Steps Toward Child Abuse Prevention & Creating Safe School Environments:

A "How-to" Manual for Massachusetts Educators

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Executive Summary

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children's trust

Introduction

The public usually assumes that most child abuse and neglect, particularly child sexual abuse, occurs in the home. However, child abuse and neglect can happen in any youth-serving organization (YSO) where there are children and youth - and individuals who are motivated to harm them. Schools are no exception. Previous editions of this Manual emphasized the critical role of educators and school staff in recognizing the physical and behavioral signs and symptoms that children exhibit as a result of abuse or neglect whether it occurred at home, in the school, or in the community. Similarly, we have explained the role and legal responsibilities of educators as mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect in the Commonwealth. This edition will reiterate and, in some areas, expand upon information related to these responsibilities, further aiding the educator in responding to all aspects of their students' educational needs.

This Manual is the 4th in a series published by the Massachusetts Children's Trust. The Manual's initial purpose was to serve as a resource for educators and other school personnel on their responsibilities as mandated reporters to recognize, respond to, and report suspicions of child abuse and neglect. Later editions included an additional emphasis on providing guidelines, strategies, and tools for the prevention of child abuse, particularly child sexual abuse, in school settings.

This edition of "Steps Toward Child Abuse Prevention & Creating Safe School Environments" is grounded in the evidence-based and evidence-informed advancements in the field of child protection from the last edition (2016) to the present. The manual was informed by superintendents, district personnel, principals, school counselors, nurses, teachers, physical education staff, and volunteers across the Commonwealth who work with children in school settings. The primary needs identified by these conversations was for updated knowledge on current best practices in prevention as well as the latest information, guidance, training, and tools that educators could use to ensure schools are safe environments.

The Manual includes updated incidence and prevalence statistics; updated references and resources on primary prevention; an expanded section on recognizing and responding to suspected Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)[1]; a new section with multiple resources on understanding and responding to children and youth with Problematic Sexual Behavior (PSB); and extensive links to the free tools and resources on a new website dedicated to primary prevention called Safe Kids Thrive (SKT). Additional detail on the history of this document can be found here, and acknowledgments of the agencies and individuals who graciously supported, reviewed, and edited this 4th edition can be found here.

The Need for a Prevention Strategy

Creating a safe school environment requires a comprehensive framework that includes – among other things:

- A clear set of policies and procedures;
- Attention to the security and safety of both the physical facilities and the online environment;
- Creation of codes of conduct for student, staff, and visitor behavior and interaction;
- Staff pre-employment and volunteer screening;
- Frequent and on-going communication with parents, families, and other members of the school community;
- Staff training and professional development;
- Periodic assessment; and,
- Leadership actions focused on school culture and sustainability.

These safety elements provide a comprehensive organizational framework that is proactive in terms of preventing child abuse and other forms of victimization because it anticipates how and where students can be harmed and actively works to deny the opportunities for it to occur. This prevention framework also facilitates training, communication, and organizational structures that work together to help staff recognize abuse and victimization (whether suspected or already taking place). Further, this initiative guides educators on how to stop and report abuse and victimization as quickly and effectively as possible.

The National and Local Scope of Child Maltreatment

According to a 2023 report[2] from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Child Protection Services (CPS) agencies in the US received an estimated 4 million referrals, involving the alleged maltreatment of approximately 7.2 million children in 2020. Of the substantiated allegations, 76 percent of the children suffered from neglect, 16 percent suffered physical abuse, slightly more than 10 percent (10.1%) suffered sexual abuse and slightly more than 6 percent (6.4%) suffered emotional or psychological abuse.

Similarly, in FY2022, the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) received 91,427 reports of the alleged abuse or neglect of children under the age of 18[3] (mostly filed by first responders, school personnel, and childcare and healthcare providers).

Of the 51A reports screened in for a response, the most frequently present allegation types were neglect (73.1%), physical abuse (21.3%), and sexual abuse (12.1%). Following the DCF response, the number of supported allegations of abuse/neglect or concerns for risk represented the maltreatment of a minor child in Massachusetts approximately every 20 minutes. The Manual provides more detail on these statistics and the significant short- and long-term public health issues they represent.

Tools to Implement an Effective Prevention Structure

In this edition, educators will find expanded information and guidance about preventing child sexual abuse in institutional and organizational settings, and an array of interactive and downloadable tools to assist them via links to our new "Safe Kids Thrive" website[4] (these links are live in the online version of the document, printed in the footnotes, and compiled in Appendix C).

Among these are an interactive assessment tool and a set of checklists that identify the major elements of a comprehensive child sexual abuse prevention framework and help to inventory and evaluate the school's existing safety structure for completeness and depth. A set of recommended minimum required safety standards along with implementation and decision-making guidance grounded in best practices and risk assessment can be helpful in refining each of the safety elements to meet individual school needs and activities. Schools can use the guidance and tools in this Manual as well as the links to external resources to take the actions necessary to reduce the risk of children being harmed and to strengthen the elements that can protect them.

The Structure of the Manual

The eight essential elements of a comprehensive safety framework are each presented in turn. Each addresses the combination of physical, procedural, and organizational elements involved in building safe environments for students that reduce the possibility of victimization.

