

APSAC ALERT



Volume #11 Issue #3

Special Points of Interest:

- *The drastic changes to families' financial well-being, community resources, and overall concern for society pose a significant risk for child well-being.*
- *Child-serving agencies can stay connected with vulnerable families, provide assistance with obtaining public services, and advocate for families at the policy level.*
- *Children will bear a significant burden of the consequences of this public health crisis; however, rapid responses by decision makers in child-serving agencies can help reduce the risk of child neglect.*

Practical Steps to Prevent Child Neglect in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

Neglect poses great harm to children: It consistently accounts for 70% of child maltreatment referrals annually and is the form of maltreatment most associated with child death (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Helping to stabilize families' financial resources may be the single most effective child neglect prevention strategy (Bullinger, Feely, Raissian, & Schneider, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in severe and sudden unemployment, school closures, public office closures, and limited hours for accessing essential services, such as grocery stores

("Coronavirus spreads," 2020). These extreme social distancing measures mean hundreds of thousands of vulnerable children face a heightened risk of neglect. Caregivers, and single caregivers in particular, may be unable to provide sufficient resources and supervision, may have difficulty adjusting to the logistics and demands of radically different work and childcare arrangements, and may no longer be able to rely on grandparents for additional care. The pandemic's financial and social strains pose a significant risk for child neglect.

Unfortunately, children's needs have not been at the forefront of discussions about mitigating the pandemic's negative consequences. Discussions concerning families' evolving needs as the pandemic worsens and lingers are also needed. Families are in an unprecedented crisis; decision-makers have a duty to help them survive it—at every stage.

We describe potential challenges families will face and specific actions

decision makers and frontline staff in child-serving agencies should consider in order to assist families at each stage of the pandemic.

Immediate Needs

Immediate needs are straightforward: stabilize income and fill childcare gaps. Low-income families are likely in one of two situations: first, they may not be working and are unpaid or awaiting unemployment benefits. Second, they may be in an “essential” job, ranging from food service to healthcare, but schools and typical childcare arrangements are unavailable. Both types of families are struggling. Unemployed families are struggling to pay bills. Working families are struggling to provide safe and consistent childcare while they work. Many families were already struggling to provide necessities, sufficient nutrition, housing, basic healthcare, and other essentials. The pandemic has critically increased the severity of these needs.

Families need swift and creative solutions to help them access all available supports to reduce the risk of child neglect. For example, frontline staff can:

- Contact families virtually or by phone, review the eligibility criteria for all benefit programs, and help eligible families to complete enrollment forms for programs.
- Explain the “recovery rebate” and confirm that clients are receiving correct amounts.
- Keep families informed of new assistance and help to complete necessary forms.
- Help families file for eviction protection.
- Help families without transportation access food or necessities by arranging delivery or community drop-offs.
- Provide tax-filing assistance, particularly to access EITC benefits.
- Stay in regular touch with all families and create a contact plan for frequent moves.
- Help small-business-owning families connect to the CARES Act, additional business-relief programs, and business resources.

Decision makers can also advocate at state legislatures and with private foundations for cash assistance and flexible funds to meet immediate and dire needs.

Mid-Pandemic Needs

As the pandemic lingers, schools and childcare facilities remain closed, and only essential businesses remain open, support and donations may dwindle. Families who were able to get through the initial phase may develop more severe needs over time. At this stage, unmet needs will likely accumulate, unemployment will increase, savings will be depleted, and fewer emergency services will be available. In addition to ongoing efforts from the initial phase, during this stage frontline staff can:

- Continue to check on all current clients, because disconnected families may experience preventable crises.
- Help families locate medical and dental resources for urgent needs.
- Educate families about workers’ rights, particularly if they are pressured to return to work.

Decision makers can also advocate at all policy levels for families’ needs to be prioritized and met. For example, there may be additional stimulus bills. Advocating for economic provisions to support families during and after the pandemic is a key strategy to preventing child neglect.

For instance, private childcare facilities may be forced to close. However, childcare facilities will be essential in the post-pandemic period and may need financial assistance to reopen promptly. Additionally, standing federal legislation like the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) may be reauthorized during this time or shortly thereafter, and this crisis may present an opportunity to improve the overall child welfare system and introduce crisis response mechanisms.

Post-Pandemic Needs

We do not know when the acute public health phase of the pandemic will be over; however, we can anticipate some challenges. For many families, the stress of the pandemic’s economic disruption will continue long after the health crisis is controlled. All families will need to establish new routines, which might include new jobs, new childcare arrangements, and new communities. Children’s education and preventive healthcare will be in “catch-up” mode. New challenges, like anxiety and acute

financial or emotional stress, may lead to spikes in child maltreatment. During this phase frontline staff can:

- Help families find jobs and stay enrolled in safety-net programs.
- Work with families to address medical, educational, and mental health needs.
- Be patient with families and continue to provide as much support as possible, as recovery will be slow and difficult for many.

Decision makers can also advocate for keeping as many people employed as possible and rapidly reopening childcare facilities when safe.

Conclusion

Rapid responses by child-serving agencies can help reduce the very real risk of child neglect COVID-19 presents to children. Yet even the needs mentioned here are conservative, in that they assume that families stay relatively healthy, no one needs intensive medical intervention, and a family member does not die. Additionally, these recommendations do not address or account for the challenges in managing changes in workforce capacity and staff needs. For example, some staff—like their clients—are likely to experience financial hardships and childcare challenges. Agencies must

anticipate and prepare for these scenarios as well. Our nation's most vulnerable families need us to rise to this challenge and make a strategic plan for every stage of the pandemic.

References

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News from APSAC

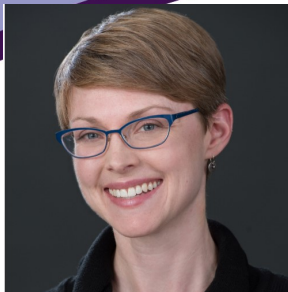
The 2020 APSAC Colloquium in Rescheduled to September 21-24 in New Orleans

When considering all necessary issues APSAC leadership reached the conclusion that the June 7–11 date brought too many uncertainties and, given the COVID-19 pandemic, was too soon for the 2020 Colloquium. Fortunately, the Sheraton was able to accommodate APSAC with dates later in the year when we hope it is a safe time to travel and gather (with appropriate social distancing). The Colloquium is now scheduled for September 21-24, 2020 - at the Sheraton New Orleans in New Orleans, LA. Details for pre-conference institutes and events are still being finalized. Information including exact dates and times will be on the [APSAC website](#) as details are finalized.

APSAC Provides Online Resources During the COVID-19 Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic is creating many new challenges for professionals working in child maltreatment. APSAC is helping professionals overcome these challenges by increasing our online resources and providing more opportunities for collegial connection and professional development in the digital world. [Visit our website](#) for [COVID-19 resources and upcoming Zoom chats](#), [upcoming webinars](#), and information on our [online course](#), and check back often for more great resources.

About the Authors



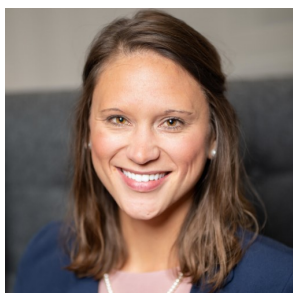
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All authors are Doris Duke Fellows for the Promotion of Child Well-Being and had equal contribution to this article.



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