

RESPONSE TO COVID-19

**UNICEF and Religious Leaders' Partnership to
Respond to Increased Risks of Violence
Against Children in Georgia**





INTRODUCTION

In response to the global pandemic of COVID 19, schools and preschools in Georgia have been closed. Given the state recommendation on physical distancing, children are spending most of their time at home. Parents and caregivers are at home with their children. Adults mostly are stressed, frustrated, concerned, worried, lots of them have lost their jobs and income or fear they will do it. All mentioned factors make parents vulnerable and it might be very difficult for them to stay calm and treat their children properly. New environments will likely increase physical and psychological violence against children. To avoid the risks of violence, parents need to be strengthened with more positive parenting tips. They should be told, that they are understood, they may feel overwhelmed and frustrated, finding it difficult to deal with increased responsibility and daily activity. Support, listening, and non-judgmental approach can be very supportive for them in current situation.

In turn, children need to play to grow and develop, spend quality time with their parents, spend their free time, spend more time online while at home, which increases the risks of violence: oppression, age-inappropriate information, risky relationships with strangers.

To avoid these risks, professionals recommend that we give parents and children knowledge and techniques that will help them to cope effectively with the situation.

Religious leaders contribute to empowering parents and children every day. Besides social distancing, they maintain contact with their parishioners. Parents may address them with concerns that they have difficulties to deal with anger, or don't know how to manage children properly to maintain harmonious relationships between family members.

Helpful information for Religious Leaders in empowering parents and advising children:



TIPS FOR PARENTS

Create a flexible but consistent daily routine: Firstly, advise parents to make a schedule for them and their children that will have blocks for structured activities and free time as well. This can help children to feel more secure and better behaved. Children or teenagers can help themselves to plan the daily routine – like making a school timetable. Children will follow these rules better if they're involved in making of it. Include physical exercise in each day – it helps children with dealing stress and reducing overwhelmed energy ant home.

Make it fun: offer your children all household duties, dinner preparation, room cleaning, and other things that can get them involved. You can make these activities as games and thus fill children's free time and improve their life skills.

Verbalize the behavior you want to see: Use positive words when telling your child what to do; like "Please put your clothes away" (instead of "Don't make a mess").

It's all in the delivery: Shouting at your child will just make you and them more stressed and angrier. Get your child's attention by using their name. Speak calmly.

Praise your children when they are behaving well: Try praising your child or teenager for something they have done well. They may not show it, but you'll see them doing such good things again. It will also reassure them that you notice and care.

Get real: Can your child actually do what you are asking them? It is very hard for a child to keep quiet at home for a whole day but maybe they can keep quiet for 15 minutes while you are on a call.

Help your teen stay connected: Teens especially need to be able to communicate with their friends. Help your teen connect through social media and other safe distancing ways. This is something you can do together, too!

It is important to mention, that the Code on the Rights of the Child directly prohibits the corporal punishment, severe and humiliating punishment, or any other form of child abuse by

a parent or other responsible persons as a measure of discipline.



REDUCE INTERNET RELATED THREATS

During the physical isolation children and adolescents spend more time on the internet. Based on different countries' experience, there are increased online violence cases in this process. Risks that young people may face:

- Disclosure of personal information;
- Access to child-inappropriate information, pornography, obscene words, material containing violence;
- Sexting - sending sexually explicit messages, photos and videos via phone or computer. Which can be blackmailed;
- Bullying.

In order to avoid the dangers associated with the use of the Internet, firstly rules should be established.

- Agree with children when they can use the Internet;
- Parents better have frank and friendly conversations with their children about risks;
- It is desirable that there is a rule at home that the Internet can be used only in a common space where family members are also present (valid mostly for young children);
- Promote your support, tell your children that no matter what, you'll be with them and help with the difficulty, and that it's important to know what they are worried about and do so in the event without excessive notice and noise.



