

Detection of Child Abuse in Virtual Learning



Valley
Children's
HEALTHCARE



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Introduction

Amidst the challenges encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, new struggles in prompt identification and reporting of child abuse have surfaced. Educators are responsible for 20% of child abuse referrals to local agencies¹ making them an essential part of leading efforts in identifying child maltreatment. While virtual learning has affected our ability to see first-hand and assess interactions and injuries, in contrast, it has opened a new window into the student's home environment.

With limited experiences available for identifying at-risk students virtually, the Guilds Child Abuse Treatment and Prevention Center hopes this tool-kit will supplement your ongoing efforts to protect and educate the students of the Central Valley.

Physical Appearance

Child abuse affects all socioeconomic groups, however, certain risk factors for child abuse are well reported.² In the current pandemic, these risk factors have been heightened with increasing stressors of food and income insecurity and social isolation, among other concerns.

Recognition of abuse based on physical findings observed virtually is challenging as your view is limited to above the shoulders. However, bruising on the face, neck or ears can be a red flag depending on the age of the child. When encountering a bruise, consider a one-on-one discussion with the child leading with, "Ouch! That looks like it hurt. What happened?"

If a child is fidgeting or seems uncomfortable sitting, grimacing in pain during class, an injury below the waist may be the cause. Again, direct questioning may be helpful such as, "Hey, you look uncomfortable in class. Did you get hurt?" In exploring excessive scratches you may ask, "I noticed you have a lot of scratches, do you have a pet?" While not directly probing the cause, it does begin dialogue that may give you the opportunity to ask further open-ended questions. Avoid probing or pressing for answers the child may be unwilling to give and do not suggest answers to the child.

While not physical abuse, older students wearing long sleeve shirts during summer months may raise a red-flag for self-harm such as cutting. Explore creative ways to better visualize an area of concern. Ask a question and ask everyone to write the answer on their arm at the beginning of class, revisit the question at the end of class and have everyone hold their answer up to the camera.

Environment

The child's environment may present with various concerns for child abuse or neglect as well. Pay attention to the child's surroundings. Are there any hazards such as exposed electrical wires, animal feces, drug paraphernalia or holes in the walls? Does the child report a lack of basic necessities such as food or utilities? Close attention should be directed towards activity and conversational tone in the background; frequent unfamiliar visitors to the home, yelling, arguing or cursing should be addressed with the child individually. Any and all online interactions with students and parents should be carefully documented as per your school district's policy. This serves to protect both students, as well as teachers.

Behavior and Affect

Maintaining our children's mental health is paramount, in the context of social distancing, loss of routines and fear for their own health or that of their family. These life changes may lead to anxiety, depression, or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that may go unrecognized and affect learning, behavior and physical health. Identifying children with mental health concerns is imperative in promoting academic success and healthy development.

While the "squeaky wheel" who disrupts the classroom with observable, concerning behavior is more noticeable², kids with internalizing disorders like depression and anxiety are more challenging to identify. Students who are shy, quiet, inattentive, or frequently have somatic complaints (headaches, upset stomach) may require closer attention. Students exhibiting regression (academic, emotional, social), hypervigilance, and nervousness (fidgeting, chewing on clothing/items, eyes frequently scanning the room) or signs of withdrawal should also be monitored for possible maltreatment.

When there is noticeable disruptive behavior or lack of involvement, students should be engaged to re-establish connection and provide redirection⁴. One way to do this is to engage students in a physical "brain break activity" in addition to regularly scheduled "brain break activities." These activities help with sensory regulation. The activity can either help awaken and engage the student(s) or to help calm student(s) down.

Calming Activity: Boulders	Energizing Activity: Electric Wire
Stand in front of a wall and use both hands to push as hard as you can, pretending to move a BIG BOULDER. Push for several seconds and then relax. Repeat x3.	Find or pretend there is an invisible line on the floor and jump with feet together over the line, back and forth. Make sure you don't touch the line!

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children or CSEC should also be considered during virtual interactions, especially with adolescent and pre-adolescent youth. Statements regarding new friends, a new job, unusual travel plans or unexplained obtainment of items such as cell phones or clothing should raise concern.

