

Signs of Maltreatment or Abuse While Working with Students Virtually



Audubon Center of the North Woods
Charter School Division

05.08.2020

This paper is not intended to be legal advice. Please check with the school's legal counsel and/or the full text of the statute for additional information.

While working in a 100% virtual setting, all staff members are encouraged to continue to look for any and all [Signs and Symptoms of Child Abuse and Neglect](#). Reminders to all staff that they are and remain [mandated reporters](#) are very important during distance learning periods.

Through distance learning, we may have more difficulty identifying some of the traditional signs of child abuse or neglect such as anxiety, depression, and withdrawing from normal activities. Some students and families may be experiencing higher anxiety or related mental health issues as a result of the global pandemic. That being said, educators still have a responsibility to look for and report child abuse and neglect during this period. Your school should also be proactive in [making virtual learning safe](#) for students.

OUR ROLE AS EDUCATORS:

- Watch for signs.
- Listen to your gut.
- Report concerning or suspicious behavior using as much evidence as possible. [See pg 4 of this document](#) from the Department of Human Services for documentation questions and information mandated reporters should gather.
- Have systems in place that allow for identification of issues and activate a support team.

Suggested Systems:

- Use attendance and check-in data to identify inconsistent attendance and/or atypical behavior patterns.
- Develop a “check-in” system with teachers, learning coaches, school counselors, etc. While each student likely has a “primary contact” consider having other staff members checking in with students on a less frequent basis. These outside contacts can validate or provide counter information to your impressions.
- Track team member communication with families to be able to identify concerns.
- Encourage students to use video chat as a way to confirm that environments are safe. Attend to any [non-verbal warning signs](#) that students may convey.
- Identify a team of support staff (or partner agencies) who coordinate support services for students or families in distress.
- Coordinate with county officials as needed to determine if a welfare check or other action is warranted.

Use your established relationships with students during this time. Asking students questions (as an attendance prompt or in morning meetings) either via email, chat, phone call, or video message is a great place to start. Lay the groundwork that you are a trusted and safe support during this time. For example:

“As your teacher I want you to know that I am here to support you. When situations are unpredictable, it is hard to feel safe. If you are feeling uneasy or unsafe at home, please know that you can reach out to me.”

One teacher in an online setting provided this idea:

“Whenever I can, I try to have assignments or activities that allow students to reflect and make the assignments about their personal journeys or stories. For example, in art I have an assignment where students choose different colors to represent their emotions and then create a self portrait based on those colors/emotions. For these types of assignments, I’ve seen some red flags and been able to connect with learning coaches and dig a bit deeper to see if more is going on and in a few cases, there has.”

As always, remain vigilant for student safety and know that some students are not safe at home.

- Continue to look for signs of homes that need resources, where families are stressed and need assistance, and where student attendance is inconsistent or low.
- If you have concerns, you have a responsibility to file a child protection report. It is not your job to determine if the concern is valid. Know that making a report will only lead to more investigation as the mandated reporter is not the final word on what is occurring and may prompt a needed investigation.

Keep in mind how important you are to your students. Even when you are overwhelmed and exhausted, remember that even in small ways, your energy and care for students makes a huge difference.

Set reminders to check in regularly with students, especially those that have expressed distress or are exhibiting consistent, unusual behavior.

IMPORTANT REMINDER

Remember that your initial thoughts may not tell the whole story or be accurate. Engaging other adults in your concerns will provide an additional frame of reference. Draw on the context and experience you have with the student, but sometimes things they share can be bizarre. In this, remember to share only with appropriate support staff at the school.

If you become aware of some concerns with a particular student, consider the support and resources available to you:

- Paraprofessionals – identify some activities that might support connection to a student beyond the regular classroom environment, such as writing letters to students
- A staff member who has a connection to a student’s special interest or particular struggle
- Special Education teacher
- Social worker
- School administrator

Resources and Information

[Finding local mental health resources during Covid-19 crisis](#)

[Covid-19: Considerations for a Trauma Informed Response for Work Settings](#)

[Classroom Resources for Cyber Safety](#)

[Tips for Staying Safe Online during Covid-19](#)

[National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)
(800) 799-7233

[Crisis Text Line](#) | Text HOME to 741741

[Intimate Partner Violence](#) (fact sheet)

Developed in collaboration with Blue Sky Online School, Crosslake Community School, EdVisions Off Campus, and TRIO Wolf Creek Charter School.