

Kids Need Schools to Continue Reporting Abuse During COVID-19 Crisis

Empowering teachers, counselors, bus drivers and nutrition staff in their role as mandated reporters during the COVID-19 Crisis

Helpful Tips for Protecting Children

In times of crisis and economic instability, child abuse and neglect rates increase. However, reports of child abuse and neglect in Georgia have declined dramatically. Review these materials to ensure you have the tools to speak up for students' safety.

To Report Effectively, Explain how the Suspected Abuse has Impacted the Child

Example Explanation: (Child) with internet access has not engaged in the virtual classroom in 10 days. I have made 5 failed attempts to contact parents. Concerned that (child's) lack of participation is negatively impacting his/her education. (Child) experienced physical abuse one year ago.

Making a Report is Asking for Help and Services

If you reasonably suspect a child is unsafe - make a report. You do not need proof. You are not making an accusation. You are asking for a professional to help a child and their family.

You May Be the Only Person to Act

If something does not look safe, sound safe or feel safe - report.

Where To Report

24-hour/7 days a week

1-855-GACHILD (1-855-422-4453)

or online at <https://cps.dhs.ga.gov/>

If a child is in immediate danger, call 911.

Children & Youth can speak to a counselor by calling 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453) or visiting www.ChildHelp.org to live chat or text.

Legal Responsibilities and Protections:

- School personnel are mandated reporters. If you have reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or neglect, you must report it immediately.
- No administrator or supervisor may impede or inhibit any report.
- When you make a report in good faith you are protected against civil/criminal penalty or adverse employment action.

Signs of Concerns:

- Lack of virtual attendance or homework not completed over a long period of time
- No contact with a family after many attempts
- Child communicates they feel unsafe, or you see a child in a dangerous environment or see a young child alone for long periods
- Significant change in a child's mood/behavior (the child may appear tired, sad, nervous, disruptive, etc)

Make an extra effort with children who:

- Have a history of emotional, sexual, physical abuse or neglect, drug use or discussed/attempted suicide
- Are responsible for the care of other children or live in a highly stressful family situation with limited support systems
- Require assistance due to physical, mental, behavioral or medical disabilities or delays

Continue to let students know you remain a supportive, caring adult in their lives:

- Check in regularly with students and/or caregivers, and provide encouraging messages.
- Ask questions to engage children. Ex: "Give me one word that describes how you feel today?" "How is learning from home different from learning at school?"



This document was adapted with permission from Missouri KidsFirst www.missourikidsfirst.org.

Free mandated reporter training available at www.PCAGeorgia.org, click on the *Training* tab.
To locate support resources for families wherever you live in Georgia go to www.PCAGeorgiaHelpline.org.



You are a Lifeline for Kids!

GUIDANCE FOR EDUCATORS AND CHILD SERVING PROFESSIONALS

Prioritizing Safety

Prioritizing student safety and managing stress is critical to the well-being and long-term academic success of our students. It is important to build connections with students while maintaining appropriate boundaries. Mandated reporter duties do not stop because children are not in the classroom, but what you see may be different. For the first time, educators are catching a glimpse inside students' homes or into family dynamics through virtual learning. Mandated reporting and child protection strategies must be adapted accordingly.

Healthy teacher-student relationships include boundaries. Similar to in-person safety considerations, virtual environments also require adults to set and model appropriate online practices for students.

- **Minimize opportunity:** All online interactions between teachers and students must be continuously observable; a parent or supervisor should be able to access the virtual classroom at all times.
- **Limit one-on-one contact:** Teachers should conduct sessions with at least two or more students and avoid one-on-one contact by video chat, FaceTime, or online chat groups. All online contact with a student should be appropriate and observable by others using school supported platforms.
- **Provide social and emotional support to students (and families):** Be a student's support system and help kids connect with their peers. However, be sure any direct contact with a student is visible on the school's online platform and includes other personnel or the caregiver of that child.
- **Prioritize health and well-being:** Adding more stress will worsen a student's cognitive ability to adapt and learn, so consider the total academic workload you and your fellow teachers are asking of your students. Promote healthy sleeping, eating and exercise habits.
- **Identify children and families who need additional support:** Your ability to connect families or students to resources now can make all the difference.

How do you know if a child is being abused without seeing the child in-person?

You can ask open-ended questions about their current situation and inquire about who they are interacting with. Ex: "How are things going at home?" "How do you feel about your time at home?" "Tell me more about that." "Who are you hanging out with at home?" If there are concerning or vague answers you may want to follow up with "Are you feeling safe/hungry/comfortable, etc.?"

You do not need proof of abuse to make a report. You only need to suspect the abuse. However, it is always important to provide as many details as possible. This will provide DFCS with enough information to warrant an assessment of the child.

I think my student is afraid or needs help but is not able to talk to me privately; what can I do?

At the beginning of each video lesson or conversation, tell your students they can communicate with you through chat message in the learning platform at any time during the online class. If needed, coordinate a session with your student, you, and a counselor.

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What do I do if a child does not attend virtual class or they miss many?

Reaching out to the student, parent, or guardian to determine why the student is not participating is a good first step. Many families are struggling to balance the demands of school at home for multiple children with other priorities such as members of the household working from home. There are also circumstances whereby students may be home alone and/or caring for siblings. The more we understand the circumstances that may be preventing a student from attending, the more equipped we are to provide support or identify resources to increase their access to virtual instruction.

What if I see something I'm concerned about?

Trust your instincts. In the state of Georgia you only have to **suspect** abuse or neglect to make a report to child protective services. If your school has a designated reporter such as a school social worker or counselor, contact them immediately with any details they would need to make a report.

