



Association of
Native Child and
Family Services
Agencies of Ontario



Ontario Association of
Children's Aid Societies

Information for Community Partners:

Supporting Children and Youth During the Pandemic

The closure of schools, childcare centres and many of the community spaces that children and families use means that access to support networks and helping adults outside the home is limited. If you are engaging children, youth, and families during the pandemic, know that this work is meaningful, and you are well positioned to help a child in need or be a support to families.

Emerging research about the impact of the pandemic indicates that families are struggling. Initial data suggests that family violence is increasing, and children and youth are experiencing the impacts of social isolation ([Advocates scramble to help domestic abuse victims as calls skyrocket during COVID-19](#)).

The Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) and the Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario (ANCFSAO) have developed this resource to assist our community partners to check in with the children and youth they serve, engage them in conversations about their holistic well-being and support them if they need to ask for help.

As always, if you have a concern about the safety or well-being of a child or youth under the age of 16, you have a duty to report it to your local Children's Aid Society or Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agency. Under the CYFSA (s. 125(4)), a person may report about a 16 or 17-year-old whom they suspect is in need of protection, although there is not a duty under the law to do so.

All Children's Aid Societies and Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies are providing services during COVID-19 pandemic.

A full list of contact information for local agencies is available here:

www.oacas.org/locate

Important Considerations

Overreporting of Indigenous and African-Caribbean Canadian Families in Child Welfare

The overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth is due to the historical injustices perpetrated against First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities by the Canadian government and provincial child welfare systems. These injustices include residential schools and the Sixties Scoop. These colonial legacies have resulted in community impairment, intergenerational trauma, and the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child welfare. The overrepresentation and inequity in outcomes for African-Caribbean Canadian families engaged with child welfare agencies is due to colonialism and systemic racism. African-Caribbean Canadian children are twice as likely to be reported to a Children's Aid Society but are no more likely than any other group of children to experience child maltreatment.

Stereotypes around poverty can also lead to overreporting. While poverty is a risk factor for children and youth, it is not a cause of child maltreatment.

How to Check Your Bias

Because community partners can be key connections in a child, youth or family's life, it is critical that they understand overrepresentation in the child welfare system and how it occurs.

Personal and systemic biases and stereotypes can impact a decision to call a Children's Aid Society. For example, behaviors of African-Caribbean Canadian children and youth in response to microaggressions, racial bullying by peers, or marginalization in the schools are sometimes incorrectly seen as reflecting issues within the home. Factors such as ethnicity, religion, family structure, and history influence family practices. Child-rearing practices vary across families and cultures. There are various parenting practices that are not concerning but may differ from your own. To check their biases, community partners are encouraged to "flip it." In other words, would they call if the individual was a white, affluent child? We also suggest conferring with colleagues to check against personal prejudice and discuss the situation from multiple perspectives.

Privacy and Duty to Report

A document called "[Yes, You Can. Dispelling the Myths About Sharing Information with Children's Aid Societies](#)", released by the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, is a critical reminder that a call to a Children's Aid Society is not a privacy violation when it concerns the safety of a child or youth. In fact, professionals who work with children and youth have a special responsibility, as stated in the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act*, to protect the safety and well-being of children and youth. More information about Duty to Report is available here: www.oacas.org/childrens-aid-child-protection/duty-to-report/.



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Strategies for Working with Children and Youth in Virtual Spaces

Check-in with children and youth.

1. Ask young people how they are managing and what they are feeling, using open-ended questions like:
 - How are you doing? Since COVID-19 started, have you noticed a change in how happy or unhappy you feel? Has there been a change in how you feel about yourself (self-esteem)?
 - Can you show me how you're feeling? Tell me a story about something that made you happy/sad or draw me a picture to help me understand what you're thinking?
 - What do you find hardest about COVID-19? What is the best part?
 - If you had 2 wishes right now, what would they be?
 - What hopes do you have for tomorrow?
2. Create opportunities for children and youth to tell you about their life at home through conversations, art and play, in both groups and individually if the setting allows.
3. Observe, listen, and pay attention to how the child/youth are doing: do they seem to be doing well? Do you have any worries or concerns about how they appear? If you knew them before COVID-19, have you noticed a difference in their affect or presentation? Do you see signs of mental health issues, abuse, and/or neglect such as:
 - physical injuries;
 - low or no participation over a significant period;
 - significant expression of worry or concerns;
 - no contact with a family after many repeated phone calls/messages;
 - flat affect or withdrawn presentation if there is video communication.
4. COVID-19 impacts Indigenous families and communities differently because of history of disease, child removal, and geographic confinement. Food security, connectivity, access to devices, family capacity, relationships with schooling and teachers, and social determinants of health can all impact involvement of children and youth in activities and programs. Many families have returned to their nations or may have moved in with extended family. When a family you are expecting to participate in your programming cannot be contacted after trying multiple means, a wellness check should be done. This can be supported by an Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agency (contact information for these agencies is available here: www.oacas.org/locate).
 - A list of resources available to support First Nations, Inuit and Métis families can be found here: www.oacas.org/covid-19-resources/#fnim

Let children and youth know you are here to help.

1. Remind young people that you are there for them and encourage them to reach out to you if they need support. Make sure they know how to reach you if they need to.
2. Acknowledge that it can be hard to ask for help but let them know it's important to do so. Acknowledge that they might not even know exactly what they need help with or that it might be difficult to define, but that you can figure it out together.
3. Share any additional supports available through your organization or from other community resources that can be accessed anonymously and outside of business hours. Refer to www.oacas.org/covid-19-resources/#youth for resources that might help.

Support children and youth to stay healthy and safe online.

1. Include information about online safety risks as well as strategies to help keep young people safe while online in your interactions/sessions.
2. Encourage young people to stay connected to their friends, communities, and identity-based groups through digital technologies and help them make these links.
3. Remind young people of the importance of finding a healthy balance by limiting their screen time and news intake. Please see www.oacas.org/covid-19-resources/#youth for resources that can help.

Promote positive mental health, self-care, and wellness.

1. Emphasize the importance of self-care during this time and talk about wellness if/when the opportunity presents itself.
2. Work with young people to identify strategies they can use for coping, managing stress, and regulating their emotions.
3. Talk about strategies for different ways of coping such as sleep, nutrition, mindfulness and physical activity.
 - [Sick Kids Learning Hub](#) has some tips and resources to help support children's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Engage families in the work.

1. Talk to families and caregivers about how things are going at home and acknowledge the stress and uncertainty that COVID-19 has caused.
2. Acknowledge that connecting virtually can be difficult for everyone and talk about ways that this new way of working could be optimized.
3. Encourage flexibility where possible and encourage caregivers to reach out if they require support or signposting to resources.

For help making the most of virtual visits, view our resource [Considerations for Virtual Work](#).