

The National Association of Social Workers

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Virtual Assessments of Students When Out of View

Introduction

The spread and danger of COVID-19 prompted Pre K-12 schools to close unexpectedly during the Spring of 2020. To slow the spread of COVID-19, students were sheltered in place at home. At the peak of the COVID-19 disruption, at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 public and private schools in the United States were closed (Edweek 2020). Schools are important resources for students and their families providing safety, meals, emotional and social care, and a positive learning environment. With school closures, the home was assumed the safest place for students. Since reports of maltreatment have decreased across the United States, questions have arisen whether students are indeed safe at home.

The Problem

School social workers play a major role in students' safety and well-being. They provide stability for students who are homeless, require behavioral and mental health services, and social-emotional support. Continuous services

by school social workers to students were significantly reduced by the pandemic, especially for students and families already experiencing multiple forms of stress, and for students with special needs. As a result, school social workers changed their perspective for providing services to students who were not in their physical view. School social workers have had to devise and implement new methods to deliver services. Assessing and responding to safety related concerns is particularly challenging since virtual technology has not been accessible to all students and school social workers. Thus, many students continue to be out of view of school social workers who are mandated reporters.

NASW Response

In 2020, NASW conducted a forum of school social workers who were members of NASW's School Social Work Specialty Practice Section Committee, to develop tools and strategies to assist school social workers in identifying and addressing maltreatment when students are enrolled in a virtual learning environment. The forum's initial focus was the well-being of students that were out of view which included students who had not registered for the current school year; and parents and students who did not respond to wellness checks by school personnel via emails, telephone calls, and/or

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mail. Developing a tool that would support school social workers as they effectively navigate the broken link between students and their schools was a collaborative goal established by the forum.

Sharing Concerns

Members of the forum shared concerns when working with students out of view:

- Students did not feel comfortable talking remotely with the school social worker especially when family members or others were present in the home.
- Low enrollment was a problem. Many students were not registered for school, changed addresses without providing forwarding information, and did not respond to virtual outreach.
- There was inequitable access to technology for virtual connections and contact. Wi-Fi and broadband are insufficient for many students and school social workers.
- Mandatory school attendance was not enforced in some school districts due to students' lack of technology. Parents were not held responsible because of technology deficits.
- Some families with multiple school-age children did not have enough computers for all children. Managing virtual learning is challenging for many families and caregivers especially when parents are required to be present at work.
- The potential for parents and caregivers' stress levels to increase was great due to food, housing, and employment insecurity as well as academic limitations.
- Job demands limited the amount of time that parents and caregivers could provide for academic support.
- Students eligible to work prioritize employment over school due to financial needs.
- Students in homes with previously identified abuse and safety issues are at a higher risk of maltreatment.
- School social workers in many school districts have not been required to make home visits during the pandemic, reducing opportunities to interact with students and families.
- Unlike teachers, school social workers were not trained nor provided the virtual learning platform provided in their school districts. Thus, they were unable to access students remotely.

In addition to the concerns expressed by the members of the forum, the potential for maltreatment was increased by the stress of adults in the home, isolation from school staff and peers, missed socialization, therapy, and group work with school social workers. These factors heightened the concerns for school social workers.

Sharing Solutions

Members of the forum shared tools from their districts that were successful for outreach for students out of view. The suggestions provided strategies that may work in different school districts with modifications based on the characteristics of their school district. In response to concerns expressed by school social workers, the following options and strategies were recommended.

- School social workers with access to virtual learning platforms in their school district should join a teacher during virtual instructions if it is allowed by their school district. Observation by the school social worker during an online class is similar to an in-person classroom observation, which allows the social worker to observe a student's behavior within their virtual educational environment.
- School social workers should be equipped to utilize the school's virtual learning platform or other virtual technology to meet with students in a virtual school social work office.
- When a school social worker suspects maltreatment, a request for a welfare visit should be made or a referral to child protective services.
- When visual contact cannot be made with a student, local social service agencies who are known to be involved with the student should be contacted regarding student safety and activities in the home.
- A wellness team composed of a school social worker, teacher, and school resource officer (SRO) should conduct a home visit to assess social-emotional needs, transportation, basic care needs, and any maltreatment.
- School social workers should collaborate with local businesses to provide spaces for students to receive instructional and non-instructional support. This action may reduce family stress and the potential for maltreatment and abuse due to anxiety.

