

COVID-19: Community Call to Action, Supporting Some of Our Most Vulnerable Citizens, Our Children

As the already overburdened child welfare system is spread even thinner by COVID-19, communities must pull together to ensure the safety of their children. While the child welfare system works to continue the monitoring and protection of children in foster care, there are other children who do not have the oversight of a formal agency. As citizens and neighbors, we cannot forget about the youngest in our local communities whose risk of abuse and neglect is increasing due to the stresses of this new environment. The COVID-19 pandemic jeopardizes the ability of many families to provide basic needs to children: food, water, shelter, education, health, and well-being.

Protective Factors

The concept of Protective Factors can be a complicated one. In its simplest form, protective factors serve as safeguards helping parents and caregivers who might otherwise be at risk of abusing their children to find resources, supports, and coping strategies that nurture effective parenting, even under stress (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/>). One key Protective Factor is parental resilience—the practice of managing stress and having the ability to function when faced with challenges in daily life (<https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ProtectiveFactorsActionSheets.pdf>). However, for some parents, COVID-19 is severely compromising their ability to cope with life's everyday challenges. Access to a social network to provide emotional support and guidance is another important Protective Factor—and today's required social distancing can serve as an unintended threat to social networks. These necessary measures are increasing the issue of parental isolation, which is linked to an increased likelihood of child maltreatment. Access to concrete supports (food, water, shelter, clothing, housing), another important Protective Factor, decreases the incidence of neglect that occur when parents are unable to fulfill their children's basic needs. Every parent asks themselves, "Am I providing enough?" But when even basic needs are in question, other "normal worries" are amplified. When children are in an environment where basic needs are always in question, they most certainly will face serious long-term negative effects (<https://www.exchangefamilycenter.org/exchange-family-center-blog/2018/9/25/protective-factors-concrete-support-in-good-times-and-in-bad>).

COVID-19 has created widespread and unprecedented challenges. Parents and caregivers are now confronted with child-rearing challenges they have never faced before—and these challenges aren't going away any time soon. Many families who were overwhelmed before the pandemic are now facing additional struggles to access the resources needed to meet the daily needs of their families.

The scope and magnitude of this crisis are unparalleled, and the hard truth is the “formal system” will not be able to fill the gaps. We know what the problems are and families need immediate solutions. Communities must be the shield; members must come together to find creative solutions to ensure children can thrive during this uncertain time.

So, What Can We Do?

Grassroots efforts across the nation are underway to increase family supports. Consider these efforts to “fill the gap”. Support can be provided in many forms and at many levels:

- **Lead the troops! Create a solution that isn't currently available in your community.**
 - » Decrease social isolation by connecting parents in your community through social media. Share useful parenting tips and resources in your community; use live videos to check in on parents “face to face”, etc.
 - » Increase access to food by setting up a micro pantry in your community (or beyond if you have the resources): <https://www.ambitenergy.com/spark/how-to-start-a-blessing-box-micro-food-pantry#.XnPGMIFYZ1w>
 - » Be a community advocate! Survey neighbors using social media or phone calls to determine the highest needs of families in your neighborhood. Reach out to community leaders to come up with solutions and access resources.
 - » Knowledge is power: Make people aware of Protective Factors. Community members should be mindful of the heightened risk of child abuse and neglect, and the need for community action to prevent it from occurring.
- **Be a donor or volunteer! Support an existing organization or group monetarily or by giving your time.**
 - » Give monetarily to the local trustee, faith-based organization or community resource center who provides cash assistance to families in need.
 - » Donate items to a local food pantry.
 - » Connect to an organization who can link you to needy families, such as those through the CarePortal: <https://www.careportal.org/>
- **Reach out to someone! Personally check in on a neighbor. We all need support, but for differing reasons we don't always ask for it.**
 - » Be that person to reach out and ask how things are going. Be that positive support.
 - » Make sure individuals know that asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a positive step to ensuring their family's needs are being met.
 - » Help connect them to resources in your community; use 211 to find resources: <http://www.211.org/services/essential-needs>

To learn more about COVID-19 and what you can do to protect our children, please contact us.



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