



The other side of COVID-19: Increased risk factors for child abuse and neglect

Pandemic safety measures have had a negative impact on some aspects of children's and teens' health. Follow our series to learn more and take action.

Risk factors associated with child maltreatment have increased

Child maltreatment, also known as child abuse and neglect, can cause serious physical and mental health problems in children. Child abuse and neglect includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to intimate partner violence (also known as domestic violence).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, findings from the [Canadian Community Health Survey \(2012\)](#) based on self-reports from those 18 years of age and older indicated that at least 32% of Canadians had experienced one or more of physical abuse, sexual abuse or exposure to intimate partner violence in childhood.

"Add the pandemic's stressors to the mix and it's more important than ever to be alert to signs and symptoms of child abuse and neglect in children so that we can intervene to support children and their families," says Anne Niec, director of the Child Advocacy and Assessment Program at Hamilton Health Sciences' McMaster Children's Hospital (MCH).

While professionals are still gathering evidence about children's experiences of maltreatment during the pandemic, risk factors have increased and children are particularly vulnerable to maltreatment because of this.

"These risk factors include economic uncertainty, job losses and limited access to supports including friends, relatives and teachers, as well as healthcare and social services" says Harriet MacMillan, psychiatrist and pediatrician with the program.

Child Advocacy and Assessment Program

The Child Advocacy and Assessment Program (CAAP) provides consultations and assessments around issues of child maltreatment, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and neglect, and exposure to intimate partner violence.

Throughout the pandemic, the CAAP team has continued to see children and their families affected by maltreatment.

Signs and symptoms

Experts in the program say healthcare and social service professionals can watch out for child abuse and neglect by being alert to signs and symptoms, inquiring about how children are doing, and how they are getting along with family members.

The signs and symptoms associated with child maltreatment often differ depending on the type of abuse or neglect, although overlap may occur. Children may present with both physical and psychological symptoms.

- Physical abuse: Consider in the context of any serious or unusual injury without explanation or with an explanation that does not fit.
- Sexual abuse: Consider in the context of changes in behaviour, for example, a child becoming withdrawn, aggressive, or exhibiting sexually inappropriate behaviour. A child may develop persistent and/or recurrent anal/genital symptoms that are without a medical explanation.
- Emotional abuse: Consider in the context of potentially harmful caregiver-child interactions such as negativity or hostility toward, or rejection or scapegoating of, a child. Also consider if you observe developmentally inappropriate expectations of, or interactions with, a child, including inappropriate threats or methods of disciplining.
- Neglect: Consider if you observe emotional unavailability and unresponsiveness from the caregiver toward a child and in particular, toward an infant. Also consider if a child frequently misses school.

Ways you can help

1. Assist in reducing stress for caregivers by providing practical and emotional supports. Examples include providing information about community resources that assist caregivers in accessing safe, supervised care for a child to give a parent a break or basic needs for a family such as groceries. Emotional support includes being available to listen to a parent's concerns without judgement.
2. Acknowledge that parenting can be frustrating and stressful and encourage parents to ask for help.
3. See children in-person whenever possible, not virtually. This is the best way to understand what is going on for the child.
4. Practice the principles of first-line support including listening and inquiring about the immediate concerns of the caregivers.
5. Show understanding of stress and distress and listen closely to caregivers without judgement. Ask about needs and concerns. Support children and caregivers by helping them connect to information, community services and social supports.
6. Recognize this is a challenging time for everyone and realize that this may be reflected in behaviours and actions. Respond with compassion and support.



If you are concerned that a child may have experienced maltreatment or is at risk of harm, contact your local [child protection agency](#) – they remain open during the pandemic.

Resources for providers

- [Violence Evidence Guidance Action \(VEGA\)](#)
- [National Trauma Child Stress Network \(NTCSN\)](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada: Child maltreatment in Canada](#)
- [WHO infographic on healthy parenting](#)
- [WHO infographic: COVID-19 Parenting – Structure Up](#)