

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school-aged children continue to be susceptible to abuse, neglect, and are vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by traffickers. Local Education Agency (LEA) staff are encouraged to develop a heightened sense of observation when working with students virtually and must continue to make reports of suspected child abuse when necessary. By remaining vigilant and following mandatory reporting guidelines, LEA staff including educators can continue to identify, prevent, and report child abuse, neglect, and human trafficking.

1. What is the role that LEA staff play in identifying and reporting suspected child abuse and neglect during the COVID-19 pandemic?

LEA staff, particularly educators, represent the largest professional resource for reporting suspected child abuse, neglect, and human trafficking. Educators are mandatory reporters and are required to report suspicions of abuse, neglect, and trafficking (see [TEA Child Abuse Prevention webpage](#)). This remains paramount even while students are not attending brick-and-mortar schools.

2. Is there new guidance for LEA staff in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic regarding assessing and reporting suspected abuse or neglect?

Although TEA's guidance regarding assessing and reporting of suspected abuse and neglect remains unchanged (See [Guidance on Educator and Staff Issues and Educator Evaluation and Non-Renewal FAQ, Page 4, Question 1](#)), there are some additional circumstances and considerations, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, that LEA staff should be aware of which are addressed throughout this FAQ.

3. What circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic can make students more susceptible to child abuse, neglect, or trafficking?

Circumstances that may surface during the COVID-19 pandemic that can make students more susceptible to becoming victims of child abuse, neglect, or trafficking include, but are not limited to:

- Financial hardships
- Unstable living conditions
- Domestic violence
- Homelessness
- Food instability

- Limited access to resources
- Mental health
- Personal safety
- Substance abuse issues

4. How can LEA staff identify and report child abuse and neglect, including trafficking of a child, during the COVID-19 pandemic?

During the COVID-19 pandemic it is important that LEA staff develop a heightened sense of observation when working with students virtually:

- LEA staff should be aware of unexplained injuries, lack of personal care and hygiene, malnourishment, medical neglect, changes in school performance, or other concerns that may be indicators that a report is needed.
- LEA staff should prioritize consistent, intentional communication with students and their families, and create opportunities to check in with students virtually, especially if there are any red flags or concerns.
- LEA staff should be aware of a student’s environment and remain attentive if a student seems noticeably withdrawn.
- LEA staff should check more frequently on students that have been previously identified as at-risk for child abuse and neglect.

5. Where should LEA staff go to report suspected abuse or neglect?

- If it is an emergency, call 911 or law enforcement immediately.
- If it is a heightened concern, contact the Texas Abuse Hotline at 1-800-252-5400.
- If there is a hunch or worry (less urgent), report online at [Texas Abuse Hotline](#).
Make sure to provide a good contact phone number, where the person who made the report can be reached.

6. Where can LEA staff go for more information on the signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect?

A full list of signs can be found on the [Texas Department of Family and Protective Services \(DFPS\) Recognizing the Signs of Child Abuse Webpage](#).

Resources:

- [DFPS Report Abuse, Neglect, or Exploitation Webpage](#)
- [Children’s Advocacy Centers of Texas- A Teacher’s Guide: Response to COVID-19](#)
- [Darkness to Light- Protecting Children During a Crisis \(free 30-minute video\)](#)
- [TEA Child Abuse Prevention webpage](#)

To be connected with additional DFPS information and training resources available in your local community, please contact DFPSCPIcommunications@dfps.state.tx.us.

7. What additional risks or dangers exist that LEA staff should be aware of when supporting their students online through distance learning?

LEA staff should consider the following risks and dangers as students spend more time online:

- Adults targeting children for sexual purposes on social media, gaming, and messaging platforms.
- Exposure to harmful content such as violence, xenophobia, inciting self-harm, and misinformation.
- Isolation from trusted adults.
- Students sharing personal information and inappropriate photos or videos of themselves.
- Cyberbullying from peers and strangers.

