



P.O. Box 427 • Barnstable, Massachusetts 02630  
Telephone (508) 375-0410

### **Pandemic trapping some kids with their abusers**

Jacob Stapledon, Community Education and Outreach Coordinator, Children's Cove

With most of the country effectively shut off from “normal life,” many of us naturally search for news and information, especially online. There’s no shortage of sobering articles and stressful news. Social media and live video streams have inflated astronomically. The saturation of content has reached critical levels and can feel overwhelming. However, even with all this content surrounding this global crisis, what’s *not* been front-and-center has us extremely concerned here at Children’s Cove.

Those of us on the frontlines helping survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, and crimes against children are concerned about victims of abuse being confined inside abusive households and by a severely curtailed ability to access to help.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the statistics were horrifying enough: one in four girls -- and one in six boys -- will be sexually abused before their 18th birthday. Most victims suffer in silence as it is estimated that more than 90 percent of abuse victims never report what happened to them. Even more alarming, more than 90 percent of perpetrators are someone that an abused child knows and trusts – a coach, camp counselor, teacher, someone in their faith community, or a family member.

If, and when, child victims of sexual abuse are able to disclose, it is to a safe adult who in most instances, are obligated and required by law to report it. Mandated reporters in Massachusetts, includes a wide range of professionals, but most notably teachers, coaches, therapists, guidance councils, and pastors of their faith community. With school, sports, and public gatherings now cancelled, so are child victims’ access to those resources. For those child victims whose perpetrator is in their home, this time is even more stressful because there is no escape, and they likely feel no safe way to report.

In Massachusetts, reports to law enforcement, the Department of Children and Families, and child advocacy centers since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic have precipitously dropped to an all-time low. This screams louder than anything to us: children are being hurt.

The implications of this are staggering: these child victims may continue to be victimized, or the abuse may escalate. The lack of ability to report may later be wrongly perceived by some as “delayed reporting” undermining the victim’s credibility. Victims may choose not to report the abuse because of the amount of time that has passed; feeling as though no one will believe them or listen. The public may believe that abuse isn’t happening due to lower number of reports of abuse and subsequent investigations. This situation is a proverbial rabbit hole of concern for the response to crimes against children.

It doesn’t have to be that way.

April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month, which is why we are urging our community to come together to make a difference. We ask that parents and caregivers “Have The Conversation” with their children, their family, and friends about body safety. This includes which parts of their bodies are private, not to be touched by anyone, and reminding them they need to immediately tell an adult they trust if someone does touch them inappropriately. That if they have concern that a child isn’t safe, to reach out for help. It can be awkward but necessary. Our website has tools to help guide this discussion.

We ask that teachers, coaches, and those doing live-streams consider talking to their audiences about body safety, and that if children or teens feel they are not safe at home, to take the step to ask for help. It may not be as readily accessible during this time, but help is still available.

Spread the word about organizations on the Cape & Islands that help victims of sexual assault, domestic violence and child sexual abuse; tell them that we are open, that we are here to help. This includes us at Children’s Cove, Independence House, Connect to End Violence on Martha’s Vineyard, A Safe Place Nantucket, and the Wampanoag Women’s Shelter in Aquinnah.

Even in these challenging times, we can work together to create space for children’s voices to be heard; a place where the most vulnerable feel safe and empowered. We are here to help. If you want to learn more, have questions or need assistance, please contact us at [www.ChildrensCove.org](http://www.ChildrensCove.org)