Engagement

Lack of participation in virtual school or a decline in grades can be a sign that something is wrong in the home. Children who are not engaged, appear tired and/or distracted may be experiencing stress, neglect or even abuse in their home. If possible, consider reaching out to the parents/caregivers to offer support. It is possible that the family is still adjusting to their new “normal” or there may be significant stressors in the family that a local agency could help with. Consult with your school social worker or counselor regarding the students you are concerned about. By addressing stressors within the family, you can help reduce the likelihood of abuse or neglect occurring.

Supervision

As parents juggle the challenges of distance learning, working either from home or on-site, and the childcare needs in each of those situations, school staff are in a position to ensure that children and adolescents still have an age-appropriate level of supervision. Teachers may observe students experiencing difficulties with technology, the online platform, or with assignments in which no adult is present in the home to assist. Some students may complain of hunger with no adult present to provide or prepare meals. On the opposite end of the spectrum, a parent that does not allow a child to be alone during instruction or speaks for the child, inhibiting the child’s opportunity to share, may also represent a red flag.

If an adult or caregiver is present, this is an opportunity to observe the students verbal and non-verbal reaction to their presence. If the child looks worried or leans away, avoidant of their presence, consider establishing a follow-up contact point. Children frequently appearing listless and tired may be experiencing extreme lack of structure or sleepless nights due to distractions in the home. Incorporating a lesson or activity into the school day that prompts the student to bring an age appropriate caregiver to the virtual classroom with them, assures proper supervision is available. Children who are frequently truant or reported to be on runaway status should be assessed by a school social worker or counselor for abuse and/or CSEC risk. Working with your school administrators, a plan for welfare checks should be available in the event you have concerns regarding a lack of supervision.

Strategies That May Help In Identifying Concerns

Creating contact points for students is a crucial risk mitigating strategy in exploring concerns:

- Consult with your student’s teacher from the previous school year. Did they have concerns for the student or has there been a significant behavioral change since last year? What could this indicate?
- Keep a roster of all your students and establish a weekly check-in routine; document any concerns.
- Establish a good rapport with your students and have explicit conversations with them about being/feeling safe.
- Create a safe word with your student(s) that can be communicated verbally or via on-line chat if they feel unsafe.
- Once a week every student is asked a simple question, not school related. For example: What do you like most/least about staying at home and why? What would you need if you were stranded on an island, do you have those things now?
- Schedule a five minute work activity that allows the students to work independently, giving you time to perform visual check-ins on your class.
- Once a week, highlight and maximize your window for every student to perform a quick physical and environmental check.
- Have a safe place for students to converse and monitor closely for any concerning language.
- Document absences, frequent leaving of the room, disruptive environments and injuries to establish any trends that may be present.
- Schedule routine one-on-one meetings with each student as a chance to promote open dialogue.
For middle and high school students, assign a given educator to a group of students.
- Reach out to school social workers or counselors for resources and consultation when you are concerned about a child.
- School meal distribution teams should also be aware of the indicators of child abuse and neglect as these contact points provide an opportunity to identify maltreatment.
- Create a family event or combined caregiver-student educational activity. Consider a game night or a hands on activity that engages a family member.

Responsibilities as a Mandated Reporter

As mandated reporters, teachers and school personnel do not need to be physically present or witness to identify suspected cases of abuse, or even have definite proof that a child may be subject to child abuse or neglect. Rather, the law requires that a person have a “reasonable suspicion” that a child has been the subject of child abuse or neglect⁵. If you have reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or neglect, you must report it immediately to your local county child protection agency.

A list of Child Protection Agency Hotlines can be found at <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/reporting/report-abuse/child-protective-services/report-child-abuse>. For additional Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Resources, visit www.valleychildrens.org/childadvocacy.

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2. Christian CW, Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, The Evaluation of Suspected Child Physical Abuse, *Pediatrics* 2015;135(5);e1337-e1354
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4. Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T.P. (2015). *The Whole Brain Child Workbook*. PESI Publishing & Media
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