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School Leaders

Here's What Every Educator Needs to Know About Calling CPS

When to call CPS and what happens after you do.

 **Brette Sember** on November 18, 2019



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As an educator, a day will come when you need to call child protective services. Perhaps you have already been through this experience—or even face it many times a year. One thing is for sure: It never gets easier.

But we do it because we have to. We do it because children need us and because it's our job. More than three million children in the US are abused each year. Of the cases reported, [16 percent are submitted by educators](#) . That might seem like a low number, but educators reported abuse more often than any other professional group. Here are a few of the things we all need to know about when to call CPS:

1. You don't have to be absolutely certain that abuse is taking place.

If you have a strong suspicion and feel that there is reasonable cause, that is enough reason to call. The hotline operator can help you determine if the information is reportable. If you have a CPS liaison in your district, start with that person. Carolyn Segal, principal of Woodrow Wilson Elementary in Sloan, New York, admits, “Often, we are unsure if CPS will take the [report], especially if it is focused on something such as heavy absences from school.”

Segal's school has a CPS co-location liaison on site, and she says, “Having the liaison [helps us] to ensure that we are making the correct decision.” She also points out that the liaison can tell them if there is already a CPS caseworker on the case the school can contact.

2. Do not investigate on your own.

If you suspect abuse or neglect, it's tempting to want to get as many details as possible. The more information, the better, right? Actually though, your responsibility does not go beyond reporting. The teacher or other school representative shouldn't interrogate the child or conduct an in-depth interview. You only need enough information for reasonable cause. Dean Tong, MSc., CFC, a forensic child abuse specialist, says, “Educators should conduct a [minimal-facts interview](#) only.” This means getting a general understanding of who, what, where, and when.

3. The closest observer should make the call.

Whoever made the observations or heard the student's story firsthand told [should make the CPS call](#). Some teachers are hesitant and may want a school leader or counselor do it for them. Segal says either she or the school social worker sits with the teacher to make the call since “a teacher is often uncomfortable.” She adds, “Because we are more versed in making a report, the teacher feels more comfortable having someone to help, but also is still the person on the phone with CPS making the report.”

4. Administrators must provide back-up.

There can and will be tricky situations with CPS reporting. For instance, what if the person in question is an employee of the district or has a personal connection with members of the staff? You or others might feel a sense of loyalty to that person. However, it's important that educators who need to make a CPS call feel they have the backing of their administration when they make a report.

5. Beware of the penalties for failing to report.

Sometimes educators may feel as if making a report is too much trouble or will cause too many problems. But if your state lists educators as mandated reporters, you *must* report an incident that falls under the state description of child abuse. [Failing to report can lead to serious legal consequences](#). In the past, states did not enforce this provision, and so some educators didn't feel compelled to make reports. But recently some states have begun to enforce the rules. Segal says that in her district they wait as long as possible to report educational neglect and try to resolve the problem with the family directly while keeping in mind the need to report.

6. Reporters are protected.

It's common for reporters to fear that they might be sued or face other legal ramifications for making a report. Some also worry that an unfounded report means they'll face criminal penalties. However, [all states give immunity from civil and criminal penalties](#) to mandated reporters who report abuse in good faith. So educators can feel confident that making the call won't come back to bite them, in a legal sense.

7. Designate one staff member to communicate with the family.

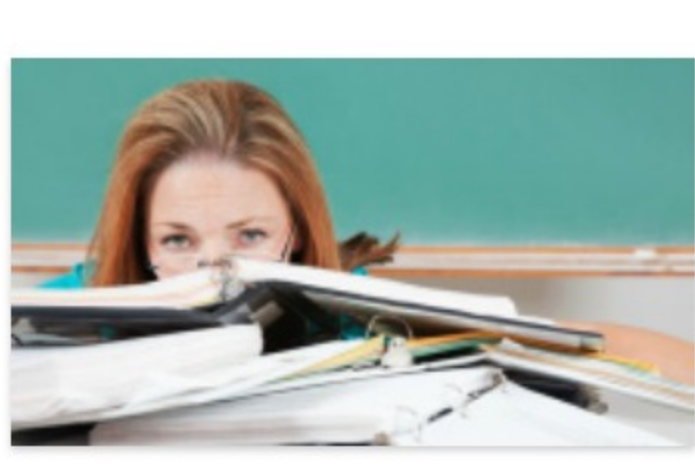
It's fairly common for parents to contact the school to complain about the report or try to gather information. Designate one employee, usually a social worker, nurse, or administrator, as the point of contact for these situations. Any attempt by a parent to discuss the report should be referred to that point of contact. Segal says, “Occasionally, [the social worker and I] will speak to a parent together on speaker phone in special cases, but one of us takes the lead, and the other is pretty much just the witness to the conversation.”

