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Help Calm the Storm: What You Can Do Today to Prevent Child Maltreatment While Still Social Distancing

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One of the many unintended consequences of the COVID-19 interventions has been and will continue to be a dramatic increase in child maltreatment. Social distancing, in particular, will likely create a “perfect storm” of extreme social isolation, high parental stress, economic hardship, limited access to resources and inadequate supports that result in child abuse, neglect and family violence. But there are actions each of us can take today to prevent child maltreatment by limiting the impact of these conditions. You do not have to be a social worker, therapist or law enforcement professional to help prevent child abuse. By understanding and addressing some of the root causes of child maltreatment and taking action to limit the impact of these conditions, you can help families avoid maltreatment and build resilience.

1. Reduce Parental Stress

It really does take a village to help families through these extraordinary challenges. You can make a meaningful difference by reaching out to parents. Parents are under enormous stress and feeling a significant lack of control. This means they will have strong emotions including sadness, anxiety, anger and fear. Validate those feelings as normal, communicate understanding and offer support. Listen empathically to their problems and struggles.

Checking in with parents can help to reduce their stress and allow them to be seen and feel heard. A good question to begin with is: "What has been like for them to take care of your family during the COVID-19 outbreak?" Listen empathetically to their response and try to help find resources (see below) and solutions. When emotions run high, it can be hard to think clearly. Help parents to think through solutions to the challenges they are facing and be creative problem solving partners with them. Look for opportunities to show them where they have choice and control over their decisions to decrease the often overwhelming sense of helplessness many are experiencing. Touch base with them regularly so they know they have someone to talk to and share challenges with.

Another helpful tool is to ask parents to recall memories from past adversities they have faced and remember how they, their family and the community coped with those hard times. Borrowing on those lessons learned in the past can provide both guidance and hope in the present.

There are some good resources for helping parents here:

<http://www.schoolmentalhealth.org/COVID-19-Resources/>

2. Assist with Economic Hardship

As you join with the parent, identify areas where you can assist with economic hardship by helping them find and access things the children will need. You may find it helpful to remind the parent that it is not always easy to ask for or find help, but if you look for helpers you will find them and a safety network can be built out of many materials. Ask the parent about the status of housing and what they know about rent, mortgage and lease payments. Help them to create a plan to address any issues requiring attention. Ask about food, meal planning and cooking. Ask questions to explore how much food is on hand, ways to make food preparation more efficient and the benefit of consistent meal times. If the family is experiencing food shortages, find the resources in that family's community providing food and assist the parent in making a plan to access the food from the resource if delivery is not available. If appropriate, consider doing the delivery yourself. Finally, stimulus checks should be arriving soon. Talk with the parent about creating a budget for spending this money once received. Planning a

budget will prevent impulse buying and focus the parent on the most significant areas of need, thereby reducing stress and increasing a sense of control.

3. Put Your Eyes and Ears on Kids

The extreme social isolation resulting from stringent social distancing measures means that adults simply won't see or hear from kids at the frequency that they did before COVID-19. When kids aren't seen or heard, maltreatment can occur and continue over time. But we can get creative in finding new ways to connect with kids. If possible, virtual connection is helpful. You can actually see the kids, ask about how they are doing and observe the dynamics between the child and the parent. If virtual isn't possible, consider a 6-foot "coffee clutch" where you can observe and engage with the family in person. You can also use the phone to engage with the parent and each of the children. Many times, regular visits like these decrease the likelihood that child maltreatment occurs.

When children's safe places like schools are not open they will need adults in the community to step in and offer a protective shield when needed to stop maltreatment. You may see or hear things in your interactions that may indicate a child or youth is being maltreated. In this case, call 911 if it is an emergency. If not an emergency, report what you saw and heard to your local Child Protective Services Hotline. You can find the number for your area at:

https://www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/?CWIGFunctionsaction=rols:main.ds&pList&rolType=Custom&RS_ID=%205

Here are some circumstances that may suggest child maltreatment has occurred or may be occurring:

- You see bruises or other injuries in multiple locations or on both sides of the child's body.
- You see or hear of frequent or unexplained injuries to the child, especially in a distinctive pattern (such as grab marks).
- The child expresses fear of remaining at home.
- The child lacks personal hygiene (dirty body and dirty/or torn clothing).
- The child exhibits or expresses sexual knowledge that is inappropriate for his or her age.

- The child is in pain and may have difficulty sitting or walking.
- The child expresses consistent hunger (the child pleads or begs for food).
- The child has untreated serious illnesses.
- The child is inappropriately left alone or unattended.

If you see, hear, or reasonably suspect these circumstances are occurring, call Child Protective Services immediately. You can also find a quality online training about the signs of child maltreatment at the Baltimore Child Abuse Center website: www.bcaci.org.

4. Boost Access to Resources

Your efforts here will differ depending on the family's access to the internet. For families having consistent internet access, the number of resources online is overwhelming. Literally hundreds of articles are published each day on everything from children and youth activities to adult self-care. In this context, identify an area of stress for the parent and offer to be an "electronic librarian" on that topic. Look at all the resources available on your identified topic, find the one or two that you think best meet the family's need and share it with the parent. This can be an enormous help as there is good information available but so much that already stressed parents feel overwhelmed trying to navigate it.

For families with limited or no internet access, you can serve as their digital explorer. Learn about the resources that will fit the most significant stress points and share that information via phone or 6-foot coffee clutches. Finally, do you have unused resources you could lend to the family? Items like board games, card decks, DVD players and movies, old Wii or other game systems, toys and books can make a remarkable difference by providing additional activity options.

If you yourself do not have internet access, contact your local department of social services and ask about the services available to meet the needs of the family you are working with and share that with them. A free directory assistance service to find phone numbers can be found by calling (800) 373-3411. If you have

a cell phone, use the 3-way call feature to contact the service provider while the parent you are helping is also on the line.

Where Do I Start?

Start with those closest to you both emotionally and physically. Family members, friends and neighbors are all great families to connect with and build your helping skills. Focus on being a support, listen for their stress points and help them problem solve solutions. You can be the buffer that helps families through this uniquely stressful time and prevents children and youth from experiencing harm.

Yes, it is an enormously challenging and stressful time. There exist many competing needs for your time and attention. I'm also aware that some of the recommendations above may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable actions to some of you. But both the present life experiences and future trajectory of our children are at stake. If each one of takes action to support families we protect children, reduce trauma and strengthen families. I'm reminded of the quote by Robert F. Kennedy that seems to fit so well:

“Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Let's start to send out our ripples now.