

# The Role of the School Nurse in Detecting and Preventing Child Abuse During This Age of Online Education

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*Due to collaborative relationships fostered with school staff and the ability to form long-term trusting relationships with students, school nurses are uniquely situated to address the issue of child abuse detection and prevention in this age of online education brought about by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). School nurses can and should champion the cause of child safety in their schools, even during school closures through the implementation of key nursing interventions such as staff education on detecting child abuse in online environments. School nurses can also protect children by supporting parents who are dealing with great stressors due to the current global pandemic. Providing resources for families, encouraging parental self-care, educating families about online safety, and encouraging family discussion about child abuse all help to prevent abuse and maltreatment of children. When child abuse goes unreported because of school closures, school nurses can bridge the gap and advocate for detection and prevention in online education.*

**Keywords:** school nurse; child abuse; detection; prevention; online education; pandemic; COVID-19

School closures and stay-at-home guidelines during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic have brought new challenges to the school nurse's role of helping to prevent, detect, and report child abuse. Our former system for detection and reporting child maltreatment depended on children interacting with adults and professionals outside the home. Due to shelter-in-place orders and virtual school mandates, children are staying home more than ever, and for some, in an unsafe environment. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS, 2020), educators and school staff are the largest collective reporters of child maltreatment, responsible for over 20% of all calls to child protective services every year. However, throughout the U.S., reports to child protective services have dropped drastically since March of 2020.

Meanwhile, families are dealing with the increased stressors of job loss, illness, quarantine, and uncertainty about the future due to COVID-19 (Schmidt & Natanson, 2020). Unfortunately, the result has been more grave outcomes for children with medical providers reporting cases of severe abuse and even death (Schmidt & Natanson, 2020). Little exists in the literature addressing this topic of school nurses combating child abuse during school closures. The purpose of this article is to present appropriate school nurse interventions to assist with recognition and prevention of child abuse during online education.

## A Unique Role in Schools

School nurses work on the front lines of child abuse detection and prevention. As a result of our ability to form long-term trusting relationships with students, school nurses play a vital role in child safety, health, and wellness (National Association of School Nurses [NASN], 2018). School nurses form collaborative relationships with school staff, community partners, medical providers, students, and families that promote safety

**Table 1.** Nursing Interventions

Goal	Focus	Action
Detect abuse	Train	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Educate staff in recognizing abuse online</li></ul>
	Observe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Watch for signs and symptoms of abuse while in online environments</li></ul>
Prevent abuse	Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Contact and support parents of at-risk students</li><li>Provide resources for families</li><li>Encourage parental self-care</li></ul>
	Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Educate about online safety</li><li>Encourage parents to start talking about abuse with their children</li></ul>

and protection for children and are in a unique position to be able to champion the cause of child abuse prevention, early identification, reporting, and treatment especially during the current pandemic (NASN, 2018). However, as a result of COVID-19 and the shift to online learning, we have to think outside the box on effective ways to reach that goal.

### The State of Child Maltreatment

Fortunately, over the past 20 years the rate of childhood sexual and physical abuse has declined (Child Trends, 2019; Dallas Children's Advocacy Center [DCAC], 2020; Finkelhor et al., 2016). Nevertheless, in 2018 alone, child protective services around the United States received 4.3 million reports of suspected child abuse and neglect involving 7.8 million children (DHHS et al., 2020). Since household stress is a significant predictor of abuse, professionals expect cases of abuse to rise during the current pandemic (Rothstein & Olympia, 2020). Statistics tell us that one in 10 children will be sexually abused before their 18th birthday and that currently the most common form of child abuse remains neglect (Child Trends, 2019; DCAC, 2020). With reports of 73% of abused children not telling anyone about their abuse and 92% of children knowing their abuser, it falls on trusted adults to advocate and speak up (DCAC, 2020).

With the COVID-19 pandemic, our face-to-face time with students was drastically reduced, if not eliminated, in favor of virtual learning. So how do we speak up for our students if we are not in the same physical space?