As a mandated reporter you are required by law to report anything you suspect as abuse or neglect to DFCS within 24 hours.

1-855-GACHILD (1-855-422-4453)

or online at <https://cps.dhs.ga.gov/>

Mandated Reporter Resources

Learn more about recognizing physical and behavior signs of abuse and neglect through ProSolutions' free mandated reporter training below.

https://www.prosolutionstraining.com/store/product/?tProductVersion_id=1093.

Prevent Child Abuse Georgia provides additional details for mandated reporters, webinar recordings that address reporting in a virtual environment and live virtual training.

<https://abuse.publichealth.gsu.edu/free-online-mandated-reporting/>.

Darkness to Light provides online training on preventing child sexual abuse from within organizations and has resources you can also give parents to help them protect children.

<https://www.d2l.org/education/additional-training/protecting-children-during-crisis/>

Childhelp provides hotline, text, and live chat services to children who are experiencing abuse. The professional crisis counselors can provide support and help children make a report to their state's authorities. <https://www.childhelp.org/childhelp-hotline/>

The Georgia Crisis and Access Line provides a free 24/7 helpline for mental health crisis assistance and access to mental health resources throughout Georgia through 1-800-715-4225 or

www.mygcal.com.

Human Trafficking and the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)

It is also important to understand and identify suspected human trafficking and CSEC. Any suspected involvement of children in human trafficking or CSEC should be reported to DFCS immediately.

- Online Training - International Human Trafficking Institute www.ihatinstitute.org/
- Victim and Survivor Services 24/7 Hotline: 1-866-END-HTGA (1-866-363-4842)

The Impact on Children and Families

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The Stress on Children & Families

At the beginning of the pandemic, many families and children were cut off from support programs, social connections, and primary safety nets such as schools, early care and learning centers, and youth serving organizations. Moving to a life of physical distancing was a major change for all families, however the impact of the pandemic is different for every family and child. Students may return to the physical classroom or virtual classroom with heightened anxiety. We all having something called a stress response system which can be positive, tolerable, or toxic if extreme or prolonged.

POSITIVE

Positive Stress Responses are a normal and essential part of healthy development, characterized by brief increases in heart rate and mild elevations in hormone levels. An example of an experience that may evoke a positive stress response is the first day of virtual learning with a new teacher and new classmates.

TOLERABLE

Tolerable Stress Responses activate the body's alert systems to a greater degree as a result of more severe, longer-lasting difficulties, such as the loss of a loved one, a natural disaster, or a frightening injury. If the activation is time-limited and buffered by relationships with adults who help the child adapt, the brain and other organs recover from what might otherwise be damaging effects.

TOXIC

Toxic Stress Responses can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years.

The Impact of Stress on Families

During times of crisis and economic instability, risk factors that contribute to child abuse and neglect increase. During the last recession, rates of abusive head trauma in children:

- Increased from 9 to 15 per 100,000 children (between 2004 and 2009)
- Doubled in children 2-years-old and younger

Another study found that for every 1% increase in the 90-day mortgage delinquency rate, there was a 3% increase in the rate of child abuse requiring hospital admission, and a 5% annual increase in the rate of traumatic brain injury suspected to be caused by child abuse.

A survey of parents from March 2020 showed that 19% of parents said they were yelling or screaming more, and 15% said they increased their use of discipline.

Supporting Children and Families

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You can continue to be a hero to students in this time of crisis and help mitigate the negative impact of traumatic events and stress; caregivers might not be able to do it alone. While it is impossible to predict how the children we serve will respond, there are things we can do to help children recalibrate to another major change.

Age	Reactions	How to Help
Preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fear of being alone• Bad dreams• Loss of bladder/bowel control• Change in appetite• Increased temper tantrums, whining or clinging behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice patience and tolerance• Provide verbal and appropriate physical reassurance• Plan calming, comforting activities• Maintain routines
School Aged (6-12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Irritability, whining, aggressive• Clinging, nightmares• Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches)• Withdrawal from peers even virtually• Competition for attention• Forgetfulness about new information learned through educational activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice patience and tolerance• Promote play sessions and staying in touch with friends through telephone and internet• Encourage regular exercise and stretching• Set gentle but firm limits• Discuss the current outbreak and encourage questions, including what is being done on a community and state level
Youth Aged (13-18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical symptoms (headaches, etc.)• Sleep/appetite disturbance• Agitation or decrease in energy• Ignoring health promotion behaviors• Isolating from peers and loved ones• Concerns about stigma/injustices• Avoiding school or cutting school	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice patience, tolerance and reassurance• Encourage continuation of routines• Encourage discussion of pandemic experience with peers and family (do not force)• Discuss and address stigma and potential injustices occurring during the pandemic.

Support Families that May Be Struggling

Families are already under tremendous stress, so if possible, avoid adding to their burdens. Just asking parents how they are can make a big difference.

Resources for Caregivers

- Georgia Department of Education resource list- <https://www.georgiainsights.com/>
- Emergency Utility and Rental Assistance- Call 211
- Fulltime Care for School Age Children in School- <https://www.decal.ga.gov/CAPS/Solve.aspx>
- Free Tutoring Services: <https://tutoratl.org/> (Metro Atlanta Area)
- Statewide supportive programs for families: 1-800-CHILDREN (244-5373) Helpline and Resource Map, www.PCAGeorgiaHelpline.org

Supporting Children and Families Through Traumatic Experiences

- <https://www.mindfulschools.org/>
- <https://www.samhsa.gov/coronavirus>:
- <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/trauma-sensitive-schools-training-package>