

COMMENTARY

Cut off from support systems during pandemic, children at greater risk of abuse



by **Kim Abernethy**
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ChildSafe employees Rachel Battaglia and Cortney John work in the Family Resource Center where essentials and comfort items are distributed to abuse victims and families. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report

Over the course of the last year, our experience tells us an astoundingly high number of children have been physically and sexually abused. But we have not seen them or heard their voices. My colleagues in the world of

social services and I am aware that COVID-19 unleashed economic turmoil and disconnection from support systems in families across the country. Such conditions can stimulate violence in families where it did not exist before and worsen where it was already present. Factor in that on average it takes a child 2 1/2 years to disclose their abuse, and the impacts from the pandemic on our children will be severe and long-lasting.

What continues to worry those of us who advocate for children is the limited in-person connections we have had with children since March 2020. We know thousands of children have been confined in households with intensified issues of domestic violence, parental mental health, alcohol and substance abuse, all factors for increased risks to children.

And teachers, the number one reporters of child abuse, will have to wait through the summer to see children who have not physically attended school, return in August. Nearly 18 months without physical observation and interaction is an unusually long timeframe that could have disastrous consequences for our community's children.

Because ChildSafe is an essential service provider, we did not stop seeing children and families during the pandemic. We continued providing our specialized forensic interviews, wrap-around care, and clinical therapy but with modifications to ensure access to services. We moved our counseling and multidisciplinary team meetings to online platforms and created virtual training for educators and human services professionals on identifying and appropriately responding to signs of abuse and neglect in a virtual setting.

Since last March, we have served 4,904 clients, down by 16% from last year at this time because so many children have been at home and not seen by others. Of the children ChildSafe served last year, 76% were victims of sexual abuse and over 50% were under age 13.

To drive awareness about the pervasiveness of child sexual abuse and help combat it, we recently launched our [People of Courage](#) initiative. Participants have committed to becoming informed about the issue and being the voice for children who have none. Here are a few facts:

- 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 7 boys will be sexually abused before age 18; only 1 in 10 ever report the crime, making child sexual abuse among the biggest underreported public health issue in the U.S.
- More than 90% of the time, sexual abuse of a child is committed by a person the child knows, loves, and trusts.
- Rates of child sexual abuse are 5 times higher for children in families with low socioeconomic status. With 20% of our community's children born into poverty, child sexual abuse is one of the most pressing issues facing Bexar County.

Child abuse exploits and damages innocent children and has dire, life-long consequences that include negative health outcomes, mental health problems, learning disabilities, increased risk of substance abuse, increased likelihood of arrest for juvenile crime and perpetuation of violence.

Everyone can do their part to help prevent child abuse.

If you suspect child abuse, you must report it so professionals can do their jobs. When a child discloses abuse to you, they are placing an extreme amount of trust in you, and if you elect to not report that abuse for whatever reason, that child may never tell again. Take note of important things a child says, and don't ask prying questions, then report what you have.

You may change the entire trajectory of a child's life with a simple phone call to statewide intake or to the police. Call Texas Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-252-5400 or **report online**. For emergencies call your local law enforcement agency or 911 immediately if you suspect a life-threatening situation. Trainings offered by nonprofits share ways to recognize and report child abuse. ChildSafe offers free, **online training** for parents and caregivers here.

Learn about background check policies for employees and volunteers in organizations in which you and your family members participate. What is the background check policy for coaches of your child's club sport or

summer camp? Predators seek to be near children and will mask themselves accordingly.

Learn about the six stages of grooming, a process sexual predators use to target and gain the trust of young victims to draw them into a secret sexual relationship. All parents and child-serving professionals should understand and be able to recognize grooming. You can learn more [here](#).

Finally, give time and support to your local agencies. Child abuse is a systemic issue rooted in generational and community violence. It generally appears in high-stress situations or situations where families lack access to services, and therefore children wind up isolated and left alone with perpetrators.

Make no mistake, child abuse and neglect are everywhere. It is so pervasive, no one organization can stop it. But if each and every citizen understands the issue, learns to recognize the signs, and how to report it, we can collectively drive down the child abuse rate in San Antonio, while protecting and nurturing our youngest citizens.

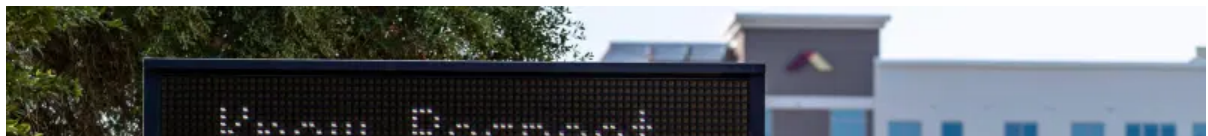
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