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Practical Steps to Prevent Child Neglect in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

Neglect poses great harm to children: It consistently accounts for 70% of child maltreatment referrals annually and is the form of maltreatment most associated with child death (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Helping to stabilize families' financial resources may be the single most effective child neglect prevention strategy (Bullinger, Feely, Raissian, & Schneider, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in severe and sudden unemployment, school closures, public office closures, and limited hours for accessing essential services, such as grocery stores (Coronavirus spreads, "2020). These extreme social distancing measures mean hundreds of thousands of vulnerable children face a heightened risk of neglect. Caregivers, and single caregivers in particular, may be unable to provide sufficient resources and supervision, may have difficulty adjusting to the logistics and demands of radically different work and childcare arrangements, and may no longer be able to rely on grandparents for additional care. The pandemic's financial and social strains pose a significant risk for child neglect.

Unfortunately, children's needs have not been at the forefront of discussions about mitigating the pandemic's negative consequences. Discussions concerning families' evolving needs as the pandemic worsens and lingers are also needed. Families are in an unprecedented crisis, decision makers have a duty to help them survive it-at every stage.

We describe potential challenges families will face and specific actions decision makers and frontline staff in child-serving agencies should consider in order to assist families at each stage of the pandemic.