Talking with the family can be challenging in this situation. Let parents know conversations about active abuse reports are not confidential. When taking these calls from parents, Segal suggests discussing the potential benefits of making the call. “The call was made because a CPS referral is often how families can receive resources.” This can help frame things in a more palatable way and help preserve the relationship with the family. Because helping to improve the child's situation is the ultimate goal.

 **Posted by Brette Sember**

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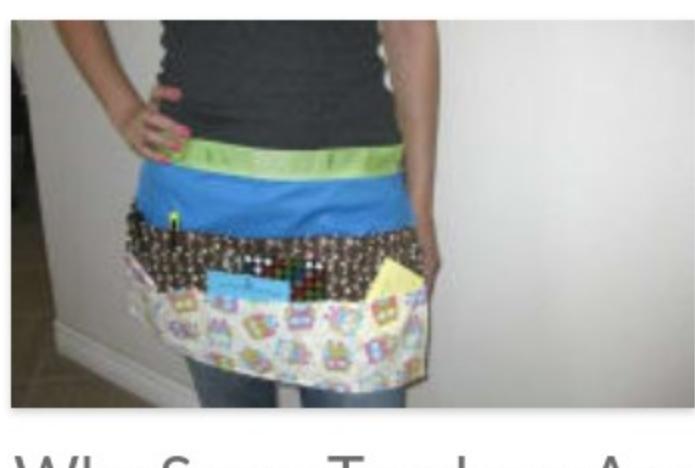


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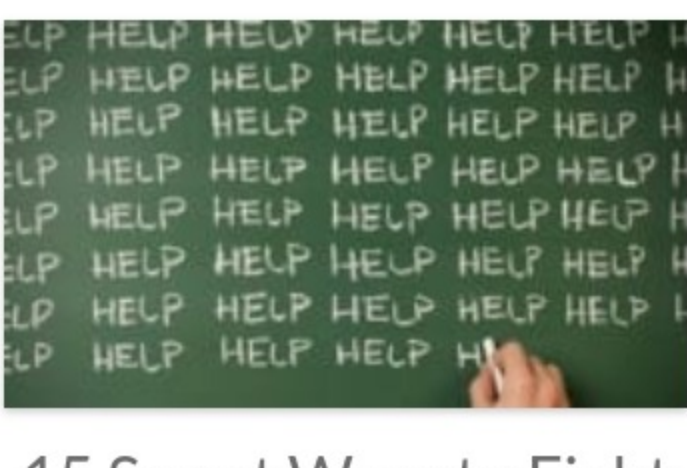


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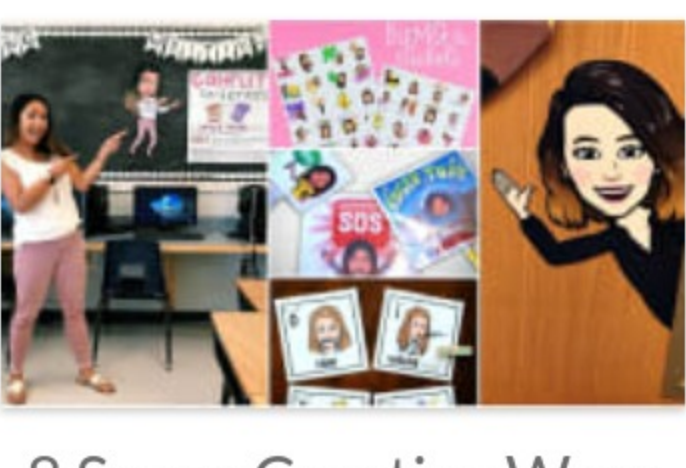
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