



Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect through Distance Learning Recommendations for California's Educators

Communities and families continue to navigate a social distancing landscape in order to reduce the spread of COVID 19. Some families are suffering the loss of many of the supports they enjoyed before the pandemic, including sports activities, social activities, spiritual activities, and family gatherings. In addition, children are not being seen by mandated reporters such as educators, counselors, and doctors, as most of these professions have transitioned to distance learning and telehealth. Though the times are challenging, educators have an opportunity to buffer the stress, share resources with families, and continue to fulfill their role as mandated reporters of suspected child abuse and neglect.

In April and May of 2020, there was a 40 percent reduction in child abuse and neglect reports to child welfare. Historically, educators were leaders in recognizing the signs of abuse and neglect and making reports. The purpose of this guidance document is two-fold:

- 1) **Resources for teachers:** To guide teachers with innovative ways they can help to keep children safe by recognizing and reporting signs of suspected child abuse and neglect through distance learning. While distance learning poses new challenges for connecting with our students, this document provides strategies and tips that may be helpful in recognizing the signs of potential child abuse and neglect through virtual and remote communication.
- 2) **Resources for caregivers:** To provide educators with resources that they can share with parents, families, and care givers (P/F/C) that will help them in supporting their children through the challenges of distance learning.

Engaging in Conversations with your Students

Educators are finding new ways to check-in with their students through distance learning. While a primary purpose of distance learning is to deliver instruction, it is also critical that educators build in time to check in on their students' overall health and well-being. Educators should actively focus on maintaining positive relationships and wellbeing in a culturally responsive inclusive approach. For example:

- Inquire as to whether the student has had trouble accessing food or meals each day. If you are concerned that a student is not answering forthrightly or is being pressured to give answers that aren't true, a more organic way to ask could be to

ask the student **what** they had for breakfast that morning or dinner the prior evening?

- Due to the stay at home orders, students and P/F/C are often home together. In fact, P/F/C are encouraged to be nearby to assist students, as necessary, to take an active part in their distance learning. Therefore, educators should be mindful of who may be listening in the background. If a child is being neglected or abused, they may not be able to share that information explicitly. Additionally, it may be unsafe for the child to be put into a situation where they would need to answer direct questions that would prompt them to report their own P/F/C. Instead, educators can ask probing questions that generally avoid yes and no answers, such as:
 - “What does a day look like at home for you right now?”
 - “What’s your favorite part about being at home? What is your least favorite part?”
 - What are some things you are missing about school?
- Remember to keep your tone, demeanor, and behavior supportive and patient. If a student is experiencing abuse or neglect at home, they will most likely be more comfortable to open up over time and not through one isolated conversation.
- Keep a log of the dates and times of when you speak to each of your students. Make sure that you document any behavior or comments that raise a red flag.
- When interacting with your students, note each student’s baseline behaviors and emotions. Tracking your students’ baseline behaviors and emotions and comparing them to what this student typically exhibits in the classroom at school will assist you in noticing any escalation in risk factors or concerns:
 - While attending to your students’ baseline behaviors and emotions, it is important to also account for the fact that our students are navigating a “new normal” and may show signs of stress due to this current situation.
 - Remember that your students are getting used to new video conferencing platforms and technology. Therefore, it is very likely that your students may appear shyer or less likely to participate than when they are in the classroom and their baseline behaviors could change as they become more comfortable with the technology and online routines.
- If possible, utilize synchronous digital technology to connect with students visually at least weekly.

It is possible that your student may make comments or show signs of stress one day but not the next. One abnormality in student behavior or comments is not usually a valid reason to open an investigation on a P/F/C, unless the behavior or comment leads you to strongly suspect child abuse or neglect. If you ever have any questions or concerns regarding a student's behavior, we recommend that you connect with another colleague who knows this student well. Other resources are your school counselor(s) or nurse(s), administrator(s), and other trusted school staff who have a positive rapport with the student.