- When conducting required Individualized Education Program (IEP) assessments, school social workers may also conduct virtual assessments for maltreatment at the same time.
- In the absence of virtual assessments, school social workers should consider the use of audio-only phone calls or text messages to assist in assessing maltreatment.

Resources

The forum developed a list of helpful resources to assist in the assessment of virtual maltreatment which included the following:

- Some school districts are using CAPS, a virtual assessment tool for maltreatment. (Author is unknown.)
- **C** - Obtain consent for the telehealth services before your virtual session. Consents can accompany the referral or case assignment.
- **A** – Request the address from the student, parent, or caregiver of the location where the student resides. Confirm the home address. Is the student located at someone else’s address? Is the student in a virtual session with his teacher and technically called to another room/location?
- **P** – Request phone number of the location student is in. If the call is on a cell phone, request the number. Confirm the phone number you have in your documents. If this is a younger child, obtain this information from the caregiver before you are in a virtual session with the student.
- **S** – Survey the room from your virtual screen. Is there someone else present in the student’s location? Do you hear the conversation of others? What room is the student in? (bedroom, kitchen, etc.)

T.A.L.K. Tell Another Listening is Key (Broward County, Fla. Public School Assessment for Maltreatment and Mental Health Needs)

Much of the student assessment conducted by school social workers is done by face to face contact. With the closure of schools and thus the inability to physically meet with students, Broward County Public School District developed an online tool to empower students for self-advocacy, to access services, both for the prevention of child abuse and for mental health

services. Several meetings occurred to get wide stakeholders’ input, including meetings with a diverse group of student representatives.

Borrowing from the ongoing mental health campaign, a request icon T.A.L.K. – Tell Another Listening is Key has been used: www.browardschools.com/cms/lib/FLO1803656/Centricity/Domain/13538/Mental%20Health%20TALK%20flyer_03242020.pdf. This icon is available and visible to all students using their online learning platform. Clicking on the icon provides students with a fillable form with four basic questions:

- Name
- School
- Need - dropdown menu with “Report Child Abuse” or “Mental Health Service” (Need to talk with a mental health professional)
- Preferred contact method - dropdown menu with email, or telephone. The completed forms are routed to a mailbox that is monitored by designated staff. Cases immediately dispatched to the appropriate child abuse designee, school social worker, or family therapist for follow-up.

Since the launch of TALK, maltreatment requests have increased in this school district.

The forum recommended virtual and in-person communication cues for school social workers, teachers, and students which are available at www.weareteachers.com/hand-signals-in-the-classroom. These techniques can be used collaboratively between the student, the teacher, and the school social worker who can also develop personal cues.

Identification of Child Abuse and Neglect is another useful resource for school social workers, www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/identifying/

Based on discussions in the forum, the following list of factors were considered when conducting virtual assessment of potential maltreatment.

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FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN A VIRTUAL ASSESSMENT

- ❑ Establish eye to eye contact or make sure visual clarity is established. (Students often multi-task when on technology, they may give clues when someone is in the room, text to another person, etc.) Your relationship with the student and skills to understand cues may be helpful.
- ❑ Obtain family composition (e.g. father, mother, grandparents, siblings, family friend, etc.)
- ❑ Screen for necessities (e.g. food, medication, housing, clothing, etc.)
- ❑ Does the student have privacy?
- ❑ Does the parent/caregiver blame student for any problems within the household?
- ❑ Document environmental or safety concerns.
- ❑ Observe behavior (e.g. anger, hostility, shyness, depressive behavior, hopelessness, expressions of self-harm, desire to run away, etc.)
- ❑ Observe physical signs (e.g. excessive scratching of their arms or legs. unexplained injuries, bruises, etc.)
- ❑ Observe parent/caregiver behavior.

Conclusion

School social workers are crucially important staff within school systems and critical links between school, home, and the community. They have the skills to provide virtual assessments for maltreatment. Yet many school systems across the nation have not been responsive in providing the resources and tools they require to perform virtual assessments. Limited access to technology for school social workers may be one factor in the decline of maltreatment referrals. NASW is advocating for school social workers to have access to online resources required to perform their work.

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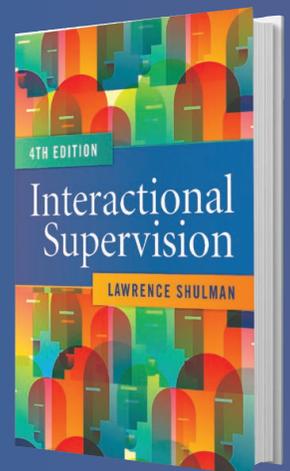
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