Policies and Procedures

- A school's policies, procedures, and guidelines for child safety and abuse prevention serve as the backbone of its efforts to protect children and youth by providing an overarching framework that presents, first and foremost, its commitment to the safety and well-being of the children and youth entrusted to its care. Effective policies focus on creating, codifying, and maintaining safe, preventive environments for children and youth, as well as on the responsible management of incidents or alleged incidents of abuse.

- A well-written and unambiguous set of policies provides the means for any school and its board to clearly express, in a public way, a commitment to its parents, to its community, and to the children and youth it serves.

- The Manual presents guidance on building a clear set of prevention-oriented policies and procedures that also serve to take the guesswork out of what should happen when incidents of abuse and neglect are observed, suspected, disclosed, or alleged – thereby reducing the chance of error and unnecessary delay in providing an effective response.

Safe Physical and Virtual Environments

- There are both physical and procedural elements involved in building safe environments for students that reduce the possibility of victimization on school property and online.

- Schools can employ best practices strategies to look at all safety factors and areas of risk, including the physical and virtual spaces children inhabit, and work to strengthen the safety and security of those environments. The key strategies to employ, either on-site or off-site, are visibility, access, supervision/training and communication.

- Included in the manual are guidance, links, and checklists for building and maintaining a safe environment in both on- and off-campus activities, model social media policies, and links to multiple internal (downloadable from SKT) and external resource materials and guidelines.

Screening and Hiring Practices

- Interviews, background checks, and reviews of criminal history are standard ways that schools attempt to identify faculty, staff, and volunteers who may not be suitable for unmonitored access to children. However, this is not foolproof. The Manual describes a comprehensive process with multiple components – each of which provides a piece of information about an individual's overall suitability to be with children.

- For Massachusetts schools, the responsibilities for the various components of this process are distributed among the school districts, school boards, and school leadership, with decisions for the procedures designed and implemented at the local district level. Since there is no "one size fits all" approach, the guidance provided in this section outlines the suggested elements of a screening and hiring process without assigning responsibility to particular individuals or offices.

- Screening and selection decisions are important elements of a safe school environment and should be integrated into other measures and efforts described in the Manual. Schools must continue to maintain their vigilance and ensure that all faculty, staff, employees and volunteers receive adequate training, supervision and management support to fulfill the school's commitment to safety. Screening and hiring procedures can be time consuming (and sometimes expensive), but the cost can be exceeded exponentially by the cost of an organization's failure to screen.

Codes of Conduct and Monitoring

- As an additional element of building a safe school environment, a Code of Conduct helps schools to clearly identify what is acceptable and expected of adults (as well as of students) in terms of behavior, sensitivity to the appearance of impropriety, interpersonal communication with students, and compliance with the policies and procedures of the school, the district, and the reporting laws of the Commonwealth.

- The basic elements of Codes of Conduct acknowledge, by means of a signature on an acknowledgement page, that teachers and others will not initiate or participate in practices and/or behaviors that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. The Codes should be distributed to all staff and volunteers and included as part of the initial orientation and ongoing training structure.

- When safety policies and a Code of Conduct are enforced through supervision, staff meetings, monitoring, and other training or professional development opportunities, it becomes easier for staff to talk about their concerns and highlight the smaller day-to-day behaviors that give them some concern. In this way, a Code of Conduct serves as another prevention tool. If everyone in the school understands and complies with the requirements outlined in the Code of Conduct, behaviors that fall outside of the Code are more easily noticed and addressed.

Building a School/District Reporting Protocol: Recognizing, Responding to, and Reporting Child Abuse

- Another aspect of keeping children safe is to create and implement a school reporting protocol designed to help school personnel respond appropriately and effectively to students who either disclose that they are being (or have been) abused or neglected, or about whom abuse or neglect is suspected.
- School reporting protocols include information and guidance on the definitions of the various types of child maltreatment; the physical and behavioral symptoms through which they can be recognized; guidance about responding to children who disclose; a clearly defined school reporting chain; the requirements and timelines of the mandatory DCF reporting process; the information educators should be prepared to provide when reporting; the legal responsibilities of mandated reporters; training requirements; and the creation of a multidisciplinary Child Protection Team (CPT) to assist educators in these responsibilities.

- This section points to existing MA Reporting Laws and Regulations; DCF reporting, intake, screening and response procedures; and to joint DESE/DCF Advisories that mandate training and outline the mandated reporting responsibilities of school personnel in cases of suspected child abuse and neglect. Finally, the section provides links to protocol development and implementation guidance, model forms, flowcharts, and tools on the Safe Kids Thrive website that will enable you to develop a protocol which is tailored to your particular school.

