



## International Network for School Social Work

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## Prioritizing Children and their Education During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Children at every stage of development from infancy to adolescence are impacted by the Coronavirus-19 pandemic in more ways than adults who have already reached maturity. Almost every child on the planet lives in one of the countries where schools have been closed for lengthy periods to reduce spread of the virus, with inevitable educational losses. Many are confined by edicts to their homes, depriving them of opportunities for physical and social development that is not possible in confinement. Schools do more than teach; they provide school meals, social training, protection, nurturing, health care and support for families. School social workers are a key part of this. They are needed now when schools are closed, when decisions are made about when and how to re-open safely, and in developing supportive programs for re-opening that can be done safely.

### **How schools and school social workers are handling the crisis**

**The Basics:** In a semirural area of Western Washington State, school bus drivers and aides are distributing bagged school lunches (and homework too). In town, lunch bags are available at the school for all children with no charge. For weekends, volunteers continue to provide food for 2 days in backpacks for children in need. Without doubt, many children do not receive the school breakfast and school lunch. The challenge for school systems everywhere is to provide food for children who otherwise will not eat. School social workers need to reach out to make that happen.

**New skills for school social workers in Finland (from Maija Jones):** There are approximately 50 school social workers in the city of Espoo. Most of the social workers seem to be working from home while schools are closed due to the pandemic. This means contacting pupils and students via phone, text messaging, e-mails, Skype and various online meetings. The same applies to working with the parents, teachers, school welfare groups and other co-workers, such as social welfare, psychiatric units, etc. The school social workers have felt that providing service at a distance, for example the Skype-meets, has brought a brand new dimension to their “tool box”. Many of the usual activities can be done online. For example, one school social worker plays online games with small groups, such as scribbling with the computer mouse while the rest of the group guesses what it is. Discussion of “feeling cards” can easily be done online. Now students have been able to “invite” the social worker to their private environment. For example introducing their dear pets, their room and other things meaningful for the children. That has created a whole different connection between the student and the school social worker. Some students have found it vital to meet regularly face-to-face with the social worker. Because of the restrictions, some social workers have organized their work so that they can meet with the students outdoors. That has always included permission from the parents, and also keeping social distancing in

mind. These outdoor meetings have taken place in parks, woods, gym parks etc. Apparently those walks have been very good. Some students who wouldn't normally exercise or go outside, now get to have some physical activity AND talk about things that are on their mind.

**Focus on social needs:** In a small town, Elkhart in Indiana, a school social worker communicates with Middle School students by phone and email and posts positive quotes on her Instagram. She is focusing on social skills, coping skills and expressing emotions. To see her students face-to-face she goes to school lunch pick-up places where she can wave to her students when they drive by with parents to pick up their school lunch. She stays in touch with parents, especially parents of special needs students, and has gone to their homes if she cannot reach them by phone or email.

**Virtual counseling:** In New York, where the coronavirus has hit the community very hard, school social workers and counselors have replaced face-to-face meetings with Skype, FaceTime or Zoom, supplemented by phone calls and emails. A school social worker has continued her weekly support groups online using all her usual listening and teaching skills, while encouraging her students in healthy activities such as taking walks, while maintaining safe health practices such as social distancing. <https://www.wgrz.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/wny-school-social-workers-helping-students-cope-through-virtual-meetings-counseling-sessions/71-60a7b552-6bae-40c9-9b39-5863d81729bb>

**Resources:** The School Social Work Association of America has a page of resources that includes information for school social workers, parents and children on a range of topics relevant to providing services during the pandemic. For example there is information on how to support grieving students, how to explain social distancing, strategies for supporting special education students, guidance on remote communications and providing mental health services online. There is much detail on issues that school social workers are dealing with. Some issues present difficult new challenges, such as how to provide services using technology when you have received no training in ethical guidelines for using such technology as videoconferencing, apps, Skype, email. Social workers are required to follow ethical guidelines, legal obligations and agency requirements, but may not know how to do all of this to provide service under the present emergency. The SSWAA website gives you a place to start in learning to handle new working conditions in which previously learned practices no longer apply to the "new normal". The School Social Work Association of America has issued a Position Paper on the role of the school social worker during the pandemic. It provides guidelines for staying safe, understanding school policies, providing services online, becoming trauma-informed and some resources to guide your work. You can find it on the SSWAA website <https://www.sswaa.org/covid-19-resources>.

**Child Protection:** Children are vulnerable during the pandemic. Families, friendships and communities are disrupted, and stressed care-givers may be less able to keep children safe. The usual role of the school in monitoring children's well-being is missing. Schools, being mandated to report child abuse, are the mainstay of child protection. Since many referrals to Protective Services are from schools, the number of children referred has dropped since schools have been closed. School social workers can give children and families lists of resources for finding help in a crisis, but it is clear that having a phone number for a child to call is no substitute for teachers and other school staff observing the child directly in the familiar environment of school and communicating face-to-face with children whose circumstances they often know well. Preventing child abuse and neglect and reaching vulnerable children who may be abused is another challenge for school social workers to solve in a time of stress.

**Advocacy is a job for school social workers that cannot wait.  
The focus now and in the immediate future must be on the well-being  
and education of the world's children**