

Children's Well-being and Protection in the COVID-19 Public Health Crisis

In addition to the immediate impacts on their health and that of their caregivers, the social and economic disruptions caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 present a range of other risks to children's well-being and protection. These may derive directly from the outbreak, from measures taken to respond to it and from wider economic and other disruption. The vulnerabilities of specific groups of children need to be taken into account.

Prime concerns relate to the interruption of children's safe and appropriate care, through the absence, incapacitation or loss of primary caregivers; exposure to negative coping strategies including violence and exploitation; and the negative impacts on the mental health and well-being of children and their caregivers of a rapidly evolving and uncertain situation. Children outside of family care, including street connected children, children on the move, children in institutions or in detention, are particularly vulnerable, including to discrimination within the community.

As a child rights organisation, Save the Children's full-spectrum preparation and response should focus on all aspects of children's well-being including and beyond health risks. It will be important to bring together messaging across health & nutrition, WASH, education and child protection sectors, ensuring that the focus on children's wellbeing and protection is clear and comprehensive. As a public health crisis that requires self-isolation, building strong communication systems and sharing information in an accessible and child-friendly way will be critical across all sectors

This child-focused holistic approach is one that Save the Children should also be taking into discussions and collaboration with Inter-agency fora as global guidance is developed.

Primacy of Care

A multi-sectoral approach to children's well-being must include a focus on the **primacy of the provision of safe and quality care** and the potential threats to ensuring that arising from the COVID-19 outbreak. Carers will carry the main burden of protecting their children from the virus as well facing the potential challenges that may come from the closure of schools, the loss of support from other family members if they fall ill, or their own need to attend work or maintain their livelihoods.

Particular attention may be required in cases like the following:

- Parents and other carers who fall ill themselves may struggle to provide proper nurturing care. Children being looked after by elderly caregivers may be a particular concern given the additional risks that older adults appear to face from COVID-19.
- Children may be at risk of separation from caregivers through preventative measures put in place to contain and outbreak.
- Parents and carers who need to go out to work while day-care centres and schools are closed may find themselves obliged to leave their children without proper supervision and exposed to heightened risks of exploitation or abuse.
- Parents facing a significant loss of income without a family or society-wide safety net may even feel forced to resort to negative coping strategies affecting their children including unsafe migration, child labour or child marriage.
- Maintaining support to vulnerable families where violence, neglect or abuse has been an issue and where the loss of support and supervision may increase the risks to children.

What kind of measures might mitigate these risks?

- Ensuring appropriate social welfare staff at hospitals to identify and better protect children separated from family members due to treatment.
- Mobilising a community response to monitor the situation of vulnerable households and offer support when needed
- Supporting caregivers without access to safe infection control materials for their home, resources for safe and healthy quarantine and/or access to information on how to care, protect and talk to their children?
- Developing a contingency plan for the care of children orphaned or left without appropriate care by severe cases of COVID-19
- Extend social protection schemes to at risk households facing temporary loss of income, and enable carers to offer continuing quality care.
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Susceptibilities of most vulnerable groups

Certain groups of children may face additional care and protection issues.

- Children in various forms of out of home care including street connected children, children in care institutions and children's homes, unaccompanied and separated children including those on the move, children in juvenile justice centres and other forms of detention.
- Children with disabilities who may be further isolated and/or neglected
- Migrating children and children from ethnic minority groups who are perceived as being a source of COVID-19 contagion and subject to discrimination and violence.
- Migrant and Displaced children in insecure settings and temporary camps

Particular attention will need to be placed to groups such as these in our responses.

Psychosocial Support

Depending on the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak it is likely to have a significant impact on the psychosocial state of many children. This may be affected by such factors as:

- Social media rumours and misinformation
- Anxiety about the impact of the outbreak on their family
- Anxiety communicated by their parents and carers
- Interruption to schooling
- Separation from friends and relatives and other social distancing measures
- Parents and carers removed from the home for medical care
- Loss of parents and carers, close relatives or friends

Mitigating strategies could include:

- Sensitization/training of multi-sector actors to ensure integration of child friendly messaging and services
- Child friendly information and communication to combat anxiety created by social media, rumour and a lack of access to authoritative information
- Age-sensitive public health messaging and procedures (tailored to children in particular).
- Support to parents and carers on how to provide psychosocial support to their children - what to watch for and how to respond.
- Support to communities to provide reassurance and support to children affected by separation or loss
- Incorporation of psychosocial support messaging in any distance learning platforms utilized, and sensitization of teachers to address psychosocial impacts during return to school activities

