



Champions for Ohio's Children and Families

COVID-19 has put a strain on millions of Ohio families who are coping with added stressors, such as working from home, isolation, limited access to resources and joblessness. When households are under stress, it's often children who are impacted the most. It has become more difficult to identify cases of child abuse and neglect because Ohio's mandated reporters have had limited contact with the children they see often under normal circumstances. Since March, such reports have declined by as much as 50 percent.

We must be sensitive to the stressors children and families are experiencing in their communities by considering their diverse racial, cultural and economic realities. As educational champions, school professionals must correctly differentiate between situational challenges and parental or educational neglect. Several factors to consider include the following:

Educators and School Personnel as Mandated Reporters:

School personnel have always been champions for student safety. In Ohio, school personnel are the main source of reports to child protective services. Working with students and families on a daily basis, school personnel are often the first to notice changes in behavior and appearance that can indicate safety, neglect and abuse concerns. Mandated reporters in schools include:

- Nurses
- Counselors
- Social workers
- Administrators
- Food service personnel
- Custodians
- Administrative professionals
- Teachers
- Paraprofessionals
- Related service personnel

Mandated Reporting

It is important for school personnel to remain champions for student safety, as well as sources of support and resources for families. During remote learning, school personnel continue to be mandatory reporters of suspected child abuse or neglect. The suspicion alone of child abuse and neglect constitutes a required report.

School personnel may feel nervous, worried or intimidated about making a report. While the mandated reporter should be the one to make the report, he or she doesn't have to make the report alone. Supervisors, school counselors and social workers can be helpful supports to assist in the reporting process. Individuals in these roles are familiar with the reporting process and understand the importance of confidentiality.

The resources listed below provide helpful guidance and information for mandated reporters:

- The [Preventing Abuse and Neglect: Student Safety During School Restart](#) webpage empowers school personnel to support families, assess student safety needs and follow mandatory reporting requirements.
- The Centers for Disease Control's [Child Abuse & Neglect Prevention Fact Sheet](#) explains the four common types of child abuse and neglect, and offers prevention strategies.
- The Ohio Department of Education's Office of Professional Conduct offers [#ABConduct Tip Sheets](#). These tip sheets are designed to help educators identify and mitigate risks that occur in everyday situations. Number eight of the [Top 10 Professional Conduct Concerns](#) addresses mandatory reporting.
- Ohioans who suspect child abuse or neglect can call their local children services agency or the following toll-free number any time, 24 hours a day, seven days a week: 1-855-OHCHILD. This line links callers directly to a children services or law enforcement office in their county. Reports can be anonymous.

Supporting Students and Families

COVID-19 is impacting many families' financial situation and creating barriers to accessing needed resources and services. It is easy to confuse poverty with neglect. School personnel must be sensitive to the stressors children and families are experiencing in their communities by considering their diverse racial, cultural and economic realities. In addition to reporting safety and neglect concerns, education professionals can support students and families in ways that ease their stress and help them find resources.

As supporters of students and families, education professionals can:

- Check in with students and families to see how they are doing and ask if they need any support.
- Monitor attendance and student well-being and follow up with families as needed. Make connections with community agencies and faith organizations to identify resources and supports available to families.
- Provide families with information for community supports and resources such as free clothing, food pantries, or free lunch or dinner programs.
- Provide information on mental and behavioral health agencies for families and children.
- Partner with community agencies to provide information sessions for parents about how to support the social, emotional and mental health of everyone in the home.
- Work with the school nurse to facilitate access to health services based on the needs of the students and families.
- Identify community centers, recreation centers or churches that offer youth programs.
- Work with school resource officers to provide early identification of student needs and ensure student wellness.