

# Recognizing Child Abuse When Interacting Virtually

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With most in-person activities moving to virtual platforms in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19, many are asking, *How will we know if child abuse is happening?*

In fact, we know that calls to report suspected child abuse and neglect to ChildLine have dropped by 50% since the social distancing efforts have gone into effect.

Reasons include fewer interactions with children and the fact that it is not as easy to see injuries to children when interacting virtually. Further, children may not feel comfortable disclosing abuse when interacting virtually or from home because the person who is abusing them may overhear.

During this time of high stress on parents and caregivers, we know that abuse is increasing, even though the number of cases being reported have declined. Hospitals across the country are already seeing an increase in severe cases of physical abuse to children.

Although many of the warning signs of child abuse remain the same, here is some information and tips to help you navigate when to suspect 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 are the areas that may be the most noticeable. Do injuries look like normal child play or more serious? Ask the child how they got the injury—not in front of other children—and be sure to 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 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. *Why do they make you feel uncomfortable?* This may help you and the child clarify 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 enough/mature enough to take on that responsibility safely. Although there is not a set age in PA for 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.

## 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.

Connect with 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 PFSA at [training@pa-fsa.org](mailto:training@pa-fsa.org). PFSA's **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 due to school occurring 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](http://pcadv.org).

A report to ChildLine can be made by calling **800-932-0313** or making the report online at **[compass.state.pa.us/cwis](https://compass.state.pa.us/cwis)**

## 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 therefore 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, 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 connection 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, always having two adults on calls/virtual sessions, and recording all virtual calls/sessions are wise additions to your child protection policy.
- ▶ Schedule training for all your staff and volunteers working with children on how to recognize and report suspected child abuse. Contact PFSA at [training@pa-fsa.org](mailto: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.

## **Additional Resources**

*Responding to Child Abuse During a Pandemic: 25 Tips for MDTs* <https://cdn2.zeroabuseproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Responding-to-Child-Abuse-During-a-Pandemic.pdf>

*Conducting and Defending a Pandemic-Era Forensic Interview* <https://cdn2.zeroabuseproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Conducting-and-Defending-Pandemic-Era-Forensic-Interview-FINAL-1.pdf>



**If you need help with finding further resources for families or want more information on what you can do to assist families during the pandemic, email PFSA at [info@pa-fsa.org](mailto:info@pa-fsa.org).**

