**Vulnerable children are at risk of abuse during coronavirus crisis.
Let’s protect them.**

BY SHEILA BOXLEY AND MICHELLE CALLEJAS *SPECIAL TO THE SACRAMENTO BEE*

Just days after schools, child care and after-school programs closed, child abuse reports in Sacramento County and across California drastically decreased. In Sacramento County, calls to the [Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline](https://www.saccounty.net/services/Pages/Child-Abuse-Hotline.aspx) have decreased by about 50%.

This is not good news; it is cause for deep concern. Vulnerable children at risk of abuse are “sheltering at home,” [possibly under extremely difficult conditions.](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/opinion/coronavirus-child-abuse.html)

Even at the best of times, parenting is hard, and during a crisis [can be completely overwhelming](https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/15/health/parenting-emotional-labor-coronavirus-wellness/index.html), currently at a magnitude few of us have ever experienced. With the added anxiety of loved ones contracting the disease, fear of losing jobs and income, inability to pay rent, severed community connections, and the need to survive in small, cramped spaces, family stress and tension are at an all-time high.

Without the protective eyes of the teachers, coaches, and doctors, and others who work with vulnerable children every day, we are not learning about what may be happening behind closed doors. Now, more than ever, these children need caring adults, like neighbors and other family members, to pay attention and take action. Now is the time to reach out and help families in this time of stress. It’s time to speak up, to pick up the phone. It is “your business”.

As we can see from what’s happening across the world, protecting children is everybody’s business and we are all accountable. On Friday, April 3, the United Nations reported that “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.”

First, be a part of preventing child abuse by [staying in touch with families](https://preventchildabuse.org/coronavirus-resources/) with children. Be a listening ear, send a care package, talk to the children. And if you hear a child screaming or crying frequently, notice young children being left alone for long periods of time, or suspect children are being harmed in any way, call for help.

You do not need proof of your suspicion. Even though it’s hard, especially during these challenging times, we all must make protecting children our business.

        If you suspect that a child is being abused, contact your local child welfare agency. Make a confidential report anytime by calling Sacramento County’s hotline at (916) 875-5437. If there is an emergency or you believe a child or someone in their household is in imminent danger, call 911.

        When a family is struggling, reach out safely, and see how you can help.

        If parents need support and do not know where find help, they can call the Information and Referral Line at (916) 244-1900.

Innocent children will be hurt unless we take a stand and help.

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