

## Keeping an Eye Out for Potential Child Abuse

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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The COVID-19 pandemic has meant changes, sometimes significant, to everyday life. This can mean sudden changes to routines, challenging circumstances, and perhaps financial strain that contributes to stress in households.

These difficult circumstances can be especially challenging for households already at-risk or parents and guardians with little or no support system, which, in turn, can contribute to an increased incidence of child abuse or neglect.

In Peoria, Ill., medical providers are still seeing the severe abuse cases that require a child be hospitalized. It's what they're *not* seeing that has them concerned.

"What we're not seeing and what we're really worried about are the children who would have been going to school, or would've been going to daycare, or grandma, grandpa - somebody else was noticing that there might have been injuries and were calling the hotline. We know that the calls are down by almost half to the hotline since we started the shelter in place. So those children we're not seeing and we're not getting calls on right now, that's concerning to us. Also sexual abuse that would've been reported by another relative or a teacher, we're not getting those calls because they're also not in school. So the social safety net for kids are not there right now."

Dr. Channing Petrak is the Medical Director of the Pediatric Resource Center, affiliated with OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois through the University of Illinois College of Medicine Peoria. During her 16 years in practice, she has never seen anything like the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, calling it unprecedented.

Dr. Petrak says the stay-at-home order works in an abuser's favor, since they like to isolate their victims and cut off contact with the outside world. She says while we talk about social distancing, we really should be physically distancing while still socially interacting. She urges everyone to check-in with family or friends and make sure everybody's doing okay, including the children.

Dr. Petrak says don't be afraid to call the [Child Abuse Hotline](#) at 800-25-ABUSE if you suspect abuse or neglect.

"Calling the hotline doesn't always mean big, huge, interventions. Sometimes it means services for that family that might need it right now a lot of the social safety nets are not functioning like they normally would, so you can't just go someplace and get something done. People need a little extra help and that can be a result of a hotline call."

Dr. Petrak also reminds parents that while it's okay – and perhaps expected – that kids are increasing their screen time to get through this stressful period, it can also open them up to those who prey on children through the internet. She encourages all parents to be more vigilant with tablet time and to make sure you know who your children are interacting with.

Also a good stress-reliever: exercise. Dr. Petrak says getting out and taking a walk can be good for everyone, just practice good social distancing and don't gather in a crowd.

In Peoria, the [Pediatric Resource Center \(PRC\)](#) is a service provider for the University of Illinois College of Medicine Peoria. Since its inception in 1993, more than 8,600 children from over 62 counties throughout Illinois and 8 other states have benefited from the services of the PRC.