

COVID-19 Guidance for Educators: Recognizing and Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect in Online Education Settings

Summary of March 22, 2021 Changes

- Added Family Support guidance to the Key Considerations section.
- Added language throughout to clarify when abuse or neglect may be happening versus, for example, living in poverty or bruising connected to age-appropriate active play activities.
- Added language on teaching safe body boundaries.
- Added language to encourage staff to share about their experiences with trusted relationships (building resilience).
- Added additional resources in the Resources section.

Introduction

This document provides guidance for teachers, paraeducators, and other educational staff who interact with school-age children in online education settings. This guidance includes information on how to offer families support, recognize signs of abuse and neglect, detect influential factors related to abuse and neglect, report concerns, and practice self-care.

Key Considerations

It is important to recognize the challenges parents and caregivers are experiencing during this unprecedented time, understand that most parents and caregivers are doing the best they can, and work to build relationships with both caregivers and students. Many parents and caregivers have the responsibility of balancing their work schedules with their child's online learning and limited childcare options, or they may be experiencing job loss and financial instability. With that, keep in mind:

- Child Protective Services (CPS) is not equipped to offer tangible supports, such as food or housing to address poverty. Removing a child from the home, even for valid safety concerns, can be traumatic for the child and family.
- Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, and multiracial children are disproportionately reported to CPS. Be aware of and reflect on your own biases to ensure they are not influencing your perceptions of children and families.
- Most referrals for child abuse and neglect are due to potential neglect situations, and a significant number of families enter into care due to poverty-related issues. Living in poverty does not equate to neglecting, and homelessness is not, by itself, reason for removing a child.

- With this in mind, think first about how to offer families information and resources (e.g., food, financial, clothing, childcare, etc.) they may need, instead of immediately referring to child services when poverty or lack of resources are the concerns.
- See the resources section [FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN](#) for information and services that may help parents and caregivers.
 - For families that are struggling with food insecurity, housing insecurity, or other challenges, consider whether community supports might provide assistance. Refer families in need of assistance to community supports, which can be found through resources, such as [Help Me Grow Washington](#), [Washington 2-1-1](#), and [WA Listens](#).
 - The [Washington State Resource Guide for Parents and Caregivers: Caring for Your Family During COVID-19](#) (available in multiple languages) and the [Behavioral Health Toolbox for Families: Supporting Children and Teens During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) are resources to help strengthen the resilience of parents, children, and families.
- See the resources section [FOR EDUCATORS](#) for additional resources and links on understanding disproportionality in child welfare, supporting families, reporting concerns, and increasing your mental and emotional well-being.

Changes Related to Online Settings

- In an online setting, most educators are asking for a parent or caregiver to be present during all interactions between the child and educator. This may change or limit the opportunities for an educator to ask the child directly or ask about the way things are going at home. If someone is abusing or neglecting a child, they may be able to hear the interactions the educator has with the child.
- Typical cues that educators use to spot signs of abuse or neglect may not be applicable in an online environment, such as smell (if the child has consumed alcohol or other drugs) or unexplained injuries (e.g., burns or bruises that may be atypical for the child's age or on uncommon places of their body). Recognize that children can have bruises for many reasons (e.g., rough playing, climbing), and a bruise does not mean abuse or neglect is happening.
- Some children will be learning in non-home settings, such as childcare or group care. Concerns observed in these settings need to be considered and reported just as they are for a home.
- Educators should consider having a conversation with their class that encourages building skills around positive relationships. Part of this is encouraging a positive sense of self and helping others. Encourage students and parents/caregivers to talk with you about things going on in the home. Check with your school administration and counselors for guidance on this. A few ways to do this:
 - If you have an online check-in, like a Google form, consider adding a question that says, "How are you doing?" with a scale of 1-4 (or sad faces to happy faces). Follow up with children in small groups if there are any who reported a 1 or 2.

- As part of the social-emotional learning that educators do for building classroom relationships, talk about the importance of respectful touch and words. Explain to children the importance of keeping their bodies safe and under their control. Our bodies should always feel safe, both at home and school. When safe body boundaries are not being respected, the child should talk with someone they trust.

What to Look for Online: Recognizing Potential Signs of Abuse or Neglect

Distance learning is new for parents, caregivers, and educators. Some of these signs may be due to increased stress related to figuring out the new environment. **The presence of a single sign does not prove child abuse is occurring.** However, when signs appear repeatedly or in combination, consider it a possibility, and take a closer look at the situation.

