



American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children

CENTER FOR CHILD POLICY



The American
Professional Society
on the Abuse of Children®

In partnership with



SCHOOL-AGE CHILD ISOLATION AND ABUSE: CHILDREN AT HOME DUE TO COVID-19

Coalition for Responsible Home Education

55 Roxbury St. #190174

Roxbury, MA 02119

info@responsiblehomeschooling.org

Center for Child Policy

American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children

1706 E. Broad St.

Columbus, OH 43203

info@apsac.org

May 2020

Challenges Posed by COVID-19 School Closures

In March 2020, schools across the country closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many child welfare professionals have expressed concern about what school closures mean for children who previously depended on schools for meals, as well as other services.

School closures also create other challenges:

- School closures prevent teachers from observing children for signs of child maltreatment.
- Social isolation is associated with increased risk of child fatality¹ and social distancing can remove children from existing support networks.
- Loss of income or concern about health creates an additional level of stress and may add to the challenges families face.

Most children at home due to school closures are still enrolled in school. However, there are commonalities between concerns for these students today and concerns for children who are homeschooled.

Social isolation is associated with increased risk of child fatality (1)

This white paper will cover:

1. What we know about school removal and child maltreatment.
2. Identifying maltreatment of isolated school-age children.
3. Promoting the wellbeing of isolated school-age children.

¹ Within Our Reach: A National Strategy to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities, Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities, 2016, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cecanf_final_report.pdf

What We Know about School Removal & Maltreatment

In recent years, child welfare professionals have focused increasing attention on parents' misuse of homeschool laws to remove their children from school in order to hide maltreatment or avoid truancy proceedings. While responsible homeschooling is positive and child-centered and can serve a child's best interests, there are also cases where parents use homeschool laws to isolate their children.

Efforts to help children isolated due to COVID-19 school closures may be productively informed by what is known about maltreated children who are isolated due to homeschooling

- A 2011 study reported that in Illinois and Iowa, 26% of students transferring to homeschooling had ongoing truancy problems.²
- In 2014, researcher Barbara Knox of the University of Wisconsin examined 28 cases of child torture and found that 47% of school-age victims were withdrawn from school to be homeschooled and 29% were never enrolled in school.³
- A 2016 study of an urban school district found that 30% of the students being homeschooled and their siblings had been maltreated by their caregivers at some point. Students were considered maltreated if child protective services made a finding of 'substantiated' abuse or neglect.⁴
- A 2018 study by the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) of Connecticut found that 36% of children withdrawn to be homeschooled lived in families subject to a prior child welfare report; 90% of cases involved substantiated or multiple reports.⁵
- A 2018 report by the Kentucky General Assembly's Education Assessment & Accountability Review Subcommittee found that nearly two-thirds of students removed from school to be homeschooled were previously chronically truant from school.⁶

In these cases, parents made the decision to disenroll their children from school in a calculated attempt to isolate them. Children isolated today due to school closures are not being isolated with this intent; their isolation is the result of public health measures taken to stem an epidemic. Still, efforts to help children who are isolated due to COVID-19 school closures may be productively informed by what is known about maltreated children who are isolated due to homeschooling.

² Stephen L. Endress, An Analysis of Illinois Practice of Non-Purposeful Homeschooling: Policy Recommendations for Illinois Lawmakers (Illinois State University, 2011). <https://pqdtopen.proquest.com/doc/917471199.html?FMT=AI>

³ Barbara L. Knox et al., Child Torture as a Form of Child Abuse, *Journ Child Adol Trauma*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2014), pp. 37-49. <https://www.rimaregas.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Knox-Torture-as-a-Form-of-Child-Abuse-article.pdf>.

⁴ Unpublished study, contact the Coalition for Responsible Home Education for more information.

⁵ Examining Connecticut's Safety Net for Children Withdrawn from School for the Purpose of Homeschooling, Office of the Child Advocate, April 26, 2018. <https://www.ct.gov/oca/lib/oca/OCA.Memo.Homeschooling.4.25.2018.pdf>

⁶ Homeschooling in Kentucky, Office of Educational Accountability, Legislative Research Commission, Research Report No. 454, Sept. 18, 2018. <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/lrc/publications/ResearchReports/RR454.pdf>.

Identifying Maltreatment of Isolated School-Age Children

Isolation of children creates a tremendous challenge for professionals seeking to identify maltreated children. Parents who abuse homeschool laws in order to hide maltreatment may isolate their children even from friends, neighbors, or relatives. This makes it nearly impossible to observe signs of harm. A similar phenomenon is occurring with children isolated at home due to COVID-19.

Families today are being asked to voluntarily self-isolate to stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many local child welfare agencies say child maltreatment reports are down⁷, suggesting that isolation induced by school closures and social distancing may be limiting child welfare professionals' ability to identify child maltreatment.

