



Supporting Safety and Well-being of Children and Families during COVID-19



The outbreak of COVID-19 is a concern on everyone's mind. While we may be comforted to know that the risk to our children's physical health from the outbreak *itself* appears to be low, child and family serving agencies are worried about the **increased risk for child abuse and neglect during this time of crisis and economic insecurity**. Reports to child abuse hotlines across the nation have declined dramatically during the pandemic. In Sacramento County alone, reports have decreased by 45-50%. These statistics are not surprising – when children stay at home, they are isolated from places where adults often look out for their safety and well-being including schools, day care, primary care providers, places of worship, and other public areas.

We have a collective responsibility to ensure kids in our community are safe and healthy, even during challenging times. While it may be difficult to maintain our normal connection with children during the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders, there are other ways we can address the safety and well-being of our children and families. This guide provides tips for teachers, social workers, counselors, day care providers and others who work with children and contact them virtually.

1. Check in with parents and caregivers.

School and workplace closings greatly increase stress in parents' lives, resulting from loss of income due to unpaid leave, unexpected or irregular childcare needs, and housing and food insecurity. Parents and other caregivers are their children's most important protectors and may need extra support during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Check in with parents and caregivers to ask how they are doing and what they need.** Lending an ear and helping families access available supports can go a long way in keeping families well. Asking solution-focused questions can help families recognize the steps they have already taken and think through other ways of caring for themselves and others. Below are some ideas for questions to ask, along with follow-up questions.

- Q Is now a good time to talk? If not, is there a better time?**
 - o Is everyone OK?
 - o Do you have any concerns for you or your children?
 - o Do you feel safe? Do you need help right now?
- Q What's it like for your family to be staying home without any breaks? How is everyone getting along with each other?**
 - o Is anyone having a hard time? What seems to bother them the most? What makes it better or worse?
 - o How are you providing downtime or "away" time for family members when needed?
 - o How is everyone passing the time? Do you have activities you do together? Do you need ideas?
- Q Since the COVID-19 emergency started, what's changed for your family? Has anything been more of a struggle? Are you facing new worries or needs?**
 - o Now is a difficult, stressful time for everyone. How is everyone coping with stress?
 - o What's one thing you are doing with your children, and one thing your children have done, since this crisis started that you are proud of?
 - o If you could pick one thing that you've started to make things a little better, but perhaps not done as often as you'd like, what would it be? What kind of difference would it make to do more of it?
- Q How are things going with your child's education at home?**
 - o What is going well? What has been challenging?
 - o Do you have any concerns you would like to discuss?
- Q How are things going with your child's behavior and social or emotional health?**
 - o Who were your children connected to outside the home before the pandemic? How are they staying in touch with their friends?
 - o Have you noticed changes in your child's behavior?
 - o Does your child seem more anxious, scared or depressed? Are you concerned?
 - o Do you have access to mental health or counseling supports for your child?
- Q Is everyone able to get what they need to get by – like food, clothing, housing, and medical care? Have there been any problems?**
 - o Are you able to access what you need to care for your family? What would help?
 - o Do you need help connecting to _____? (provide local resource suggestions)
 - o Who can help you? Do you have supportive family, friends, or neighbors who can help?
- Q We all need support right now. Who are the supports in your life? Are you able to connect with them now?**
 - o People in a crisis often look to examples in their family and culture for how others have dealt with a crisis. Have people in your family had to face crises before? What did they do?
- Q What have you most appreciated about yourself during this time? What have your children most appreciated about you?**

2. Check in with children and youth.

Check in regularly with the children and youth you work with, care for, and teach. **Ask questions that are engaging and help identify whether support is needed or a safety concern may be present.** Provide encouraging messages and helpful advice. If a child raises a concern, consider if you can safely follow-up with their caregiver. It is important to remind parents, caregivers, and children that you are there to help, not judge them. Validate that this is a difficult time, everyone is struggling, and that support is still available. Be mindful of how the child's caregiver responds to your questions. Always think of the child's safety first and consider the possibility that the child may not feel safe talking.

Q Tell me about how things are going at home. How are things going for you?

- Are you feeling OK? Give me one word that describes how you're feeling today.
- Are you worried about anything? Who do you feel safe talking to about needs or worries? Do you have a way to talk to that person right now?
- What was the best part of your day? What was the hardest part of your day?
- If you were stranded on a desert island, what would you need? Are those things in your house right now?

Q Tell me about what you do all day.

- How is learning from home different from learning at school? Is it working for you? How is it affecting you and your family? Do you need help with anything?
- What things do you like to do at home? What don't you like to do?
- Do you have responsibilities at home? What are they?
- What do you like most about staying at home? What do you like least? Why?

Q How is everyone getting along with each other? Is anyone having a hard time?

- Who lives or stays in your home (including pets)? Who visits?
- Are you worried about anyone? Why?
- How can you tell when someone in your home is having a hard time? What do they do? What makes them feel better?

Q Who is taking care of you? How are they doing?

- Who makes sure you have everything you need? What do they do?
- Where do you sleep at night? Does anyone else sleep with you? Do you sleep well?
- Who takes care of you when you get hurt? What do they do?
- Who gets food for you or makes your meals? Who do you eat with? What do you like to eat?
- What did you have to eat for breakfast today? Yesterday?
- What are the rules in your house? What happens when someone breaks a rule? (Sibling, pet, mom, dad?)

3. Connect children and families with support in times of need.

Connect families to additional support when needed. However, if you reasonably suspect a child is unsafe – report it to Sacramento County Child Protective Services (if you suspect imminent danger, call law enforcement first). You do not need proof. You are not making an accusation. You are asking for a professional to help a child and their family. You may be the only person to act. **If something does not look safe, sound safe, or feel safe – report it.**

Signs of concerns:

- You have had no contact at all with a family after many repeated phone calls/messages
- A child communicates they feel unsafe, you see a child in a dangerous environment, or you notice a significant change in a child's mood/behavior
- For students with technology/internet access: lack of virtual attendance or homework not completed over a long period of time

Make an extra effort with children who:

- Have a history of emotional, sexual, physical abuse or neglect, drug use, or discussed/attempted suicide
- Are responsible for the care of other children or live in a highly stressful family situation with limited support systems
- Require assistance due to physical, mental, behavioral, or medical disabilities or delays



Sacramento Child Abuse Hotline
Department of Child, Family and Adult
Services

916-875-5437 (KIDS)
24-hour/seven days a week