Potential signs of abuse or neglect in an online education setting include:

- Changes in levels of participation in online classes (e.g., unusually vocal, disruptive, very withdrawn, frequently absent or late to class, leaving early without explanation or notice, not wanting to leave).
- Extremely blunted or heightened emotional expressions.
- Appearing frightened or shrinking at the approach of an adult at home or the care setting.
- Age-inappropriate or sexualized knowledge, language, drawings, or behavior.
- Observable bruising on face, head, neck, hands, or arms (that is atypical for an active child of that developmental age).
- A change in the child's general physical appearance of hygiene (e.g., a child that normally wears weather-appropriate clothing is no longer doing so, or a child that normally appears clean begins to consistently appear with greasy hair).
- Indications that a young child may be home alone.
- Observable signs in the background of health or safety hazards, harsh discipline, violence, substance abuse, or accessible weapons.
- Parent or caregiver giving conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for a child's injury.
- Parent or caregiver describing the child as bad, worthless, or burdensome.
- Difficulty contacting the child or parent/caregiver. Please note that this could also be due to language, cultural, or economic barriers, and should not be a sign of abuse or neglect on its own.

How to Get More Information During Online Interactions

- Pay attention to things that do not look or feel right, while being mindful of potential biases.
- Because the person who may be harming a child may monitor the child's interactions, educators may have to rely on observations of the signs described in the section above.

- For kindergarten through sixth grade, movement activities like ‘get the wiggles out’ may be suitable at the beginning of an online session, which involves students putting both hands up and wiggling fingers back and forth (like Jazz hands).
 - Movement activities can help students focus on learning and may allow educators to notice anything unusual or out of the ordinary about the child’s body, movements, and environment.
- For middle school, junior high, and high school, ensure there is a way for students to safely contact educators (by phone, text, or chat) outside of class for office hours, if school policy allows it. This strategy could also be used with younger students who have access to a phone or computer to contact school staff.

How to Report Concerns or Request Follow-Up

- Follow your district guidelines about reporting requirements and processes.
- Consult with school counselors and administration, as needed. This does not replace mandatory reporting but may offer reassurance and guidance for the process.
- If a child is in immediate danger, call 9-1-1.
- For information on reporting child abuse or neglect:
 - Visit the Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families [Report Child Abuse or Neglect webpage](#), or
 - Call 1-866-END-HARM (1-866-363-4276). Direct TTY calls can be made to 1-800-624-6186.
- See the [Additional Educator, Family, and Child Resources](#) section for additional resources and links.

Building Your Own Resilience

- Educators are being asked to do more than ever. If you see or hear something, please say something. Your skills in building relationships with students and their families are crucially important.
- Talk with others about your experiences. While maintaining confidentiality of those involved, consider sharing your thoughts and concerns with a trusted family member, friend, or colleague. Talking with those you trust builds relationships, attachment, and belonging. You are doing important work, and you are not alone.
- Seek support from a professional resource, such as your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), school behavioral health staff and administrators, or an external behavioral health provider, if needed.
- Reinforce healthy boundaries around on-duty work time and off-duty time. This means:
 - Avoid responding to emails or texts when off duty.
 - Put away work materials to indicate the end of your workday.
 - Give yourself enough downtime to recover from each workday.

- Encourage and support others in setting boundaries by modeling them from the top down in the organization (i.e., administrators, principals, and team leads modeling healthy boundaries).
- Take an active role in working with your principal and district to adapt policies and procedures regarding child abuse and neglect in online education settings.

Additional Educator, Family, and Child Resources

FOR EDUCATORS

Washington State Coronavirus Response

- [Washington Listens](https://www.walistsens.org/) (833-681-0211)
https://www.walistsens.org/
- [Mental & Emotional Well-Being Resources](https://coronavirus.wa.gov/mental-and-emotional-well-being)
https://coronavirus.wa.gov/mental-and-emotional-well-being

Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families

- [Report Child Abuse or Neglect](https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/safety/report-abuse)
https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/safety/report-abuse
- [Racial Disproportionality and Disparity in Washington State](https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/reports/2016DisproportionalityReport-CA.pdf)
https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/reports/2016DisproportionalityReport-CA.pdf
- [Strengthening Families Washington](https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/services/child-development-supports/sfwa): Help families access services and child development supports
https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/services/child-development-supports/sfwa
 - [The Protective Factors Framework](https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/About-Strengthening-Families.pdf)
https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/About-Strengthening-Families.pdf

Washington State Department of Health

- [COVID-19 Behavioral Health Group Impact Reference Guide](https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/BHG-COVID19BehavioralHealthGroupImpactReferenceGuide.pdf)
(includes information specific to educators, families, and children)
https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/BHG-COVID19BehavioralHealthGroupImpactReferenceGuide.pdf

Washington State Office of the Attorney General

- [Child Abuse & Neglect](https://www.atg.wa.gov/child-abuse-neglect)
https://www.atg.wa.gov/child-abuse-neglect

American Bar Association

- [Race and Poverty Bias in the Child Welfare System: Strategies for Child Welfare Practitioners](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/january---december-2019/race-and-poverty-bias-in-the-child-welfare-system---strategies-f/)
https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/january---december-2019/race-and-poverty-bias-in-the-child-welfare-system---strategies-f/

Child Welfare Information Gateway

- [Child Abuse & Neglect](https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/)
https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/

- [Children of Color in the Child Welfare System](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/otherpubs/children/findings/)
https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/otherpubs/children/findings/
- [Causes of Disproportionality](https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/cultural/disproportionality/causes/)
https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/cultural/disproportionality/causes/
- [Supporting & Preserving Families](https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/supporting/)
https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/supporting/
- [How You Can Help Someone Who Is Being Abused or Neglected](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/kids-tipsheet/)
https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/kids-tipsheet/

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

- [Trauma-Informed School Strategies during COVID-19](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/resource-guide/trauma_informed_school_strategies_during_covid-19.pdf)
https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/resource-guide/trauma_informed_school_strategies_during_covid-19.pdf

Stop It Now!