These children's isolation was accompanied by "an escalation of physically abusive events"
(8)

Social isolation can exacerbate abuse

In a study of child abuse so severe it could be termed torture, researcher Barbara Knox wrote that when the school-age child victims she examined were removed from school, their isolation "was accompanied by an escalation of physically abusive events."⁸

Several young adults who experienced child abuse report that the abuse was worse when they were educated at home than it was prior to their removal from school.⁹ "Every abuse had a magnified effect on us because there was no escape from our home environment," wrote one.¹⁰

⁷ Jenna Middaugh, "DHS concerned about drop in child abuse calls", KKTV 11 News, Colorado Springs, Colorado, March 27, 2020, <https://www.kktv.com/content/news/DHS-concerned-about-drop-in-child-abuse-calls-still-investigating-during-COVID-19-569158331.html>; Michael Torres, "Reports of child abuse are down," KSBY 6 News, Central Coast, California, April 3, 2020, <https://www.ksby.com/news/local-news/reports-of-child-abuse-are-down-but-agencies-believe-abuse-is-on-the-rise-due-to-covid-19>; Becca Robbins, "Child abuse reports down during COVID-19," Herald and News, Klamath Falls, Oregon, May 1, 2020, https://www.heraldandnews.com/news/local_news/child-abuse-reports-down-during-covid-19/article_7fb04e4d-a878-52d9-a7b8-165de4d1104a.html.

⁸ Barbara L. Knox et al., Child Torture as a Form of Child Abuse, *Journ Child Adol Trauma*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2014), pp. 37-49. <https://www.rimaregas.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Knox-Torture-as-a-Form-of-Child-Abuse-article.pdf>.

⁹ Jessica A., "Homeschool is an abusive parent's dream," Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-11R>; Jane N., "We were completely cut off from the outside world," *ibid.*, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-2fD>; Elizabeth W., "I am a survivor," *ibid.*, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-183>.

¹⁰ Kimberly R., "Every abuse had a magnified effect on us," Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-18w>.

Emotional abuse of children isolated at home

Social isolation can exacerbate emotional abuse by making it more totalizing. A young adult who was homeschooled beginning in the 4th grade reports that her parents' emotional abuse felt worse when she was homeschooled because there were no contrary voices:

“My dysfunctional and emotionally abusive home was my school, and vice versa”
(13)

“When I was in regular school, I had several adults telling me that I was smart, that I was kind, that I was capable of producing good things and of being a good person. When I was homeschooled, the main voice I had in my life was telling me that I was nothing, that I was ‘too stupid to do anything right,’ and that I was bad just because I happened to be alive.”¹¹

“My mother ... was unpredictable and frequently intrusive, hypercritical, and explosively angry,” another individual wrote of being homeschooled with an emotionally abusive parent.¹² “My dysfunctional and emotionally abusive home was my school, and vice versa,” a third recalls.¹³

In some cases emotionally abusive parents may grow frustrated while supervising their children's education: “When a person with a hair-trigger temper places themselves in the position of trying to teach something they aren't qualified to teach, to a frustrated child who isn't understanding the lesson ... you have a powder keg waiting to blow,” an individual homeschooled in an explosive and emotionally abusive home noted.¹⁴

Online teachers can play a crucial protective role

Access to an online teacher can prove essential to helping children in need. The following two cases are illustrative of the protective role of online teachers.

¹¹ Rai Storm, “There was no gratefulness. There was no escape. It just went on and on,” Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-2ep>.

¹² Lana Martin, “I suffered severe depression, suicidality, and disordered eating,” Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-18l>.

¹³ Joan T., “My dysfunctional and emotionally abusive home was my school,” Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-2LE>.

¹⁴ Lillie S., “I was never once asked if I felt safe at home,” Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-1Pj>.

- Three children enrolled in Ohio Virtual Academy emailed their online teacher and asked her to call 911 because they were being “tied to the beds and beat.” The children’s mother and her boyfriend pled guilty to child endangerment and other charges. The children were 8, 9, and 11.¹⁵
- An online teacher administering an 11-year-old girl’s required homeschool assessment noticed that she was acting odd and asked if she was okay. The girl reported that she was being starved. Authorities found her locked in a trailer, so malnourished she had to be hospitalized.¹⁶

While there are some technology constraints, most children isolated at home due to COVID-19 have access to an online teacher through distance learning programs. The impact online teachers can have on socially isolated homeschooled children suggests these teachers may play an important protective role during COVID-19 school closures.

