

ADVOCACY MESSAGES FOR CHILD PROTECTION ACTORS: PRIORITIZING CHILD PROTECTION IN COVID-19 RESPONSE PLANS

Emergency responses to COVID-19 are intended to speed containment of the virus but can have devastating consequences for children if they ignore unique risks to their safety and fail to include specific child protection provisions. Protecting children from violence and exploitation can be life-saving during a humanitarian crisis like COVID-19, and governments should prioritize it as such. Effective COVID-19 response plans must adequately fund and resource measures to ensure children's safety and well-being.

During COVID-19 outbreaks, children face increased risk of violence and threats to their safety.

- Children, particularly those living in countries with limited access to COVID-19 treatment, risk losing their parents or primary guardians, leaving them vulnerable and alone.
- Children who lack sufficient supervision because caregivers are sick (or caring for the sick) are at greater risk of suffering harmful accidents and injuries.¹
- Loss of income due to confinement, sickness or death of a major breadwinner may push children out of school and into labour, child marriage, exploitation, or recruitment by armed groups.
- Girls, children of diverse sexual orientation, children with disabilities, institutionalized or detained children, children on the streets or on the move, and those in refugee camps are among those particularly vulnerable to violence and exploitation.
- Children, particularly girls, face greater risk of sexual and gender-based violence, including rape, domestic abuse and sexual exploitation.
- Children from marginalized groups in particular are often suspected of being infected and are targeted for stigmatization and discrimination.²

Emergency responses to COVID-19 can exacerbate risks to children's safety and well-being.

- Responses to COVID-19 have economic impacts that can push vulnerable, low-income families further into poverty, forcing parents and caregivers to resort to supplementing family income, such as forcing children into manual labour or sexual exploitation.
- Closing schools to prevent the spread of COVID-19 reduces children's access to protective services.³
- Public health alerts and procedures can create fear and panic if not conveyed with language children readily understand.
- Quarantine measures can increase psychological and psychosocial distress, exacerbating mental health problems for children and caregivers.⁴
- Confinement contributes to stress in the home and can increase the risk that children observe or experience greater levels of domestic and gender-based violence.⁵
- Children under confinement orders spend more time online, often without supervision or access to protective services, which increases their exposure to online bullying, abuse and sexual exploitation.⁶

¹ Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, [Technical Note: Protection of Children during the Coronavirus Pandemic](#), Version 1, March 2020.

² See United Nations Coordinated Appeal, [Global Humanitarian Response Plan: COVID-19](#), April-December, 2020.

³ See UNICEF, [Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-2019\) Global Response](#), UNICEF.org > HAC 2020 Home, 25 March 2020.

⁴ Brooks, Samantha K., et al., "The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence," *The Lancet*, 14 March 2020.

⁵ See Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE PA), [Protection from domestic violence urgently needed for women and children under stay-at-home orders, say OSCE officials](#), OSCEPA.org > Home / New & Media / Press Releases 2020, 2 April 2020.

⁶ ECPAT International, [Why children are at risk of sexual exploitation during COVID-19](#), ECPAT.org > Home > Latest News, 7 April 2020.

The protection of children is essential to any sound COVID-19 response and recovery plan.

- Protective services—from raising awareness of household hazards, to continuing to support and monitor children and families with protection concerns, to providing child-friendly public health alerts—can prevent children from suffering injuries or illnesses that require emergency care and divert critical resources from the COVID-19 response while potentially exposing children to the virus and creating vectors for it to spread more quickly.
- COVID-19 response plans that do not include provisions to meet the [Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action \(CPMS\)](#) put young children at risk of short and long-term developmental challenges, which can lead to a lifetime of psychological distress.
- In many of the communities most vulnerable to COVID-19, children constitute a large segment of the population and their survival, well-being and development is critical to effective emergency interventions and recovery.
- Healthy children, who can learn and develop at their full potential, let parents and caregivers return to productive life, and will be critical to full recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

Effective COVID-19 response plans must deem certain child protection services essential and furnish the social workers providing these services with personal protective equipment.

- Given the considerable adverse impacts COVID-19 will have on children, governments must ensure response plans provide access to effective, adequately resourced and rights-based protective, educational and mental health services.
- Governments should train health, education and social service staff to effectively identify, refer and respond to child protection risks that arise during COVID-19 responses.
- Governments must prepare to manage and mitigate the mental health and psychosocial impacts of COVID-19 responses by providing children and their caregivers with support that is age, gender and disability appropriate.
- Governments should put concrete measures in place to minimize child-family separation, including placing temporarily-separated children in safe, adequate, and family-based care, with the ability to communicate with their parents or primary caregivers.

Effective COVID-19 response plans must mainstream child protection across all sectors and include dedicated, flexible funding for protective measures.

- While child protection typically constitutes a mere 0.5% of total humanitarian funding, to protect children from the adverse impacts COVID-19, governments should ensure at least 4% of COVID-19 response budgets is dedicated child protection services.⁷
- Governments should prioritize direct cash transfers and adopt mechanisms to confirm that cash programs meet the basic needs of children and their families and discourage strategies to supplement family income through child labour, child marriage or sexual exploitation.
- While a singular focus on health may speed containment of COVID-19, governments must consider the long-term socioeconomic impacts on children and their families. No single sector operating in a crisis has all the knowledge, skills and resources to fully prevent risks and protect children. Governments should adopt a multi-sectoral approach that acknowledges our collective responsibility to safeguard children and the unique capacities of each sector to promote their safety and well-being.⁸

⁷ See Margot Theiry, et. al., *Unprotected: Crisis in Humanitarian Funding for Child Protection*, ACPHA, 2019.

⁸ See [Pillar 4](#) in Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action*, 2019 Edition, chapter 7.