



Recognizing Child Abuse When Interacting Virtually

During these times of high stress on parents and caregivers, we know that abuse is increasing, even though the number of cases being reported remain below average. With most in-person activities remaining virtual in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19, many people wonder, “How will we know if child abuse is happening?”

Many of the warning signs of child abuse to look for in a virtual environment remain the same as in a physical environment, but some are different. Here are some tips to help you navigate suspicions of abuse when interacting virtually with children and families.

What Abuse and Neglect Look Like

Bodily Injury: Take note of injuries visible when using virtual platforms; injuries to the face, neck, and arms may be the most noticeable. Do injuries look like normal child’s play, or do they appear more serious?

Ask the child how they got the injury — waiting until they are not in front of other children — and only ask open-ended questions. “What happened to your arm?” or “Can you tell me about that goose egg on your forehead?”

Note that injuries behind the ears could indicate a head injury and are therefore especially concerning. If you can’t get further clarification on an injury but suspect abuse, call ChildLine. If you get further clarification and suspect abuse, call ChildLine.

Serious Mental Injury: Remain aware of child-caregiver interactions. Does the child appear depressed or voicing thoughts of harming themselves? Is there evidence of or disclosed self-harm happening? Much insight into family dynamics can be gained from observing what's happening in the background of your virtual visit. Are other children being berated or yelled at? How are those other children reacting?

Sexual Abuse or Exploitation: If the child makes a concerning statement about being uncomfortable about an individual in their home, try following up with open-ended questions, such as, "Why do they make you feel uncomfortable?" This may help you and the child clarify what their discomfort stems from, so you know whether or not to suspect abuse.

Serious Physical Neglect: These are those neglect concerns and/or essentials of life that have reached the point of having an impact/effect/injury/impairment to the child and must be reported to ChildLine.

We may see an increase in children being left home alone or in the care of siblings who may not be old or mature enough to safely take on that responsibility. Although there is no set age in PA when a child can be left home alone, we should still report when we have concerns about the child's ability to remain safe when left home alone.

If you suspect abuse or neglect of a child, please call ChildLine at 800-932-0313, or (if you are a mandated reporter) make the report online at www.compass.state.pa.us/cwis

Identifying and Responding to Abuse and Neglect

Community Approach: Intervening effectively in the lives of neglected children and families

is a community concern and must be shared among community professionals and citizens. No single agency, individual, or discipline has all the necessary knowledge, skills, or resources to provide the assistance needed by neglected children and their families.

Reach out to your neighbors and support them during this difficult time. By finding ways to support the families in your community and connect them with needed resources, you will help alleviate stressors and potentially reduce the risk for child abuse and neglect.

- Connect with the caregivers, either outside with physical distancing or virtually, to offer a listening ear.

- Offer to do porch drop-offs for essentials like food or toilet paper and items for kid-friendly activities.

To learn more about ways you can intervene and support families in your community, email Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance at training@pa-fsa.org. PFSA's The Front Porch Project® is an excellent training resource for community members, professionals, and volunteers utilizing a community approach.

Intimate Partner Violence: Know that child abuse and neglect is more likely to occur in homes where intimate partner violence is already present between caregivers.

Also, children who witness domestic violence are often exposed to the increased tension in the home prior to the assault and witness and/or deal with the aftermath. All of this can lead to increased anger and decreased ability to concentrate.

Children who are home and schooling virtually during the pandemic are at greater risk of exposure to the effects of intimate partner violence in the home.

Resources for the non-offending caregiver can be found at pcadv.org.

Additional Guidance for Professionals

Encourage the professionals from youth-serving agencies to hold regular virtual sessions with the children they serve during times of social distancing. By seeing the children through these virtual platforms, you may be able to see if a child has injuries.

Pay special attention to any injuries on their neck or near their ears or patterned marks on the face as these are highly indicative of abuse. Also pay attention to what is happening and being said in the background with family members; it can be surprising what you see and hear during a virtual session in the home.

Lack of participation in virtual school or a decline in grades could be a sign that something is wrong in the home.

If possible, consider reaching out to the parents/caregivers to offer support. It could be that the family is still adjusting to the new “normal,” or there may be significant stressors in the family that your agency could help with by connecting them with resources. By addressing stressors within the family, you can help reduce the likelihood of abuse or neglect occurring.

Understand that children are online more than ever before, and so there is a higher risk of online perpetrators trying to engage them in sexual talk and activities virtually. Encourage the children you work or volunteer with to tell you or another trusted adult if they ever feel unsafe or if someone makes them feel uncomfortable.

Children are more likely to express their concerns and frustrations and disclose abuse through social media and other online forums during this time. Consider providing online communication networks for children to communicate with your agency.

Revise your agency’s child protection policy to include this new virtual world. While connecting with kids virtually is encouraged, it also opens the door for staff with ill-intent to engage children in sexual talk or other abusive behaviors. Consider building in safeguards such as always Ccing another staff person on emails to children, having two adults on calls/virtual sessions, and recording all virtual calls/sessions, all wise additions to your child protection policy.

Schedule training for all your staff and volunteers working with children on recognizing and reporting suspected child abuse. Contact PFSA at training@pa-fsa.org to schedule a virtual training session free of charge.

As always, you know the kids you work with best. If something doesn’t seem right and you suspect possible abuse or neglect, it is always best to make that call to ChildLine so that the situation can be assessed or investigated further.

To download a handout with this information, please [click here](#).