Training

- Training is a vital part of implementing a child abuse and neglect reporting plan and is a mandatory annual requirement for educators in the Commonwealth. School personnel should be trained to understand the terms used in child maltreatment allegations; physical and behavioral indicators of child abuse and neglect (Appendix D); applicable law and its implications; reporting procedures; and what happens when a case is reported to DCF (Also see Flowchart on Safe Kids Thrive and Appendix I).
- The Manual points educators to an online training resource for mandated reporters in Massachusetts[5] a new online mandated reporter training for school personnel[6] from the MA office of the Child Advocate, and variety of local and national training programs on understanding and preventing child maltreatment. Many of these programs offer short, online webinars, fact sheets, guidelines, and resources on particular areas of concern like children and youth who exhibit problematic sexual behaviors (PSB) and the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC - also see endnote 1).
- The Children's Trust and the state's Children's Advocacy Centers are good sources of information about prevention programs for faculty and staff as well as evidence based, developmentally sequenced personal safety and abuse prevention training for students. The Safe Kids Thrive website has an interactive map[7] that allows you to find resources near you, as well as a listing of state and national resources[8] and their contact information. The website also contains a schedule of upcoming trainings[9], meetings, and conferences on its "Events" page.

Self-Audit and Sustainment

- Once the prevention elements above are developed and implemented into a comprehensive abuse prevention framework, periodic evaluation becomes a critical element of quality assurance and program sustainability.
- This requires an ongoing commitment from school leadership to assess the efficacy of what has been accomplished and to regularly communicate progress and outcomes to all elements of the school community. The variety and amount of data gathered from prevention efforts can help school leaders to understand the strengths, weaknesses, and impacts of their programs and to adjust accordingly.
- The Manual provides school leadership with links to key data collection strategies and tools: a short, interactive Self-Audit Form; a comprehensive Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Evaluation Tool; and a Sample Incident Report. Annual internal audits and data collection are suggested to demonstrate whether and how the desired results are being achieved and maintained, and how periodic evaluation of a school's overall policies can help refine and sustain success.

The Need for a Protocol

As discussed above, the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in the United States is a national tragedy. The purpose of a child abuse and neglect reporting protocol is to help guide one's involvement in the intervention process. Administrators, staff, faculty, and volunteers should be involved in this process for three key reasons:

First, the effects of abuse and neglect on children are as much a detriment to learning as is any other type of learning disability.

In addition to teaching, educators also have a responsibility to do all they can to address issues that impede a child's ability to learn. Child maltreatment impacts both immediate and long-term physical, emotional, and mental health[10]; bonding with caretakers; the ability to concentrate and to learn; and can give rise to behavioral problems and other significant barriers to a child's successful school experience. Recognizing and preventing abuse and neglect to the extent possible is a primary responsibility.

Secondly, the teacher is one of the most significant people in a child's life, in many cases, second only to the parent.

If it is the parent, a relative, a family friend, a colleague, or other caregiver who is maltreating the child, that child needs the teacher as an ally, someone they can trust and go to for help. This is especially true for elementary age children who develop strong ties with their teacher. But even middle and high school age students will often establish a relationship with a particular teacher or counselor whom they trust and to whom they feel they can turn when in crisis.

And finally, in every state, educators are mandated by law to report suspected child abuse and neglect.

Although each state has a different set of regulations and laws regarding child maltreatment, educators are mandated reporters in every one. The Manual's emphasis on responsible, effective abuse identification and reporting is, in a sense, an investment – an investment in a rational, thorough, caring, and fair handling of each and every child maltreatment situation. When child abuse or neglect is suspected, it is often due to a crisis. Or, when a child discloses, or when an educator decides that it is now time to report, it may certainly feel like a crisis. The events that follow may take place in quick succession with little time to think.

Designing and Implementing a School Safety Protocol: Prevention Actions

- Violence against children is preventable
- It is primarily an adult responsibility to understand how, and to use that knowledge to protect them

The bottom line is that we can help to ensure the creation of safe, healthy, and trauma-sensitive environments for our children and their protection from abuse and neglect by educating students about appropriate and inappropriate contact with adults and helping them to develop the skills and language to communicate with parents and caretakers; by building faculty and staff awareness of the signs and symptoms of child abuse and the responsibilities and mechanics of mandated reporting; by involving parents as partners in prevention education; and by instituting capable Child Protection Teams and preventative policies, practices, and protocols in our schools.

This Executive Summary links back to the full Manual "Steps Toward Child Abuse Prevention & Creating Safe School Environments: A "How-to" Manual for Massachusetts Educators" which provides more detailed information and tools for preventing and responding to observed, suspected, or self-reported abuse and neglect in school environments.

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[1] Note that for DCF purposes, the term "Human Trafficking" is used as an umbrella term to include two new (as of Feb 2016) allegations of abuse: Human Trafficking – Sexually Exploited Child, and Human Trafficking – Labor. See Appendix E for more information.

[2] U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2023). Child Maltreatment 2021. Available from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment.

[3] Massachusetts Department of Children and Families Annual Report for FY2022 (December 2022). https://www.mass.gov/doc/fy-2022/download

[4] https://safekidsthrive.org/

[5] https://51a.middlesexcac.org/

[6] https://mandatedreportertraining.com/massachusetts/

[7] https://safekidsthrive.org/join-the-community/local-resources/

[8] https://safekidsthrive.org/join-the-community/other-resources/

[9] https://safekidsthrive.org/join-the-community/events/

[10] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html)