Effective followup by school districts is important

School districts can play a crucial role in protecting children. The following two cases are illustrative of the role played by school districts:

- 10-year-old Janiya Thomas died after her Florida school district failed to adequately follow up when her mother did not submit a required homeschool assessment. More timely followup might have identified Janiya’s abuse.¹⁷
- When the family of an 11-year-old Ohio girl failed to submit an assessment, their school district persistently followed up. The family hired a teacher to administer the assessment online, leading to the identification of the girl’s abuse.¹⁸

Because children at home due to COVID-19 are still enrolled in school, school districts are both required and empowered to keep track of these children. Effective followup is important to protect child wellbeing.

***School districts
can play a
crucial role in
protecting
children (18)***

¹⁵ “Email for help leads to 3 Ohio child abuse arrests,” Associated Press, February 12, 2014, <https://news.yahoo.com/email-help-leads-3-ohio-child-abuse-arrests-184610321.html>.

¹⁶ “Authorities find malnourished girl after online teacher tip,” Associated Press, November 14, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/11/14/authorities-find-malnourished-girl-after-online-teacher-tip/>.

¹⁷ Kate Irby, “Mother of missing Bradenton girl Janiya Thomas charged with aggravated child abuse,” Bradenton Herald, October 19, 2015, <https://www.bradenton.com/news/local/crime/article40081161.html>.

¹⁸ “Authorities find malnourished girl after online teacher tip,” Associated Press, November 14, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/11/14/authorities-find-malnourished-girl-after-online-teacher-tip/>.

Neighbors, friends, and relatives can make a big difference

Neighbors, friends, and relatives can also play an important protective role. In these examples, maltreated children who were isolated by homeschooling sought help from neighbors or from friends they knew while enrolled in school.

- A 14-year-old girl who was being confined to a room and sexually abused by her father escaped and ran two miles to the home of a friend from when she was enrolled in school several years previously.¹⁹
- A severely abused 11-year-old boy escaped from his home and went to a neighbor's home for help.²⁰

These individuals may play a similar protective role in the lives of children isolated today due to COVID-19 school closures. Children home due to COVID-19 school closures are not being isolated with criminal intent, which may make it easier for neighbors, friends, and relatives to maintain contact with them; on the other hand, CDC-recommended social distancing practices will make such contact more difficult.

Recommendations for Identifying Child Maltreatment during COVID-19

- Teachers and school districts should maintain contact with children and families during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Students at home due to COVID-19 school closures need positive feedback and verbal encouragement from teachers and others.
- Teachers and schools should encourage parents who are supervising their children's education at home to be supportive with their children and understanding of their needs.
- Families should be encouraged to maintain social connections while still observing CDC-recommended social distancing practices. For example, adults can use video chats or other virtual platforms to connect with children outside of the home.

¹⁹ A. J. Flick, "Man guilty of 11 charges in captive-girl abuse case," Tucson Citizen, April 28, 2006, <http://tucsoncitizen.com/morgue2/2006/04/28/110448-man-guilty-of-11-charges-in-captive-girl-abuse-case/>.

²⁰ David Goodhue, "A boy was beaten, starved," Miami Herald, August 7, 2018, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/florida-keys/article216225375.html>.

Promoting the Wellbeing of Isolated School-Age Children

COVID-19 school closures have created an artificial level of social isolation that differs even from the day-to-day lives of many longtime homeschooling families. However, some homeschooled children are socially isolated. We can glean a number of lessons from these children's experiences that will help inform professionals on the challenges faced by children experiencing social isolation due to COVID-19 school closures.

Students need access to mental health care

One individual who was socially isolated while being homeschooled reported that: "As a teenager I was depressed. Doing nothing day after day, having nowhere to go, and having no real direction in life only made me feel more hopeless."²¹ Another wrote that she "had intense social anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem my entire growing up years."²² A third stated that she "was punished, shamed, and manipulated by my parents until I hated myself so much that I truly wanted to die."²³

Despite their elevated need for mental health care due to social isolation, these individuals frequently reported a lack of access to mental health care while being homeschooled.²⁴ One young woman reported that she had a mental health crisis in her late teens, brought on by isolation and abuse, but had "no access to counselors or any other sort of help."²⁵ She added that her parents treated mental health issues "as demonic."

Children at home due to COVID-19 school closures are experiencing a level of social isolation they have not experienced before; this may affect their mental health in varying ways. School districts, teachers, and other professionals working with children should ensure that students have access to the mental health care they need to make it through this period.

"As a teenager I was depressed. Doing nothing day after day, having nowhere to go ... only made me feel more hopeless." (21)

²¹ Sierra S., "My mom was obviously overwhelmed," Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-19l>.

²² Kimberly R., "Every abuse had a magnified effect on us," Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-18w>.

²³ Lynne A., "I wasn't protected at all," Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-1ye>.

²⁴ Lana Martin, "I suffered severe depression, suicidality, and disordered eating," Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-18l>.