### Child Abuse Reporting and Training

Reporting child abuse is not only a school nurse's legal responsibility but also an ethical obligation. As of 2019, 47 states as well as Washington DC and several U.S. territories have mandatory child abuse reporting laws for professionals including teachers, school administrators, and nurses (DHHS et al., 2019). The three remaining states (Indiana, New Jersey, and Wyoming) mandate reporting of child abuse but do not specify which professions are required to report (DHHS et al., 2019). As highly trusted professionals, we are to advocate for our students, promote their health and well-being, and speak out about illegal behavior (NASN, 2016).

To ensure school staff are prepared for their role of detecting and reporting abuse, child abuse training has become mandated in many states (AB-1432, 2014; Texas Education Code, 2019). As a result, many classroom teachers and school staff are familiar with the child maltreatment signs to watch for in their interactions with students. Red flags of potential child abuse include students who regularly appear disheveled or dirty, present with

unexplained injuries or multiple injuries in different stages of healing, or have sudden changes in behavior or school performance, and these red flags are recognizable to the trained eye, especially when educators are with students every day on campus (Arreguin & Rodgers, 2020).

### A New Way to Detect and Prevent

Moving into an online teaching environment has naturally created challenges in the area of detecting and preventing child maltreatment. School nurses will need to pull from their strengths of resourcefulness and creativity, looking for new ways to advocate for students. Potential nursing interventions useful in detecting and preventing child abuse in online environments are listed in Table 1. School nurses can help educate colleagues on ways to detect child abuse or neglect through online encounters. Equally as important, school nurses can support parents during these times of increased stress as a way of preventing child abuse and protecting students.

### Detection

*Provide Training.* School nurses can train educators to spot signs and symptoms of child maltreatment during online learning. The warning signs of maltreatment learned through traditional child abuse training still apply; however, school personnel must be on the lookout for these signs in online educational spaces. One major warning sign is a decline in a student's virtual attendance or work performance. Remind school staff that once other causes have been ruled out (such as lack of internet access), a drop in performance or attendance could be a result of some form of maltreatment the student is suffering at home. Just as during in-person education, children who are suffering abuse or neglect will likely struggle to pay attention in class, as well as to complete assignments, due to being worried about their own personal safety, or the safety of a family member, especially if the perpetrator is in the

**Table 2.** Detecting Child Abuse During Online Education

- Declining attendance or school work online
- Changes in mood or behavior in online sessions
- Clothing that does not match the weather
- Broken objects or yelling in the background of online classes
- Check in on kids who have ever expressed concern about their safety at home
- Use open-ended questions and provide ways for kids to respond privately

same room with them (Arreguin & Rodgers, 2020).

*Increase Observation.* Educators will need to place a heightened emphasis on observation of students during distance or “at-home” learning as indicated in Table 2. Instruct educators to notice what is happening in the background during online sessions with students and to note if they see broken objects or hear yelling. School nurses and educators should pay special attention to any student who has ever expressed a concern for his or her personal safety in the past. Children who have suffered maltreatment in the past will be at higher risk of abuse during stressful situations such as the current global pandemic (Arreguin & Rodgers, 2020). Educators should watch for significant changes in a student’s mood or behavior in online group sessions. Watch what students with a history of suicidal ideation are wearing in case they are attempting to hide injuries (e.g., wearing long sleeves during warm weather;

Arreguin & Rodgers, 2020). Educators can ask open-ended questions in online assignments and give students private ways to respond (Arreguin & Rodgers, 2020). This may provide an opportunity for a child suffering abuse to reach out through their writing or assignments. Remind staff that any suspicion of maltreatment should be reported and that during online learning they may have less to go on. Emphasize that it is the job of school staff to report suspicions, not investigate the probable abuse or neglect.

