



COVID-19: Children at greater risk of sexual abuse and exploitation

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the world in an unprecedented way. If the world is currently slowing down, sexual predators never stop and are continuously adapting. Many factors induced by this sanitary crisis facilitate the perpetuation of violence, especially against children. What is the impact of COVID-19 on children? What can we do to protect them, especially from sexual exploitation and abuse?

ECPAT Belgium shares some essential information in order to understand, and more importantly to act to protect children.

Isolation and marginalization: factors increasing vulnerabilities

Measures taken to tackle the pandemic are forcing us to stay at home. For many children, the family is a place where they can find trust, protection and comfort. Unfortunately, for others, family is an abusive and toxic place. Consequently, the quarantine intensifies existing violence (physical, psychological, sexual, etc.) and minors are more isolated and vulnerable. According to the Council of Europe, one in five children in Europe is victim of sexual violence. Based on data from ECPAT International, 74% of sexual abuse is perpetrated by a person from the child's circle of trust.

Many confined minors are thus unable to leave the place where they are being abused in order to seek help. Need support? We listed different platforms and helplines below.

If, as a parent, you feel overwhelmed, **parenting support tools are available.** These can help you find the right words to explain lockdown and ideas of activities for children. There are also many platforms for exchange amongst parents.





Need support? Many platforms exist to help you in difficult times:

If you speak French:

- Écoute Enfant (103)
- Télé Accueil (107)
- [SOS Enfants Teams](#)
- SOS Rape (0800 98 100)
- Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance (02 542 12 11)
- Family planning centres
- Certified family mediators
- [General Delegate for the Rights of the Child](#)
- Suicide Prevention Centre (0800 32 123)

If you speak Dutch :

- You can talk to Red Cross volunteer: 0800 14 689
- For deaf or hearing impaired people : you can contact the information number via the remote interpreting services of [CAB Vlaanderen](#)
- Tele-Onthaal: phone 106 or use their [online chat](#)
- Awel: call 102 or visit [their website](#)
- Suicide Helpline : call 1813, or [chat with volunteers or contact them via e-mail](#)
- [Centrum Algemeen Welzijnswerk \(CAW\)](#)
- [JAC](#)
- [Solentra helpdesk for refugees:](#) (0496/55.72.62 or 0800/35.247)

Some parenting support tools:

- SOS Parents (0471 41 43 33), set up during lockdown
- [Parental burnout](#)
- [La ligue des familles](#)
- [L'Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance](#)
- [UNICEF's guide](#) to talk to your child about COVID-19
- Yapaka's [special edition](#) to support adolescents during the health crisis
- The parenting line (De [opvoedingslijn](#))



Increased online exposure

Because of the quarantine, the number of hours spent on the Internet has increased among children, especially teenagers, as they have more free time and use social media to stay in touch with their friends.

Sexual predators have realized this and take advantage of the situation to find new victims. **Because of their prolonged online exposure, minors are now more vulnerable to the risks of sexual exploitation.**

We fear that an increasing number of groomers will take advantage of the quarantine to contact children online, either to ask them to produce sexual images/videos, or to plan a future meeting with these minors after lockdown. Moreover, the production of material representing child sexual abuse or exploitation is not decreasing. On the contrary, the demand is adapting and abusers are now watching more live streaming of abuse.

The intention here is not to demonize new technologies, but to provide you with some preventive and protective tools. **It is by acknowledging that new technologies are an integral part of their lives that we will be able to give children the tips to ensure their safety online.**

Promote online safety

- [How to talk about online safety](#) with your children?
- [« Peer-2-peer » activity guide](#) on online safety for teenagers
- [Videos](#) and [Comics](#) produced by and for kids about online safety



Abuses more difficult to detect and report

The COVID-19 pandemic also has an impact on the detection and the referral of sexual violence cases. Indeed, a significant number of people capable of detecting and reporting cases of abuse are also compelled to stay home. For example, the detection work previously carried out through schools, youth centres or family planning centres is temporarily no longer possible due to the closure of these facilities. In order to overcome these shortcomings, we all have a role to play. Neighbours, for example, are likely to report - even anonymously - recurring noises that lead them to believe that a situation of violence or abuse may be taking place in the apartment next door. **Keeping your eyes and ears open can save lives.**

Shelters for victims of sexual violence also operate slower than usual, which gives us good reasons to fear for the protection of children.

In addition, the saturation of hospital services linked to the increasing number of people contaminated by COVID-19 may lead to believe that the care of victims of sexual violence will be impacted by this health crisis. Youth Services are themselves overwhelmed by requests for child placement, which have greatly increased as a result of lockdown measures. Children whose parents are hospitalized must also be placed. In order to deal with the lack of available foster families, a citizen movement has started, allowing children to be placed in volunteer families, but child protection professionals, while appreciating the initiative, also **express their concern that these volunteer families are unknown to Youth Services and are not trained to take in foster children.**

Finally, we should not forget that the pandemic also has an important impact on the work of organizations working for the protection of children, such as ECPAT Belgium, which has temporarily interrupted all training courses for professionals and young people. Less awareness-raising means less detection, let's face it...



How to report child sexual abuse or exploitation?

- If the child is in immediate danger, call 101
- If in doubt, contact the [SOS Enfants](#) team (French) or call [1712](#) (Flemish)
- Contact Child Focus via 116 000, info@childfocus.org or www.nupraatikerover.be
- If you are abroad, report on the [I say STOP!](#) website

Want to learn more ?

- Visit our website www.ecpat.be
- Discover our [e-learning](#) to learn how to detect cases of child trafficking
- You can also check out our [videos](#), [analyses](#) and [brochures](#) on this topic

The sanitary crisis caused by COVID-19 is particularly impacting on organizations such as ECPAT Belgium, as their very functioning is being disrupted and the funds usually available are becoming very uncertain.

If you wish to contribute to the survival of our activities, you can make a donation to the account of ECPAT Belgium (BE27 2100 4712 4773). Thank you for your support!

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