Thousands of vulnerable children could face a heightened risk of abuse and neglect as coronavirus-related school closures keep them at home and away from school staff who make up the majority of those who report to abuse hotlines. Unfortunately, child abuse does not stop when there are disruptions in everyday life. In fact, abuse of children increases during times of stress due to uncertainty, financial burdens, and interruptions in childcare and school. This period of isolation, while necessary to keep everyone safe from COVID-19, is also a perfect storm for child abuse to go unreported.

Kids are at greater risk at home than anywhere else; 81% of perpetrators are either a parent or an unmarried partner of a parent (U.S. Administration for Children & Families, Child Maltreatment 2018). Here at Bivona, we are concerned for:

- Children who may be home with a physically or sexually abusive parent, older sibling or child or other caregivers. With 90% of sexually abused children knowing their abusers, vulnerability is now greatly pronounced. The latest national data showed a 6% increase in child sexual abuse cases for the first time in over 15 years.
- Children who may be left alone with someone a loving parent believes is a safe person but is not.
- Children who are being abused and because school is out don’t have a safe adult to disclose their abuse.

During this unusual time, school staff have had to completely change the way they educate, interact and check in with students. Lesson plans, activities, and discussions look very different than they did just a few weeks ago. Even though students are not coming into buildings and classrooms, teachers, administrators, school counselors and other educational professionals still may be the only safe adult(s) children have access to, although now very remotely. Just as we have had to alter our communication modes to educate, we must also alter modes in order to continue to keep children protected.

Our partner in student safety education, Monique Burr Foundation, has released some excellent tips for schools in assisting children with psychological and personal safety:

- Ensure you have a system in place to check with students and assess they are safe in their homes. We know private conversations are limited at this time, so video chat and seeing children in their surroundings may provide a bigger picture. You can be checking:
  - Physical Appearance
  - What is the environment in the background like? What is going on in the background of a child’s screen?
  - Changes in behavior or even a child’s affect
  - Listen for strange outcries for help or distress
  - Lack of engagement
- Supervision – or lack of
  - Other helpful resources for engaging with youth can be found on our website: https://www.bivonacac.org/community

- All teachers, school counselors, administrators, and other school employees need to be educated about the signs of abuse and how to report it if they suspect it is occurring. Go to the Bivona website for a quick refresher: https://www.bivonacac.org/what-to-do

- Ensure students receive digital safety education to help them stay safe from online dangers during this time of increased technology use.

- If capable, make sure children know how to contact you or another safe adult themselves.

- Set up a code word or phrase that gives kids a quick and easy way to let you know if they are unsafe or need help.

- Also, encourage students to check in on their friends and peers – teach them what/how to report concerns.

If you were working with or concerned about a student prior to the COVID-19 shutdowns, please make sure a safe adult is checking in and following up with that student to the best of your ability. Here are some questions you might ask:

- “Tell me what’s it been like for you and your family since we’ve not been able to go to school?”
- “Tell me all about [a person, family, activities, etc.] at home”

Please remember your mandated reporter policy and protocols: if you see something, say something. Call the NYS CPS hotline (800-342-3720) or local law enforcement to report your concerns. You can also call Bivona at 585-935-7800 or go to https://www.bivonacac.org/what-to-do if you have questions or concerns about what to do as well as request more personalized support.

*Please do not interview children or contact the alleged offender – report your suspicions and let the appropriate authorities investigate.*

You can trust that Bivona is remaining mission-focused and will continue to help and restore hope for the most severely abused children in Monroe County. Please visit our website for more helpful resources and links to online training: https://www.bivonacac.org/capm; https://www.bivonacac.org/community