



Children Are at Increased Risk for Abuse When Stressors Abound

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Introduction

On March 20, 2020, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) issued a press release that stated, in part:

"Hundreds of millions of children around the world will likely face increasing threats to their safety and wellbeing – including mistreatment, gender-based violence, exploitation, social exclusion and separation from caregivers – because of actions taken to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. UNICEF is urging governments to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children amidst the intensifying socioeconomic fallout from the disease. In a matter of months, COVID-19 has upended the lives of children and families across the globe. School closures and movement restrictions are disrupting children's routines and support systems. They are also adding new stressors on caregivers...."

Background

The stressors referred to in the UNICEF press release are a result of the societal and economic changes from the COVID-19 or "coronavirus" pandemic. *"Stress or stressors have also been identified as a precursor or causation factor in cases of physical child abuse or child abuse homicide."* It has been clearly established by professionals that an event or triggering mechanism precedes physical child abuse, child abuse homicide and other types of abuse. Often stress will cause a parent or caretaker to become overwhelmed and then overreact to an occurrence while interacting with a child, ultimately resulting in abuse.

What exactly is stress?

Stress is defined by Merriam Webster as a physical, chemical or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension. Now and then, everyone experiences stress. A stressor may be a one-time event, a short-time occurrence or an ongoing situation.

Stress affects everybody differently. Some people are able to cope and recover from a stressful event or situation more easily than others. Stress may be exhibited through anger, irritability or restlessness.

Increased stress

Parents and caretakers are understandably stressed over how to protect their families from contracting the coronavirus.

As if this isn't enough to bear, there have also been concerns for public welfare, resulting in official responses to the current pandemic that have ranged from school closings, social distancing, sheltering in place orders, work from home requirements, etc., which, along with the effects of the virus itself, have culminated in the closing of some jobs, furloughed positions, and being laid off. Schools that may have been providing children with two meals a day, at no-charge, may be unable to provide that service.

The shift with workplace responses has also increased stress in the home for children, too. Children living in otherwise happy families, may now be dealing with a tense parent (or parents), who, in some cases, are out-of-work or simply unaccustomed to providing around-the-clock care. Children may be acting differently than usual, because they also do not have the same physical, emotional and spiritual outlets.

How can stress translate to abuse?

Already-stressed parents may feel more stress and may ultimately make poor decisions. For example, they may feel they have no option but to take a serious risk and leave their children at home, alone, for hours, to work outside of the home, despite safety, neglect or legal concerns, depending on the child's age.

When I conducted physical child abuse investigations for the Cook County Sheriff's Police in Chicago, I would frequently learn that the parent or caretaker had been experiencing some type of stress; examples were wide-ranging as to what caused that stress.

I also discovered that the parent often was unable to vent the stress he/she was experiencing. The parent didn't talk to anyone about their stress; either, they had no one they felt comfortable talking with, or the parent was not comfortable talking with anyone about the stress.

As a result, the stress continued to build to the point of the triggering mechanism. In many cases, the triggering mechanism for the child's abuse was something pretty simplistic, through no real fault of the child: A child continually crying, what was perceived as a "dirty look" given by the child, a child doing something that was perceived to be annoying, such as repeatedly opening the kitchen cabinets, a child refusing to eat a vegetable, a child talking back, etc. In most cases, as the stress continued to build, harsh words increased, yelling intensified, spanking and beatings began to occur, and whippings or other types of abuse occurred or increased in their intensity.

This progression happens during every tragic U.S. event. One example was seen in the United States in 2008 when parental stress within families spiked as a result of the national financial crisis. Parental or caretaker feelings of frustration or nervousness with their economic situation were a major cause in making the terrible decision of physically punishing a child. However, this also resulted in a national increase of caring people reporting physical child abuse to state child abuse hotlines.

Current risks

Just as we saw in 2008, due to caretaker and parental stress, abuse will increase. However, it will be more difficult for other caring adults to make additional suspected child abuse reports to state child abuse hotlines, because there is not the same amount of face-to-face interaction with anyone. Bruises on children are more easily hidden when it's more difficult for them to leave the house and be seen by others. A child's interaction with "would be" protectors is more easily monitored by the people in the home who are being abusive, if interaction with teachers and schools happens only through online channels.

The harsh reality is that the increased stress from COVID-19 has already resulted in an increase of minors contacting child protective services and sexual assault hotlines to report all of the types of child abuse, not just physical abuse. We also know that where there is one type of [abuse](#), there

is an increased chance that another type is present as well.

The National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC) in Huntsville, Alabama, has reported that 90% of children who have been sexually abused know the perpetrator. Boys and girls who are now forced to shelter at home for days and weeks, as the result of the closed schools or distance learning, may be more vulnerable for child sexual abuse, and other types of abuse, by caretakers.

Concerns for trusted adults

Educators are typically on the front line for reporting suspected child abuse to state and county hotlines. With the schools closed, these mandated reporters are unable to identify or communicate about the at-risk children.

On March 23, 2020, the FBI issued a press release that said, in part, "Due to school closings as a result of COVID-19, children will potentially have an increased online presence and/or be in a position that puts them at an inadvertent risk. Due to this newly developing environment, the FBI is seeking to warn parents, educators, caregivers, and children about the dangers of online sexual exploitation..."

"Screen time" is generally defined as the amount of time spent using a device with a screen such as a smartphone, computer, television, or video game console. Pediatricians generally recommend that parents limit screen time to no more than one or two hours a day for children ages 2 and up unless the parent is present and actively involved. With school closures and families engaged in virtual calls, social media and internet surfing challenges are presented for those parents who have implemented strict screen time rules for their children. Stressed parents, unaccustomed to providing around-the-clock care, or grappling with distance learning, will probably relax the screen time rules for their "bored" children, which can increase the risk of the children being confronted with sexually explicit material via the internet and with people who have bad intentions and seek to abuse children.

With the COVID-19 crisis, everyone must take an active role in monitoring child safety in their families, neighborhoods and their communities. Inevitably, there will be children and young people, in the months to come, making disclosures of abuse, to trusted adults, once they feel safe, and when schools are back in session and churches are open. It's possible that the child may make the disclosure to you over your online communication, or that you may pick up on disturbing behavior or warning signs through that online communication. What you see, hear or observe may cause you to suspect one of the types of child abuse—physical abuse, neglect, emotional/psychological abuse or sexual abuse.

To get help:

- **Parents or caretakers who are in need of support can:**
 - Call the National Parent Helpline at 1-855-427-2736, or,
 - Call the National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD or 800-422-4453
 - Obtain help via online therapy to [reduce stressors](#) or find venting and/or coping opportunities
- **To report suspected child abuse or neglect,** contact law enforcement or child protective services (CPS) in your [state or county](#)

- **For suspicion, fear or concern of immediate abuse**, please call 911
- **To report suspected online sexual exploitation**, contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 1-800-843-5678 or online at www.cybertipline.org

Your role as a safe adult is extremely important to the children in your life, whether they are in your own home or see you intermittently, or hardly at all.

Reference:

1 "Child Abuse and Exploitation Investigative Techniques", U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., 2001- 3rd Edition (2nd Edition, 1st Edition). Farley, Killacky, O'Connor, Russ, Walsh, Tressler

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1) What can you do to protect children who are not in your immediate care?

- A) Be on the lookout for any concerning behavior or activity during any communication.
- B) Communicate any suspicions of abuse directly to the child protective services in your state or county.
- C) Ensure that you know how to access the appropriate phone numbers and websites to communicate with child protective services in the event that you need additional help.
- D) All of the above