

OPINION // COMMENTARY

# Commentary: Calls about child abuse drop; that's a red flag

By Kim Abernethy, For the Express-News

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ChildSafe's Cardboard Kids are reminders of the importance of seeing abused and neglected children — and reporting concerns. But that's been harder to do during this pandemic.

Photo: Staff file photo

In recent weeks, phone calls to the state's child abuse hotline have fallen substantially.

At first, this might sound like a good thing, but it worries child advocates who fear for the safety of children in our community. Since shelter-in-place orders began, many children are trapped in homes where substance and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and food insecurity are commonplace. They are not attending school physically, so teachers, the No. 1 reporters of child abuse, do not see the whole child, in person.

reporting, a tool used primarily by teachers and service professionals, is down 56 percent.

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In addition to the decline in calls to the state's child abuse hotline, the FBI released the following statement in regard to child abuse amid the pandemic: "Due to school closings as a result of COVID-19, children will potentially have an increased online presence and/or be in a position that puts them at an inadvertent risk. Due to this newly developing environment, the FBI is seeking to warn parents, educators, caregivers, and children about the dangers of online sexual exploitation and signs of child abuse."

Normally, ChildSafe's education and prevention team conducts in-person and online training for teachers and mental health professionals so they learn how to recognize and report child abuse. Last year, we taught the program to more than 30,000 educators, coaches, counselors and auxiliary staff in five Bexar County school districts, many private schools and several universities. But as COVID-19 encroached into every aspect of our lives, our team began thinking about the tragic consequences that could result if teachers did not see their students in person until August.

That is why ChildSafe created a new virtual training program to assist educators and human services professionals in identifying and appropriately responding to possible signs of abuse and neglect in their virtual classrooms and sessions. Titled "Recognizing & Reporting Child Abuse Virtually," the comprehensive training addresses general signs of abuse and red flags, and offers tips on communication and what to do if a child discloses abuse or neglect. So far, 1,360 Bexar County educators and service providers have taken the training.

What signs are educators and human services workers looking for during virtual sessions? The most immediate are changes in a student's appearance, such as visible signs of abuse, lack of hygiene and/or weight loss. Participants should be aware of behaviors that signal a student or child might be uncomfortable, scared or behaving out of character, such as a cheerful child acting sullen.

is unsafe, so it is important for educators to listen for concerning sounds or loud or demeaning language during virtual visits, and to be watchful for unkempt households and/or hazards, such as drugs, medication, alcohol or gang-related paraphernalia, in the background.

The most prevailing question ChildSafe receives from educators is regarding a child who has not logged into school for several days and the teacher has not been able to talk to the child or a family member. In this case, teachers are asked to provide the name of the child to the Bexar County Sheriff's Office so a member of its team can complete an in-person well check at their home.

During this time of COVID-19, not only are schools providing instruction to students virtually, so are other nonprofits and organizations that deliver essential services. Working with United Way, one of our funding partners, ChildSafe's team also is offering virtual training for service providers. To date, we have provided training to 20 community organizations in addition to schools. The curriculum has been so well received that Communities in Schools is reviewing the training for a national rollout.

Through our Zoom trainings, we have found that not only are we able to communicate with teachers and service providers, but they have been able to connect with each other, perhaps the most powerful aspect of the platform in a time when interactions are so limited.

In these turbulent times, we all must adapt to keep children safe. As ChildSafe modifies our prevention services to help educators and other nonprofit service agencies to recognize children at risk, we ask every member of our community to also keep a watchful eye on children who might fall victim to abuse and neglect, virtually or in person.

*Kim Abernethy is president and CEO of ChildSafe, Bexar County's children advocacy center.*

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