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ADULTS MUST TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

By Deb Ryan, Chester County District Attorney

While COVID-19 may have infected children in lower numbers than older adults, the pandemic has negatively impacted children in ways that go beyond the loss of school and social relationships. There's also been a loss of adult oversight of children. And the numbers show that less oversight has translated to a sharp decrease in child abuse reports over the past year in the state of Pennsylvania – including Chester County.

Teachers and daycare providers are mandated reporters, required to report any signs of child abuse to Childline, the state-run hotline for child abuse and neglect. Because children are abused by someone they know more than 90% of the time, these mandated reporters become the eyes and ears for children who need protection.

That is until a pandemic hits and daily interactions at school and daycare disappear. Add stressors such as job and income loss, and homes can become volatile environments for children.

In 2020, Chester County saw a 42% decrease in Childline reports, compared to increases since 2017, while the number of Internet Crimes Against Children and child pornography is projected to have increased by 40%. The drop in Childline reports is almost certainly not an indication that child abuse isn't happening;

instead, it demonstrates the importance of having mandated reporters observing, engaging, and protecting our children.

The child sexual abuse numbers alone are startling. One in ten children in the United States will be sexually abused before they reach 18. The harm caused to them can be irreparable. Child sexual abuse victims are three to four times more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol, twice as likely to drop out of school, have a teen pregnancy, and/or suffer from PTSD, anxiety, and depression.

Before I became Chester County's [District Attorney](#), I was a child abuse prosecutor in the same office I now oversee. I learned from that heartbreaking and gut-wrenching work that abusers could be anyone – doctors, lawyers, clergymen, coaches, mothers, fathers, and siblings – and come from all socioeconomic levels, religions, races, ages, genders. Likewise, child abuse victims are children from all walks of life.

The nationally accredited [Children's Advocacy Center](#) located in my office is a child-focused center that coordinates the investigation and prosecution of child abuse and the treatment of victims. By centralizing law enforcement and outside agencies' efforts, victims are less likely to be victimized by the system. And their healing can begin.

During my years as a child abuse prosecutor, I met children who were not believed and were called liars; children terrified to share their stories for fear their family would be torn apart; children who loved the person abusing them and didn't want them to get in trouble; and children who were threatened if they said anything.

Try putting yourself in the place of an abused child to understand the stress and trauma they deal with every day.

One of the saddest cases I prosecuted involved several six-year-old boys and girls sexually assaulted by their music teacher while their parents waited just outside the door. Not one child said a word to their moms or dads for months. But one

day, a brave little girl told her mom. Her fortitude was the impetus for the other young children to come forward, too.

The owner of the music studio was outraged because he had no idea what was happening behind closed doors. He immediately installed security cameras in all the classrooms and replaced the doors with ones that had windows.

His measures are an example of how to protect children and adults from being alone in one-on-one situations. We need to take more steps like this because about 80% of child sexual abuse happens in isolation.

- Youth organizations with a large volunteer staff should have a written code of conduct distributed to parents and children.
- Background checks that include speaking directly to references should be done on anyone dealing with children.
- Teachers, coaches, and clergy should have office doors open when meeting with children.

It is our responsibility as adults to protect our own children and those we come into contact with.

The District Attorney's Office, the Crime Victims' Center of Chester County, and the Safe and Healthy Communities Initiative address that responsibility through Stewards of Children, a free two-hour virtual workshop open to any adult.

Stewards of Children teaches participants how to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse. It includes stories from child sexual abuse survivors and strategies from experts on preventing child sexual abuse from happening at all. It is the only nationally distributed, evidence-informed program proven to increase knowledge, improve attitudes, and change child-protective behaviors.

Our goal is to train 5% of Chester County residents by the end of 2021. Already we've trained over 5,000 adults. Teachers, nurses, dentists/dental hygienists, social workers, attorneys, and early childhood and school-age professionals can earn continuing education credits.

Because April is National Child Abuse Prevention month, I invite you to sign up for a Stewards of Children webinar. Upcoming workshops are offered on April 21 at 1 p.m. and April 29 at 10 a.m. Sign up at [Stewards of Children](#). For more information, contact Charlotte Fabian, Stewards of Children County Coordinator, at cfabian@chesco.org or 610-344-6115.

We hope that the pandemic of the past year is coming to an end and, with that, a return to life as usual. For the children in our community who are the victims of child abuse or neglect, let's not allow their usual to be one of silence and looking the other way.

Please speak up and speak out if you suspect child abuse – because all children deserve our protection.

Call Childline at 1-800-932-0313.