²⁵ Jane N., "We were completely cut off from the outside world," Coalition for Responsible Home Education., <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-2fD>

Students need access to academic counselors

Homeschooled students frequently lack access to academic counselors and other professionals who could help prepare them for their next steps in life. Students at home due to COVID-19 school closures, particularly those preparing to graduate, may face similar challenges.

Homeschool graduates appear to be less likely than other graduates to attend college.²⁶ While there are likely many reasons for this and further research is needed, lack of access to academic counselors may be one cause. This finding makes it all the more important that school districts find ways to provide high school seniors with support from academic counselors to avoid similar problems with access to higher education. Such contact should meet the CDC's social distancing guidelines.

Students with disabilities need access to supports

Educating children with disabilities at home can be challenging for both parents and for students. While many parents who homeschool children with disabilities work to find their children the accommodations and services they need, social isolation can also render disabled children more vulnerable. A disproportionate number of entries in the Coalition for Responsible Home Education's database of severe and fatal homeschool abuse and neglect cases involve children with disabilities, suggesting that disability may be a risk factor for abuse.²⁷

Disabled children at home due to COVID-19 school closures have lost not only their access to service providers and trusted teachers but also the routines they were used to. School districts should ensure that children with disabilities are provided with support and services at home, in keeping with CDC-recommended social distancing guidelines.

Structure and routines may benefit students

A 2011 study found that homeschooled children whose parents provided more structured educational environments outperformed those whose

Some degree of structure and routine may be beneficial to students schooled at home (28)

²⁶ Homeschooling in Kentucky, Office of Educational Accountability, Legislative Research Commission, Research Report No. 454, Sept. 18, 2018. <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/lrc/publications/ResearchReports/RR454.pdf>.

²⁷ Disabilities, Homeschooling's Invisible Children, <https://hsinvisiblechildren.org/themes-in-abuse/disabilities/>.

parents provided less structured educational environments.²⁸ This finding suggests that some degree of structure and routine may be beneficial to students who are schooled at home.

In the case of children being schooled at home due to COVID-19 school closures, routine can involve daily school assignments, contact with teachers, or contact with friends and family members outside of the home, in keeping with CDC-recommended social distancing practices.

Internet access may be a positive mitigating factor

A study of formerly homeschooled LGBT young adults found that “internet access appeared to be a significant protective factor” and that “in the absence of in-person peers and school-based supports, access to internet resources and communities becomes even more essential.”²⁹

Many children now learning at home due to COVID-19 have turned to online gaming platforms and other ways to connect over the internet. While children should be taught the importance of internet safety and parents should keep up with their children’s online activities, students may benefit from a relaxing of family screen time requirements.

Students benefit from maintaining connections

Children who are educated at home have fewer friends than children who attend school, but the friends they do have become extremely important to them.³⁰ Homeschooled children frequently sustain friendships with children they do not see regularly, often communicating with them via email or, in some cases, through written letters. It is also important to remember that every child’s need for social interaction is different, and that what works for one child may not work for another.³¹

“Internet access appeared to be an important protective factor” (29)

²⁸ Martin-Chang et al., The impact of home schooling on academic achievement: Evidence from homeschooled and traditionally schooled children, *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2011), 195-202.

²⁹ Sloan Okrey Anderson and Benjamin J. Lough, Sexual and gender minoritized youth in Christian homeschools: Perceptions of climate and support, *Journal of LGBT Youth*, Dec. 2019.

³⁰ Richard G. Medlin, Homeschooling and the question of socialization revisited, *Peabody Journal of Education*, vol. 88, no. 3 (2013), pp. 284-97, <https://www.stetson.edu/artsci/psychology/media/medlin-socialization-2000.pdf>.

³¹ Homeschooling and Social Interaction Q&A, Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-Xk>.

Children at home during COVID-19 school closures need support for maintaining their friendships in ways that meet CDC-recommended social distancing practices. Parents and child welfare professionals may be able to foster children's sense of connection with others through online video conferencing platforms or regular virtual meetings with small groups.

Recommendations for Promoting Student Wellbeing during COVID-19 School Closures

- School districts should ensure that children who are at home during COVID-19 school closures have access to mental health care, academic counselors, and disability supports.
- Both school districts and parents should work to provide children with some level of structure and a sense of routine.
- School districts and child welfare professionals should work to ensure that children have access to the internet at home.
- Parents should be aware that, in the absence of in-person social interaction, children may use online gaming or smartphones to maintain important connections with friends and meet their need for social interaction. During COVID-19 school closures, students may benefit from parents relaxing screen time restrictions.
- School districts should ensure that both children and parents are educated on internet safety. Parents should ensure that children know how to keep themselves safe on the internet.

The Coalition for Responsible Home Education empowers homeschooled children by educating the public and advocating for child-centered, evidence-based policy and practices for families and professionals.

The Center for Child Policy translates research into usable resources that promote evidence-informed policy-making and best practices for all professions involved in the field child maltreatment.