Concerning Changes in Student Behaviors

- Note any sudden declines in performance, or swings in typical academic behavior. Does your student normally turn in all of their work, but now they are not completing assignments? It is important to note that a lack of turning in work alone is not necessarily a sign of child abuse or neglect. Educators need to continuously examine their assignment policies and due dates to remove barriers to student participation. For example, are all assignments due during the week with little time for completion over the weekends? Perhaps assigning due dates of Sunday evenings, rather than Friday mornings, will allow for some P/F/C to assist their children with completing and submitting assignments on time. A lack of turning in assignments is not necessarily a risk, but could be a warning sign when coupled with other indicators listed in this guidance document.
- Pay attention to written assignments and what a student may be revealing through their words or acts. Compare these assignments and samples of student work with the log that you have been using to keep track of your conversations with them and their P/F/C. Reach out to a trusted colleague if anything causes concerns of potential child abuse and neglect.
- Educators who have a relationship with students who may have been at a higher risk for abuse or neglect prior to the pandemic may want to have a conversation with that student about how they can safely convey any concerns. This could resemble the use of a safe word or phrase mutually agreed upon by the student and teacher.
- Make student safety your number one priority when you have this conversation. Because you will not know who is listening, do not explicitly say what the child has shared with you in the past or relay previous incidents that have raised concern.
- Instead, frame the conversation in a way that allows the child to know that they have a direct line of communication to reach you if they need support while we are in our current state of distance learning. Letting your student know how much you care about their overall well-being in and out of school is important for all children, and especially for children who are victims of abuse and neglect. Please see the section entitled "Using Instructional Strategies to Create a Safe Space for

Your Students” for additional guidance.

- With an increase of time spent online, as well as the inevitable isolation of following social distancing guidance, students are also at an increased risk for commercial sexual exploitation.
- Students, especially our Foster Youth, may be at increased risk of family and acquaintance child sexual abuse, as their family structure may change during difficult economic times.
- Pay attention to what students may share about new friends they are making, or plans they have for when social distancing requirements end.
- Note if your student suddenly has a new job that may seem out of context or place, and demonstrates guardedness about sharing details.
- Trust and follow your intuition. Listen to student responses both verbally and in their schoolwork:
 - Are students deflecting or avoiding answering particular questions?
 - Are P/F/C interrupting particular questions that would elicit an answer that could reveal potential abuse and neglect?

Remember, the duty to file a mandated report falls on you. If you fear there is abuse or neglect occurring in your student’s home, you should report your concerns to Child Protective Services. Guidelines on mandated reporting are shared in the “Reporting Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect” section of this guidance document.

Using Instructional Strategies to Provide a Safe Space for Your Students

- Use a variety of online platforms for students to check in with their peers and with you.
- Utilize digital platforms to host secure student/teacher chats and pose questions and/or assignments that may reveal how home life and social distancing are going. Please see the prompts in the section titled, “Engaging in Conversations with your Students” for additional guidance.
- If possible, create a safe mechanism for students to reach out for support if needed. This could involve a particular discussion board, use of email, or even a phone call:
 - Google and several text messaging apps provide alternative phone numbers that link to your personal phone number so that it is kept private. Calling the alternative phone number will connect your student to you

directly. These services are typically free of charge.

Engaging in Conversations with P/F/C

- A best practice for supporting all of our students and their families through distance learning is to make a point to engage in frequent conversations with your students' P/F/C. As the educator, you should approach each of these check-ins with a positive, casual, friendly, and supportive tone. Suggestions for conversation starters include:
 - “How are you doing?”
 - “How do you feel that your child is doing?”
 - “How do they feel distance learning is going?” “For you?”
- Ask the P/F/C if they have any needs that you can help with and reassure them that you are there to support them and their child.
- Keep a daily log or tracker that documents when you speak to your students' P/F/C and notes of what is said. Highlight any discrepancies between what a student and a P/F/C may be reporting:
 - Keeping a daily log of your conversations with your students and their P/F/C is a best practice regardless of whether or not you suspect child abuse or neglect.
- Listen to **how** P/F/C describe their interactions with their children. For example, a P/F/C may make a subtle threatening statement such as, “They are so out of control and won't listen to me or do what I say no matter what. The next time they act out I'm going to ___.”
- If participating in visual and/or audible video learning, pay attention to the background at home.
 - Are there any safety hazards, either physical or environmental?
 - Do you hear yelling, screaming or high levels of aggressive conflict among family members?
 - How does the child appear in the environment? Please see additional guidance on tracking your students' baseline behaviors in the section titled “Engaging in Conversations with Your Students.”

Reporting Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect

If you are concerned about the safety of a child, please contact your local Child Protective Services Hotline (<https://www.cdss.ca.gov/reporting/report-abuse/child->

[protective-services/report-child-abuse](#)) to report to the county where the child lives. You can also get 24/7 guidance and information from professional crisis counselors at the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline (https://www.childhelp.org/childhelp-hotline/?_sm_auiHV8M0njLnQMSvFQMRtVGK34F24MF) at 1-800-4-A-CHILD.

Responsibilities of Mandated Reporters

California Department of Social Services provides a web page with free training to meet California's Mandated Reporter Training. The free training is available at the Mandated Reporter California website (https://mandatedreporterca.com/?_sm_auiHV8M0njLnQMSvFQMRtVGK34F24MF).

