

Voices: Children, communication and coronavirus

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During the pandemic, families across Texas are finding fun and creative ways to spend time together as we shelter in our homes to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It's uplifting to see how so many are making the best of the situation and becoming closer.

But behind some doors is a much darker reality, one involving the abuse and neglect of innocent children. As shelter-in-place orders lift, I am concerned about what we will find.

May is Foster Care Awareness Month, a time when nonprofits, social workers, advocates and teachers typically work together to raise awareness about the need for families to care for children removed from their homes. It is also a time to focus on the reasons children end up in the system in the first place and how we might prevent it.

According to the Children's Bureau, [62 percent of children](#) are removed from their homes because of general neglect, while 12 percent of removals are due specifically to physical abuse. These causes are likely increasing during the pandemic, as an article in *USA Today* [reported](#), because children have temporarily lost one of their most important guardians, their teachers.

One in every five child-mistreatment claims are reported by educational professionals, a statistic the article attributes to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Teachers and communication

Although teachers do receive special training to help them identify potential cases of abuse and neglect, their biggest advantage is simply the relationships they've developed with their students.

Teachers see our children every day. They skillfully observe verbal and nonverbal differences in their behavior, and they often earn the child's trust in order to ask questions and listen. They communicate.

What can we do without our educators? We all have the ability to communicate with each other if we make the effort.

Part of the Latin origin of the word "communication" is the word *communis*, meaning "common, public, shared by all or many." The word "community" also derives from *communis*. You might say that without communication, there is no community.

What children need

I have a vivid memory of meeting Itza, a beautiful 9-year-old girl who received new socks and shoes through Buckner International. When Jesse, one of our volunteers, finished tying the laces on Itza's pink sneakers, he asked if he could pray for her. Itza said, "Yes," but it was her exact request that broke my heart.

After careful consideration, Itza replied, "Would you ask God to help my mother love me a little more?"

Of all the things this tiny, innocent child could ask for—a dress, a toy, a new doll, ice cream, a thousand other things 9-year-old children want—Itza just wanted to be loved more by her mother.

This brief encounter triggered so many questions: Why did she not feel loved, valued, cherished at home? Was she being neglected? Was she in danger?

Standing in the gap

One of the key goals of Buckner is strengthening our community's most vulnerable families. We do this through a Family Hope Center model that provides the critical services, education, aid and coaching needed to decrease the likelihood of abuse, neglect and removal of children.

For more than a month, family coaches were unable to meet face-to-face with their clients, but that did not mean our mission was suspended. Our communication continued.

Whether through phone calls or Skype, texts or social media, our Buckner teams across every social service program continue to keep the lines of communication open.

As one of my team members said, "Social distancing doesn't mean we have to emotional distance."

We are providing outlets for parents experiencing fear of an uncertain future or financial stress. We are sharing parenting tips and suggestions for family activities. And we are paying attention to the verbal and nonverbal cues of the children, much like their teachers. You can do this, too.

Being community

Itza's prayer request was a catalyst toward our engagement with her family. She showed so much courage opening up to strangers, and it became our obligation to shine hope into her life.

I have noticed that in addition to bringing the majority of families closer together, our response to the coronavirus pandemic is also bonding communities. When going for an evening walk to stretch our legs, my wife and I are encountering many more people who smile, hold eye contact and say, “Hello”—all at a safe distance, of course.

Despite the government’s plan to open Texas, many families will continue to suffer from the economic impact of the pandemic and the resulting stressors, and many more will continue to shelter in place.

Let’s use our renewed sense of community to connect better with each other virtually. Ask questions, and actually listen to the answers. Pay attention to each other. These simple acts of intentional communication might be the watchful eyes and ears a defenseless child needs. At the very least, it’s the love and support we all need.

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EDITOR’S NOTE: Updated to correct information about Foster Care Awareness Month.