WARNING SIGNS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Warning signs of emotional abuse:

- Excessively withdrawn, fearful, or anxious about doing something wrong
- Shows extremes in behavior (compliant, demanding, passive, aggressive)
- Doesn't seem to be attached to the parent or caregiver
- Acts either inappropriately adult (taking care of other children) or inappropriately infantile (thumb-sucking, throwing tantrums)

Warning signs of physical abuse:

- Frequent injuries or unexplained bruises, welts, or cuts
- Is always watchful and "on alert," as if waiting for something bad to happen
- Injuries appear to have a pattern such as marks from a hand or belt
- Shies away from touch, flinches at sudden movements, or seems afraid to go home
- Wears inappropriate clothing to cover up injuries, such as long-sleeved shirts on hot days

Warning signs of child neglect:

- Clothes are ill-fitting, filthy, or inappropriate for the weather
- Hygiene is consistently bad (unbathed, matted and unwashed hair, noticeable body odor)
- Untreated illnesses and physical injuries
- Is frequently unsupervised or left alone or allowed to play in unsafe situations
- Is frequently late or missing from school

Warning signs of sexual abuse in children:

- Trouble walking or sitting
- Displays knowledge of sexual acts inappropriate for their age, or even seductive behavior
- Makes strong efforts to avoid a specific person, without an obvious reason
- Doesn't want to change clothes in front of others or participate in physical activities
- Runs away from home
- Risk factors for child abuse and neglect



WHILE ABUSE AND NEGLECT OCCURS IN ALL TYPES OF FAMILIES, CHILDREN ARE AT A MUCH GREATER RISK IN CERTAIN SITUATIONS.

Domestic violence. Even if the abused parent does their best to protect their children, domestic violence is still extremely damaging. Getting out is the best way to help your children.

Alcohol and drug abuse. Parents who are drunk or high may be unable to care for their children, make good parenting decisions, or control often-dangerous impulses. Substance abuse can also lead to physical abuse.

Untreated mental illness. Parents who are suffering from depression, an anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, or another mental illness may have trouble taking care of themselves, much less their children. A mentally ill or traumatized parent may be distant and withdrawn from their children, or quick to anger without understanding why. Treatment for the caregiver means better care for the children.

Lack of parenting skills. Some caregivers never learned the skills necessary for good parenting. Teen parents, for example, might have unrealistic expectations about how much care babies and small children need. Or parents who were themselves victims of child abuse may only know how to raise their children the way they were raised. Parenting classes, therapy, and caregiver support groups are great resources for learning better parenting skills.

Stress and lack of support. Parenting can be a very time-intensive, stressful job, especially if you're raising children without support from family and friends, or you're dealing with relationship problems or financial difficulties. Caring for a child with a disability, special needs, or difficult behaviors is also a challenge. It's important to get the support you need, so you are emotionally and physically able to support your child.



TIPS FOR CHILDREN

It's easy to get cabin fever when children who were used to run around and hang-out with friends are stuck indoors with their parents and watch the world changing drastically. It's a source for anxiety and tension. There might be extra tension in their family, but faith leaders, psychologists, trusted adults are people who can help them. Children need to know that they are not alone, and these certain people are always ready to listen them and support. It's also good for children to know that they themselves can be of great help for elderly people - grandparents, neighbors and relatives, who mightn't have skills to use new technology to communicate with the rest of the world.

Children should know that it is not acceptable for an adult or peer to commit violence against them. All children have the right to be raised in a peaceful and safe environment. Violence against them is never their fault. For help they can call 116 006.

Here are tips for keeping children's spirits up as much as possible in isolation period.

Exercise - It's suddenly much harder to move around, but it's important to stay physically active, not just for children's body, but for your mental health, too.

Eat well and stay hydrated - Eat a balanced diet. Be involved in planning meals and in helping adults to prepare them. Make sure children drink lots of water, too.

Do something creative - Whether it's drawing, writing, playing music, knitting, or building a bus out of cardboard boxes, you can lose yourself in creative activity, experiencing a supercharged state of concentration and freedom that's been described as "flow". It doesn't matter how rubbish the final product is (though you probably want it to be good) – it's all about the process.

Connect - This is probably the most important thing of all. Human beings are profoundly social, and this pandemic is requiring us to stop socializing. Just because we're not in the same physical space as other people, though, it doesn't mean we can't be with them in other ways. Take time to keep in touch.

If you're still anxious - Try everything above and if none of that works, do something you can control. Write down what you're worried about – in a diary, say – and put it away.



REPORTING CASES OF VIOLENCE

As soon as you are informed about a probable or confirmed case of violence, you should advise the informer to address the hotline and/or submit it yourself in the following way:

Reports for violence against children should be submitted to the hotline: 116-006 (LEPL Agency Of State Care and Assistance for the (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking). Children can get assistance from a social worker on this line and in emergency cases they can be provided with a safe place.