PA Child Abuse **PREVENTION SYMPOSIUM**

a Virtual Event

Thursday, November 5, 2020

This all-day virtual conference will feature nationally acclaimed speakers who are experts in child protection, education, the impact of substance use disorder on children, and equity, diversity, and inclusion for youth. Presentations will include a variety of topics that are relevant to professionals and organizations that provide programs to children.



Erin Gruwell

Freedom Writers
Foundation

Keynote Speaker: Erin Gruwell **Session Title: Becoming a Catalyst for Change**

Erin Gruwell is a teacher, education activist, and founder of the Freedom Writers Foundation. She created the Freedom Writer Methods, a progressive teaching philosophy and curricula designed to achieve excellence from all students.

Erin will share her motivational story, as portrayed in the book *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*. Erin challenged her students to overcome the seemingly insurmountable problems of poverty, racism, and violence.

How can we all become role models for tolerance, respect, and cooperation? Erin teaches us all how we can become "Catalysts for Change."

Tye and Sue Ellen, two original Freedom Writers who are now adults, will join Erin during her presentation. Tye was physically and sexually abused as a child. He took his pain and turned it into a purpose, writing diary entries for *The Freedom Writers Diary*. After serving in the Navy, he

continues to share his story with students and teachers worldwide, having successfully broken the cycle of violence and abuse that plagued his childhood.

Sue Ellen was raised in a violent neighborhood, and her father was abusive. After her parents divorced, Sue Ellen became homeless, and her brother died. Shortly afterward, Sue Ellen joined Room 203, where she felt empowered to use her voice. Today, she works at the Freedom Writers Foundation and shares her inspirational story about the power of education.

<http://www.freedomwritersfoundation.org/>



Todd Snovel

Former Executive Director
PA LGBTQ Affairs

Speaker: Todd Snovel

Session Title: Affirming LGBTQ+ Communities in the Prevention of Child Abuse

While embracing our intersectional commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, this session will address unique needs and challenges often faced by LGBTQ+ children and youth and those beginning to question their sexual and/or gender identities. Learn about ways in which our actions and words demonstrate competency and understanding of LGBTQ communities, the increased health needs that exist among LGBTQ-identified community members, and action steps toward assisting our agencies in being fully affirming and brave spaces.

Todd Snovel serves as Special Assistant to the President for Strategic Initiatives at the Pennsylvania College of Art and Design in Lancaster. Prior to this position, Todd was appointed by Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf as the inaugural Executive Director for the Pennsylvania Commission on LGBTQ Affairs. In this role, he advised the governor on policies, practices, legislation, and systems that impacted LGBTQ individuals and communities.



Chris Glover

Joining Forces
for Children

Speaker: Chris Glover

Session Title: Addiction: Through the Lens of a Child

In this training, participants will learn about the illness of addiction and its impact on family systems. Special emphasis will be on the experience of a child living in a family experiencing addiction. Training will also introduce participants to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) behavioral health continuum of care, including prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery. Participants will learn about individualized risk and protective factors and how they can build protective factors in individuals.



Jane Straub

Zero Abuse
Project

Speaker: Jane Straub

Session Title: Enhancing Student Safety During a Pandemic

"Safe at home" unfortunately does not describe the circumstances for all children and youth. As we work to navigate this new world of COVID-19, we find that our children may also be at heightened risk of abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Physical isolation limits whom our children and youth connect with in person while opening up their connections to the world online.

This training will cover the risks to children and adolescents who may be confined at home with someone who abuses them. We will cover strategies to connect with youth as well as providing

preventative measures for adults who may be feeling extreme stress and frustration. This training will also cover online safety for youth and caregivers of youth. Recognizing signs of abuse or attempts at disclosure are imperative as we connect with youth and families for a very short duration of time.

Session Title: Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) With Positive Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences are events that have the potential to become traumatic for a child. For some children, COVID-19 will be that experience. How do we create buffers for children and families to mitigate the risk? Positive Childhood Experiences have been proven to lessen the impact of trauma. Supporting children and families during this pandemic is essential.

5 CONTINUING ED CREDITS AVAILABLE AT SYMPOSIUM

Social workers, marriage and family therapists, and professional counselors can earn up to 5 hours of Continuing Education Units (CEU) at no additional cost. Attorneys can earn up to 5 hours of Continuing Legal Education (CLE) Credits for \$1.50 per credit.

► **Register online at pafsa.org or click here.**

Sponsorships available!

Email amoffitt@pa-fsa.org or call 717-238-0937.



Thank you

A shout out and a **BIG THANK YOU** to you, our generous donors! Your support has been of special significance during the past several months as we have revamped our methods of providing education, support, and training to agencies serving children and families, professionals, and volunteers working with children and many others in this a new virtual world.

Your generosity gives us the flexibility to develop new training models and services to meet the critical needs of those who serve children and families throughout Pennsylvania and beyond.

Your gifts also assist in providing the funding necessary for PFSA to respond to pressing needs such as: transferring our mandated reporter training (MRT) for online access to assure that those working with children,

either as professionals or volunteers, could be trained and certificated, with most of these participants working from their homes. Our annual PA Child Abuse Prevention Symposium has become a virtual event to take place on Nov. 5. All these critical activities have been made possible with the help of your donations.

Thank you for helping PA Family Support Alliance stay at the forefront of keeping our children safe.

A big bear hug to each of you. (Virtually, of course.)

TO MAKE A DONATION

please contact Director of Development Ann Moffitt, ACFRE, at 800-448-4906 or amoffitt@pa-fsa.org.