**Parental protection and COVID**

Jamaica’s children have joined their counterparts worldwide in a bid to further their education in spite of the distraction caused by the coronavirus. Since the pandemic arose and schools were forced to institute virtual classes, students have been operating out of their homes. In several instances parents and other caregivers have also had to adopt work-from -home practices. Some children have not been so fortunate as their parents are still required to leave the home to report for work. Responsible parents need to be aware that when leaving the children to fend for themselves, or to stay with older siblings, family friends, or uncles or aunts they may be in danger. Admittedly, some adults are just not cut out for the job of babysitting.

But what say do children have in who looks after them? Perhaps not much but their thoughts on the matter are to be taken into consideration. The cues they give parents are important. In the absence of parents, the guidance of the children falls to the surrogates. Verbal cues such as any stated objections to individuals should bear weight in decision making. Non-verbal cues such as recoiling at someone’s touch, avoidance, changes in mode of dress to cover their bodies in a bid to disguise bruises or a normally talkative child suddenly becoming withdrawn and silent, speak volumes.

As far as little children go, all mothers when teaching them about their body parts must include in the lessons the concept of Good Touch Bad Touch. That way both boys and girls will know when someone is inappropriately touching them and immediately raise an alarm.

In the society we have been made aware of older children being targets of abuse by primary and secondary caregivers. Concerned individuals need to be aware of the tell-tale signs that may include the child’s nervousness around a particular individual, a fall-off in attention to physical appearance and in performance in school work; knowledge of sexual issues that are inappropriate for their age; aggression; their running away from home and withdrawal from family and friends. It has to be reinforced that persons be on the lookout for these behaviours . As communities there must be vigilance in monitoring the movement of children who out of boredom may be tempted to visit friends. Perhaps this is where the Stay At Home (Tan a Yuh Yaad) messaging around the pandemic works in parents’ favour.

Parents are relying on the trust and openness that they have built with their children to tell them when something is not right . But parents in juggling the many demands made on your lives do bear in mind the maxim ‘The Devil finds work for idle hands‘ and consider in whose hands you are leaving the children. This may very well be the lightbulb going off in your heads as you seek to protect the children.