

## **Going Back to School and Keeping Your Eyes Open:**

In the excitement and hustle and bustle of starting school again, it may be easy for school employees to overlook even the most obvious signs of child abuse. However, it is the first few days back to school that might be the most revealing when it comes to recognizing potential signs of abuse for a child who has spent the past few months in an abusive or neglectful home.

Although indicators of potential abuse and neglect can also be caused by other factors, there are some signs and symptoms common to children who are abused. Child abuse can include serious physical injury, serious mental injury, serious physical neglect, and sexual abuse as well as imminent risk of serious physical injury or sexual abuse.<sup>1</sup>

The child:

- Sudden changes in behavior from decreased appetite to promiscuity
- Declines in school performance
- Experiences difficulties in learning or concentrating that are not attributable to specific physical or psychological causes
- Displays hyper-vigilance
- Discloses a lack of adult supervision at home and/or drug and alcohol use by parents
- Shows up at school and other activities early, stays late, and does not want to go home
- Displays behavior that is overly compliant, withdrawn, or passive
- Has unexplained bruises, burns, broken bones, or other injuries
- Displays fear of parents
- Frequently late or absent from school
- Begs for food or money or steals food or money
- Displays poor hygiene, including clothing that is dirty or fits poorly
- Weight loss
- Medical and dental needs are not addressed
- Pregnancy
- Demonstrates sexual knowledge or behavior that is not typical for their age
- Runs away from home
- Refuses to change for gym or participate in physical activities
- Discontinues engaging in activities that they previously enjoyed such as sports, clubs, or playing an instrument
- Demonstrates aggressive behavior toward self or others
- Alienates themselves from others

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<sup>1</sup> *Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect: Signs and Symptoms*, Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007

In addition to potential signs of abuse seen in children, parents and other caretakers may also display behaviors that are cause for concern and may be indicative of abuse.

The parent:

- Shows little or no concern for the child's welfare
- Denies the existence of the child's problems at home or school
- Blames the child for problems at home or school
- Requests harsh discipline at school for the child
- Conveys that the child is completely bad, worthless, or burdensome
- Rarely touches or looks at the child or overtly rejects the child
- Is very demanding of child beyond their capabilities
- Depends on the child to care for the parent's needs
- Speaks negatively of the child, including blaming, belittling, or berating the child
- Does not address health issues
- Rejects offers of help for the child's problem(s)

As mandated reporters, it is important for school employees to be vigilant of possible indicators of abuse and neglect. It may be just one sign that causes suspicion or it may be a combination of signs that does so. Either way, once a reasonable suspicion has been reached, it is the legal mandate in Pennsylvania to call ChildLine at (800) 932-0313 to report your suspicions. And, remember, it is not necessary to be positive abuse has occurred or to gather evidence – all you need is reasonable cause to suspect.

PFSA provides training specifically on "Recognizing and Reporting Child Abuse." To find out more about how to schedule a session for your school or other organization, visit [www.pa-fsa.org](http://www.pa-fsa.org) or call 800-448-4906.