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Watching out for Wisconsin's children and families

(MADISON) – As Wisconsin keeps physically healthy by staying Safer at Home, children have fewer interactions with many of the professionals trained to observe and mandated to report suspected child abuse. It is critical now, more than ever, for families, friends, and neighbors to be aware of the signs of child abuse and neglect and to know how to report those signs to their local child welfare agencies.

Many families are experiencing increased stress during the COVID-19 pandemic for a range of reasons, including:

- Increased demand on parents' time and attention to care for their children due to closure of schools and childcare facilities;
- Financial hardship due to loss of pay or jobs;
- Illness or fear of illness of oneself or a family member;
- Increased isolation from informal support networks, such as extended family members and friends, who can provide respite and other supports for parents;
- Decreased access to usual recreational and social activities for both parents and children; and
- Increased unsupervised time on-line by children and youth, making them vulnerable to on-line sex exploitation.

These added stressors increase the risk of child abuse and neglect. The Department of Children and Families (DCF) [compiled a list of resources](#) that may be helpful for families facing added stress during the public health emergency.

"It cannot be said enough that we are in this together," said Department of Children and Families (DCF) Secretary Emilie Amundson. "A friendly check-in, no matter the format, can make a world of difference. And it's even more impactful for those who are struggling, distressed, or vulnerable."

The public plays a critical role in helping to prevent child abuse and neglect for vulnerable children and families. While fewer reports of suspected abuse and neglect are coming from educators, medical professionals, and other professionals who receive training on abuse and neglect and are required to report suspected incidents, referrals from families and the public remain largely unchanged. This largely mirrors the yearly trend the department sees during summer months, when school is out of session and families take vacations.

People are encouraged to watch for families who may be struggling and offer support in any way that is possible and safe. The department has [resources to help the public understand the signs of possible abuse and neglect](#) and recognize situations that may need to be reported. If you suspect abuse or neglect, it is critical that you contact your county's child protective services (CPS) agency immediately. Your [local CPS agency's contact information can be found online](#) or by calling the United Way's resource line by dialing 2-1-1.

Child safety is the top priority of the child welfare system – that remains unchanged during the current health emergency. The DCF, alongside its partners in local child welfare agencies and community-based providers, continues to respond to the needs of families facing increasing distress whose children are at greater risk of being abused and neglected. We all share the responsibility to watch out for vulnerable children in our communities particularly during this emergency, and we also share in the successes these efforts bring to supporting child and family well-being.

The department produced a [one-page flyer to help the public understand the signs of abuse and neglect and know how to report suspected incidents](#). To learn more about DCF, visit www.dcf.wisconsin.gov and follow @WisDCF on Twitter and Facebook.

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