- [What Teachers and Child Care Providers Can Do to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse](https://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/what-teachers-and-child-care-providers-can-do-to-prevent-child-sexual-abuse)
https://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/what-teachers-and-child-care-providers-can-do-to-prevent-child-sexual-abuse

FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

Community Services

- [Help Me Grow Washington](https://helpmegrowwa.org/) (https://helpmegrowwa.org/) is a free service that connects parents and caregivers to resources in their community, such as early childhood development screening, application assistance for health insurance, or help finding a food bank, parenting class, or low-cost medical clinic.
- [Washington 2-1-1](https://wa211.org/about-2-1-1/) (https://wa211.org/about-2-1-1/) is a free, confidential community service and one-stop connection to local services, such as utility assistance, food, housing, health, child and elder care, crisis intervention, and much more.

Washington State Coronavirus Response

- [Washington Listens](https://www.walistsens.org/) (833-681-0211)
https://www.walistsens.org/
- [Food & Housing Resources](https://www.coronavirus.wa.gov/resource-topics/food-and-housing)
https://www.coronavirus.wa.gov/resource-topics/food-and-housing
- [Mental & Emotional Well-Being Resources](https://coronavirus.wa.gov/mental-and-emotional-well-being)
https://coronavirus.wa.gov/mental-and-emotional-well-being

Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families

- [Washington State Resource Guide for Parents and Caregivers: Caring for Your Family During COVID-19](https://dcyf.wa.gov/publications-library?combine_1=fs_0039&combine=&field_program_topic_value=All&field_languages_available_value=All) (available in multiple languages)
https://dcyf.wa.gov/publications-library?combine_1=fs_0039&combine=&field_program_topic_value=All&field_languages_available_value=All
- [Find Child Care and Early Learning Programs](https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/services/earlylearning-childcare/find-child-care)
https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/services/earlylearning-childcare/find-child-care
- Protective Factors Coloring Book

- [English](https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pubs/FS_0026.pdf)
- [Spanish](https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pubs/FS_0026SP.pdf)

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

- [Listening and Talking to Your Child About Domestic Violence](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/children_domestic_violence_listening_talking_to_your_child.pdf)

Washington State Department of Health

- [Behavioral Health Toolbox for Families: Supporting Children and Teens During the COVID-19 Pandemic](https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/BHG-COVID19-FamilyToolbox.pdf)
- [COVID-19 Behavioral Health Group Impact Reference Guide](https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/BHG-COVID19BehavioralHealthGroupImpactReferenceGuide.pdf#page=34)
(includes information specific to families and children)

Acknowledgements

This document was developed by the Washington State Department of Health’s COVID-19 Behavioral Health Strike Team with contributions from the Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families and the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. The Behavioral Health Strike Team is a group of clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists with expertise in disaster relief and behavioral health. Contributing authors include Doug Dicharry, M.D., Stacy Cecchet, Ph.D., ABPP., and Kira Mauseth, Ph.D.

More COVID-19 Information and Resources

Stay up-to-date on the [current COVID-19 situation in Washington](#), [Governor Inslee’s proclamations](#), [symptoms](#), [how it spreads](#), and [how and when people should get tested](#). See our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) for more information.

A person’s race/ethnicity or nationality does not, itself, put them at greater risk of COVID-19. However, data are revealing that communities of color are being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. This is due to the effects of racism, and in particular, structural racism, that leaves some groups with fewer opportunities to protect themselves and their communities. [Stigma will not help to fight the illness](#). Share accurate information with others to keep rumors and misinformation from spreading.

- [WA State Department of Health 2019 Novel Coronavirus Outbreak \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [WA State Coronavirus Response \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Find Your Local Health Department or District](#)
- [CDC Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Stigma Reduction Resources](#)

Have more questions? Call our COVID-19 Information hotline: **1-800-525-0127**

Monday – 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., Tuesday – Sunday and [observed state holidays](#), 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. For interpretative services, **press #** when they answer and **say your language**. For questions about your own health, COVID-19 testing, or testing results, please contact a health care provider.

To request this document in another format, call 1-800-525-0127. Deaf or hard of hearing customers, please call 711 ([Washington Relay](#)) or email civil.rights@doh.wa.gov.