8. What can LEA staff do to protect students from becoming victims of online predators?

LEA staff can take the following measures to help protect students from becoming victims of online predators:

- Discuss internet safety and develop an online safety plan.
- Tell children to avoid sharing personal information, photos, and videos online.
- Teach children about body safety and boundaries.
- Be alert to potential signs of abuse.
- Encourage children to tell a parent, guardian, or other trusted adult if they feel they are in danger.
- LEA staff should follow local school district policy when reporting suspected online enticement and immediately make a report of sexual exploitation of a child to the [Texas Abuse Hotline](#) or by calling 1-800-252-5400.

Resources:

- [DFPS Recognize the Signs of Child Abuse](#)
- [Department of Justice’s response to COVID-19: Tips to Protect Children](#)
- [National Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#)- The [Texas Regional Office](#) is available to provide trainings and supports to educators and communities. Additional resources and training videos are also available at [NetSmartz](#) and [NetSmartzKids](#).

9. What can LEA staff do to help guide parents/guardians on how to protect their children from becoming victims of online predators?

LEA staff can guide parents/guardians to take measures to help protect their children from becoming victims of online predators:

- Supervise children’s use of the internet.
- Review games, apps, and social media sites.
- Adjust privacy settings and use of parental controls.
- Immediately report suspected online enticement to the [National Center for Missing & Exploited Children CyberTipline](#) and make a report with the [Texas Abuse Hotline](#) or by calling 1-800-252-5400, for sexual exploitation of a child.

Resources:

- [COVID-19 Parenting: Keeping Children Safe Online](#)
- [PTA Connected](#)- Parental resources that help children with digital citizenship and online safety.

10. Are prevention and awareness of school-aged human trafficking trainings available for LEA staff?

Yes. To increase awareness among educators at this time, the [Governor’s Child Sex Trafficking Team](#) is collaborating with [3Strands Global Foundation](#) to generously offer all schools in Texas free access to an online human trafficking training and prevention education program. PROTECT Texas offers training modules for school personnel as well as age-appropriate, research-based prevention curricula for elementary, middle, and high school students. Considering the current environment, the program has also been updated to include a trauma-informed distance learning curriculum. Please visit [PROTECT Texas](#) for more information and to register for 12 months of access.

11. Are there any additional resources or materials available for LEA staff regarding the prevention and awareness of school-aged human trafficking?

Yes. Listed below are organizations that provide additional training resources and materials that may be useful when addressing the prevention and awareness of school-aged human trafficking:

- [LOVE146- 5 Tips for Internet Safety During COVID-19](#) and [COVID-19 Anti-Trafficking PSA](#)- Materials and resources available for educator use when discussing internet safety with students.
- [UNBOUND](#)- Provides free training resources for parents and caregivers, school nurses, educators, bus drivers, and students in English and Spanish. [Keeping Our STUDENTS Safe- Online Education Outreach- April 2020](#) hosts prerecorded trainings. Additional resources about Human Trafficking can also be accessed at [Unbound: Human Trafficking Happens Everywhere](#) webpage.

- [A21: Can You See Me?](#)- Equips the general public to recognize indicators of human trafficking and report suspected scenarios.
- [Office of the Texas Governor Child Sex Trafficking Team](#)- 5 Regional Administrators throughout Texas (See Map of [Regional Administrators](#)) assist communities to build their continuum of care for survivors, support prevention, awareness, and justice activities.
- [Attorney General of Texas Human Trafficking- Be the One in the Fight Against Human Trafficking](#) is a training video that uses actual cases prosecuted in Texas to educate viewers about the realities of this heinous crime and equip them with the tools to recognize red flags and respond appropriately.
- [Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Human Trafficking](#)- General information on Human Trafficking and how to report. [Tools That Teach: What is Trafficking?](#)
- [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#)- Online [Referral Directory](#) of anti-trafficking organizations and programs that offer emergency, transitional, or long-term services to victims and survivors of human trafficking as well as those that provide resources and opportunities in the anti-trafficking field.

Please submit any questions, concerns, and/or feedback to:

disasterinfo@tea.texas.gov

Feedback will assist TEA with technical assistance and planning.