or their loved ones. Children with prior or ongoing trauma, in addition to children with pre-existing mental, physical, or developmental problems, could especially feel the effects of this stress.

Social connectedness through writing letters, online video chats, and telephone calls can allow children to maintain their relationships with peers or key adults in their lives. Children need to be reassured about their safety and the safety of loved ones, and the adults in their lives should maintain routines as

much as possible to provide children with a sense of safety and predictability. Children should also be supported with regulation of their emotions. For instance, acknowledging their feelings and encouraging them to engage in activities (i.e. breathing techniques, smudging, grounding exercises) to help them self-regulate their emotions and behaviours.

For resources, refer to [this list of educational, mental health, and entertainment-based options for helping children, youth and caregivers cope during COVID-19 compiled by OAITH](#). Also refer to the [COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Resource Hub](#) and [the COVID-19 Resource List prepared by LGBT YouthLine](#).

5. Connect with children and/or their families on a frequent basis.

Many community-based agencies are moving programming and supports online to continue supporting children and their families. While contact with children and families may not be the same as before, try to maintain your relationship with a child who may be vulnerable at home to increase the chances of spotting possible signs of abuse. With many parents and siblings home more than usual, opportunities to harm children may increase and it may be necessary to conduct “check-ins” more often. Do not assume everything is okay if there is decreased contact with a child and/or a parent.

It may take time for children to feel comfortable connecting with you in this new manner. Try to recreate the same activities you did together in person over a video chat such as reading stories together or colouring. Some children will act like everything is okay if check-ins are occurring where parents are present. Ask simple questions that provide a glimpse into what life looks like every day for them without probing.

6. Speak with children about online safety and risk for sexual exploitation.

Children are likely to spend more time online than usual due to the pandemic and may be at risk for [online sexual exploitation](#). For children who have experienced abuse, this risk may increase. Children may be persuaded into producing and sharing sexually explicit photos or videos of themselves. Predators may pretend to be in the same age group as those they chat with through various platforms (e.g. Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok) or pose as a trusted adult to form a bond in hopes of eventually meeting in person (grooming). Speak with children about the potential dangers of internet activity to increase their safety. [Cybertip.ca provides age-appropriate resources on internet safety](#).

Given social/physical distancing requirements, we need to rely more on technology to continue to meaningfully connect with children to learn of their concerns and resilience. Children's safety requires us to recognize, accurately assess, and address threats to them and their families within the context of IPV and co-occurring adversities. Even in a pandemic, the experts at women's shelters and children's services are available to help keep mothers and children safe! We serve children and their families best when our efforts are centered in and informed by the interacting realities that shape their experiences such as age, race, class, citizenship, and ability. [Trauma- and violence-informed approaches](#), though they may be implemented differently during the current pandemic, are essential to supporting the health and well-being of children and their families.

The [Learning Network](#) at the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children produced this resource in collaboration with the following organizations: [BC Society of Transition Houses](#), [Alberta Council of Women's Shelters](#), [Manitoba Association of Women's Shelters](#), [Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses](#), [PEI Family Violence Prevention Services](#), [Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan](#), and [Women's Shelters Canada](#).