

If Kids Were at the COVID-19 Policy Table.....

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It is widely reported that there has been a surge across the country in domestic violence since the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders have been [implemented](#). Hotlines like RAINN are reporting that [reports](#) directly from children have increased along the lines of 20%. Then there is the disquieting [statistic](#) that reports by mandated reporters of child abuse are way down, some 40-50%.

The widespread assumption is that since mandated reporters are not seeing kids, it is not that abuse has declined—just reporting. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that the stress of this era is increasing child abuse, which makes this significant downturn in reporting even more troubling.

Just as COVID-19 has laid bare cracks in our health system, it has trained a spotlight on children at risk at home. The child sex abuse scandals since 2000 have focused on institutions, as we have recoiled at beloved organizations letting our children be sexually abused – from the Roman Catholic Church to Penn State to USA Gymnastics and the Boy Scouts. There is a lot to be done to address the institutional cultures that made seriatim child sex abuse possible.

Yet, the frontier we now face as a country is abuse in the home, by family members. Child protective services in the states work everyday to protect children in these scenarios, but they need to know what is happening to help. We can train parents to protect their kids from wrongdoers in organizations, and we should. Mandated reporters—teachers, school administrators, police officers, doctors, and many others-- are in place to be a safety net for kids in any situation, but what happens when there is a catastrophe or, say, a pandemic, and those children are isolated at home with their perpetrators?

It looks like we need to consider several reforms based on what we have learned from COVID-19 stay-at-home orders:

First, every school age child needs a computer and effective wifi. There is no full isolation in an internet-connected world. Many children who have not been able to go to school have stayed in contact with their teachers, because they have computers and wifi. But for the children who lack technology, their stay-at-home experience puts them behind a wall the teacher can't see behind. We have circulated a survey to get a handle on how much of a problem this is. If you are a teacher or otherwise employed by a K-12 school, please fill out the survey [here](#)

Second, kids don't inherently know who to contact, and we have not created a system that is easy for them to use. Frankly, it is no picnic for the adult trying to figure out what to do about a child who is suffering abuse or neglect, as [this chart](#) about reporting abuse in sports shows. There should be a national, single number that can be texted, called, or emailed with an SOS from a child, whether it is abuse or neglect. That central calling system would then get the child's report/needs to the proper recipient, whether it is federal or state, government, social services

agency, or nonprofit. We have a plethora of good people doing wonderful things for kids across the country. It's time to streamline this important information for children to access.

Third, let's learn a lesson from this experience: children need to be at the policymaking table. With COVID-19, there was the typical rush to see what needed to be done for adults first. It's just a fact that adults prefer and protect adult interests. That instinct was reinforced by the fact that it seemed that children weren't at risk from this novel coronavirus, but the elderly are at deadly risk. We have learned in the meantime that COVID-19 isn't quite so benign to children, and, of course, that stay-at-home orders can pose huge barriers to children's health, safety, and thriving. The federal government and the states should have included children's needs earlier. Children, after all, compose 24% of the United States' population.

Children were property not too long ago. Now that they are persons with constitutional rights, it's time to expand the conference table and find them a seat. If they had been at the table years ago, just imagine how much better our world would be today.