



Expanding Role and Reach: A Community-Centered Child Welfare Response to COVID-19¹

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SUMMARY BRIEF

Current Context and Impact of the Pandemic

The legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic will be a significantly elevated need for core child welfare services over the months and years to come. COVID-19 has created a high degree of anxiety, stress, grief, and loss. It has reduced access to support networks at a time when families need them most. Public health measures like physical distancing and quarantine may be necessary, but their unwanted consequences - unemployment, financial and food insecurity, mental illness, family violence, and separation from family and culture - undermine child safety and well-being.

A review of the literature indicates that the impact of the pandemic on children, youth and families includes:

- Increased child abuse and neglect
- Disruptions in cultural knowledge due to family separation and isolation
- Deterioration of mental health due to a combination of uncertainty, isolation and trauma
- Increased domestic violence, with fewer opportunities to reach out for help
- Deterioration in economic and food security
- Disproportionate suffering for families living in poverty or with housing insecurity.

We know from past pandemics that COVID-related suffering will require attention and support long after the virus itself is brought under control. Studies have found, for instance, that the mental health impacts of quarantine can last up to three years². Direct comparisons to other pandemics, however, do not take us far. Current responses like lockdowns and social distancing have been more widespread and long-lasting than with other modern pandemics.

We do know that there is not yet an end in sight. Until a vaccination or treatment is widely available, it is likely that there will be ongoing infections, physical distancing and periodic lockdowns. Once the pandemic itself is over, secondary impacts like economic recession will continue to impact well-being. Recovery from mental illness and the traumatic aftermath of gender-based violence and abuse and neglect can take years. There is emerging recognition that managing the fallout is likely to require a long term response.^{3,4}

Child welfare agencies will need to adapt to this new context, and effective adaptation appears to entail the expansion of the child welfare role and engagement in hitherto unlikely community partnerships.

Implications for Practice

1. Broader understanding of child welfare

An effective response requires the child welfare system to move further away from a narrow focus on child protection incidents and service referrals towards a broader understanding of the child welfare worker's role. This includes significant outreach efforts, public education and dexterity with



a wider array of tools to reach and support families. It involves increasing capacity to provide information, screening and emergency support related to mental illness and domestic violence. We are seeing the beginnings of a shift in the child welfare system's focus: from reacting to incoming reports and requests to proactively reaching out to families in a response that puts mental health, material living conditions and the safety of all family members squarely in view.

2. Increased importance of advocacy and concrete supports

The impact on families of pandemic-related poverty and food insecurity suggests that advocacy for, or the direct provision of, financial, housing and food aid might become more important. Online access can be added to this list: reliance on virtual services during this crisis means every safety plan moving forward should ensure that families have access to the internet and the tools to use it.

In British Columbia, pandemic-related child welfare policies and stories of emerging practices show that COVID-19 is already pushing agencies in this direction. Child welfare workers are systematically reaching out to families to conduct wellness checks. They are using their helping skills to listen, validate, support coping, and connect families to resources. They are delivering gift baskets and children's activities on special occasions like Mother's Day and children's birthdays. They are providing access to finances and food and meeting other concrete needs. They are using video-based tools to conduct child protection interviews, view family homes, share information with the child's community, assess caregivers, visit with children in care, host youth groups and ensure continuing access between children and kin.

3. Creative collaborations

New community partnerships will be necessary if workers are to respond nimbly to the breadth and depth of COVID-related need. Our task now is to forge pandemic responses that acknowledge the continuing importance of physical health, while honouring the extent to which family well-being also relies on psychological, cultural, and relational safety. Achieving this will require collaboration with both familiar and unfamiliar partners.

4. New challenges

Even before the pandemic hit, child welfare workers could best be described as overburdened. An effective pandemic response will require child welfare leadership to consider how to make space for workers to take on a broadened role. Possibilities include reducing expectations related to documentation, reporting, or even commuting to work. If we expect workers to ask difficult questions about mental health and experiences of violence and poverty, we must give them time to listen to the answers.

The pandemic is pushing us towards a more community-centered model of child welfare; our challenge at a time of collective suffering is to creatively engage the full range of community resources in response.

¹ Oliver, Carolyn, Expanding role and reach: A community-centered child welfare response to COVID-19 (May 31, 2020). Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3618161>

² Hossain, M.M., A. Sultana, and N. Purohit, Mental health outcomes of quarantine and isolation for infection prevention: A systematic umbrella review of the global evidence. 2020.

³ Troyer, E.A., J.N. Kohn, and S. Hong, *Are we facing a crashing wave of neuropsychiatric sequelae of COVID-19? Neuropsychiatric symptoms and potential immunologic mechanisms.* Brain, Behavior, and Immunity, 2020: p. S0889-1591(20)30489-X

⁴ Holmes, E.A., et al., *Multidisciplinary research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic: a call for action for mental health science.* The Lancet Psychiatry, 2020.