### Prevention

*Provide Support.* School nurses and educators can create systems of support for parents and caregivers as a way to prevent child maltreatment during this uncertain and isolating time. Maintaining close contact with caregivers and providing support, described herein, will help protect children as so many caregivers have lost any respite during this time of quarantine and social

distancing. Parents and caregivers of physically or mentally disabled students are especially at risk and need extra support (Arreguin & Rodgers, 2020). School nurses and educators can take the time to reach out to parents regularly via open chat or zoom times. While doing this, be mindful of what you see or hear in the background when talking to a caregiver (Arreguin & Rodgers, 2020). At-risk families could especially benefit from a personal phone call or email from their child’s teacher or school nurse. Ask parents if they need support and follow through with their requests for resources (Arreguin & Rodgers, 2020). School nurses can help create resource lists to share with parents including how to find support with food, clothing, and homework help for their children (see Table 3). Ask parents how they are dealing with the stress of the pandemic. Encourage parents to participate in their own self-care for the benefit of their children. Self-care suggestions for parents could include taking a walk, talking to a friend, trading babysitting services with another family to get a night away, turning off the news, seeking out a therapist to talk to, or attending a religious service. Crisis counselors are available to parents and students by a simple text (see Table 3) to the Crisis Text Line where a trained volunteer is available to discuss many issues including coronavirus, school, anxiety, depression, emotional abuse, or suicide

**Table 3.** Resources for Child Abuse Prevention and Help

Name	Purpose	Website or hotline
Crisis Text Line	Talk to a crisis counselor	<a href="http://www.crisistextline.org">www.crisistextline.org</a> or text “HOME” to 741741
Feeding America	Find a local food bank	<a href="https://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank">https://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank</a>
Hot Chocolate Talk	Find guides for how to talk to your children about sexual abuse at every age and stage	<a href="https://www.cfchildren.org/resources/child-abuse-prevention/">https://www.cfchildren.org/resources/child-abuse-prevention/</a>
Khan Academy	Homework help and virtual classes to engage children	<a href="http://www.khanacademy.org">www.khanacademy.org</a>
Meals4Kids	Find meals for kids while schools are closed	<a href="https://www.fns.usda.gov/meals4kids">https://www.fns.usda.gov/meals4kids</a>
National Domestic Violence Hotline	If you are being abused and need help	<a href="http://www.thehotline.org">www.thehotline.org</a> 1-800-799-7233 or text “LOVEIS” to 22522

(Rothstein & Olympia, 2020). A helpful, but not exhaustive, list of online and national resources has been provided for you in Table 3. School nurses are encouraged to compile and share a similar list of local resources available to families.

**Increase Safety.** School nurses can increase safety for students by advocating for families. Many school districts sent home computer devices for each student this past school year. While necessary to facilitate learning, the devices may also increase stress for parents who may not know how to operate their child's device nor how to ensure online safety for devices at home. To reduce parental stress and likewise reduce the risk of abuse, school nurses can provide tips for parents on internet safety such as the need to set boundaries for daily internet time and offer parent education on how to help students use their school-issued device, along with tips on cyber-security (Arreguin & Rodgers, 2020). This parent education is best accomplished through collaboration with other school or district employees who specialize in use of the devices or internet safety. Any focus on internet safety for parents or students provides an added benefit of helping protect children from online predators. School nurses can also encourage parents to start having conversations about abuse with their children, which in itself creates protection for kids. When you educate children about abuse, you empower them to speak up and say "No" to potential abusers. Online resources, such as Hot Chocolate Talk (see Table 3), offer parents free and easy-to-access guides for how to talk to children at every age and stage about sexual abuse (Committee for Children, n.d.). School nurses can also support victims of abuse by highlighting information about the National Domestic Violence Hotline (see Table 3) and the protections provided to families (Rothstein & Olympia, 2020).

In this new pandemic-created world of online education, school nurses can be instrumental in speaking up *and out* about child abuse. We can educate school staff, and in so doing, keep it at the forefront of their minds on behalf of student safety and well-being. We can support parents through resources, education, and open chat times. We can protect our students by encouraging parents to talk with their kids about child abuse and provide access to crisis hotlines. Throughout this pandemic and beyond, school nurses must be resourceful and creative in the way we advocate for our students to both prevent and detect child abuse and neglect. ■

### Acknowledgments

Thank you to Stephanie Nwadike, RN, and Emily Winn, RN, who assisted with this article.

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