California Department of Education Resources for Educators for the Prevention of Child Abuse

- The *Health Education Framework* is aligned to the 2008 *California Health Education Content Standards*, which support the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in eight overarching standards: (1) essential health concepts; (2) analyzing health influences; (3) accessing valid health information; (4) interpersonal communication; (5) decision making; (6) goal setting; (7) practicing health-enhancing behaviors; and (8) health promotion in six content areas of health education (nutrition and physical activity; growth, development and sexual health; injury prevention and safety; alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs; mental, emotional, and social health; and personal and community health) in the 2008 *Health Education Content Standards*. Chapter One of framework addresses requirements that teachers have as mandated reporters and a section on the prevention of child abuse and also contains an Appendix on Sex Trafficking. The 2019 *Health Education Framework* is available at the California Department of Education (CDE) website (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/he/cf/>).
- ***Child Abuse Identification & Reporting Guidelines***, issued by the CDE, provide information for school personnel and those who work in our children's schools to be able to identify signs of suspected cases of child abuse and/or child neglect and to have the tools to know how to make a report to the proper authorities. These guidelines are issued by the CDE, in conjunction with the California Department of Social Services, to help all persons, particularly those persons who work in our children's schools, to be able to identify signs of suspected cases of child abuse and/or child neglect and to have the tools to know how to make a report to the proper authorities. The guidelines are available at the CDE website (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/ap/childabusereportingguide.asp>).
- The ***Child Abuse Prevention and Training Resources*** CDE web page provides information on training and reporting requirements for mandated reporters, training guides and model practices for parents, families, and administrators, and technical assistance to promote child well-being and protection from abuse. These resources are available at CDE website

(<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/ap/childabusereportingguide.asp>).

Resources for Educators to Share with P/F/C

Get Free Internet from Comcast

We realize online resources are plentiful, but not all families have access to the internet. Comcast is offering 60 days of complimentary broadband internet to new customers in low-income households. To review additional requirements and apply for this program, click the link below. Comcast is also offering additional resources, including access to free Xfinity Wi-Fi hotspots, even for non-Xfinity customers. Information can be found on the Comcast website (<https://corporate.comcast.com/covid-19>). Learn more from the Internet Essentials website (<https://www.internetessentials.com/>).

School Lunch Program During School Closures

Visit the Office of Child Abuse Prevention's Parent Resources Page (<https://cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/ocap/parent-resources>) for more information on where children can access free meals while schools are closed.

CalFresh

Does your family need assistance buying groceries? Find out if you qualify for grocery subsidies on the CalFresh website (<https://www.getcalfresh.org/>).

California Alternate Rates for Energy (CARE) Program

PG&E is offering California Climate Credits on April bills for both natural gas and electric services; customers can expect a credit ranging from \$27–\$61 depending on their services. Customers will not experience service disconnections for non-payment during this time, and additional resources, like the California Alternate Rates for Energy Program are still available. More information can be found on the PG&E website (https://www.pge.com/en_US/residential/rate-plans/rate-plan-options/understanding-rate-plans/help-paying-your-bills.page).

Tax Preparation and California Earned Income Tax Credit

The California Earned Income Tax Credit (CalEITC) is a refundable cash back credit for qualified low-to-moderate income working Californians. Both the federal and state programs are widely recognized as a powerful resource for lifting low-income individuals out of poverty. Follow @CalEITC4Me on social media or visit the CalEITC website (<https://www.caleitc4me.org/>) for updates and to see if you qualify.

The “Stress Busting” Playbook

California's Surgeon General has published a “stress busting” playbook (https://files.covid19.ca.gov/pdf/caregivers_and_kids_california_surgeon_general_stress_busting_playbook_draft_v2_clean_ada_04072020v2.pdf) for caregivers and kids to

recognize the signs of stress, with strategies to cope with stress.

New Stimulus Bill

Here's what you need to know about the new national government stimulus bill and how it might benefit you on the Financial Diet website (<https://thefinancialdiet.com/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-new-stimulus-bill/>).

The California State Parent Teacher Association

The California State Parent Teacher Association (PTA) collects, organizes, and shares a wide variety of resources specifically tailored to supporting parents, families, and caregivers of California's students. Visit the California State PTA website (<https://capta.org/resources/>) to access these free resources.

Family Resource Centers and Helplines

If a parent appears to be struggling, be sure they know where they can get help by calling 211 (<https://www.211.org/>) or contacting their local non-profit Family Resource Center (<http://www.frcnca.org/frcnca-directory/>). The National Parent Helpline (<https://www.nationalparenthelpline.org/find-support/state-resources/california-resources>) (1-855-427-2736) can also offer emotional support and referrals to resources during difficult times.

Sincerely,

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