

REPORTING SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE/NEGLECT

INTRODUCTION

Each Member of a school staff is considered by Massachusetts's Law (Chapter 119, Section 51A) to be a mandated reporter of child abuse and/or neglect. Since this is such an important, but difficult task, we have developed procedures for the filing of a 51A (suspicion of abuse or neglect) in our system. The basic procedures for reporting suspected abuse/neglect (51A) within our school system have been outlined for your information and convenience. These procedures will provide consistency in the filing and documentation of 51A reports.

REPORTING PROCEDURES

Initially, staff members will immediately report suspicion of abuse/neglect to the school psychologist/social worker or building principal. The Principal and/or school psychologist/or social worker will contact the Superintendent or his/her designee, the nurse, and at the Junior/Senior High School, the student's guidance counselor. This team of professionals will meet to determine a course of action.

If a 51A is to be filed, the school psychologist will do the intake and in a majority of cases immediately call the report into the Department of Social Services. This call will be followed within forty-eight (48) hours by a written report to the Department which, when completed, will be kept on file in the Director of Pupil Services' Office. A decision will also be made as to whether the parents will be notified that a 51A has been filed by the school.

If the school psychologist/social worker is not available at the time of the filing, then the Principal will notify him/her of the filing as soon as possible.

INVESTIGATIONS

It is our responsibility to report suspicion of abuse or neglect, though it is a difficult and unpleasant task. It is then the responsibility of the Department of Social Services' (D.S.S.) Protective Service Unit to investigate our suspicion; this is usually done via interviews. If there is a possibility that the abuse/neglect has occurred at home, there is a high probability that the child will not discuss the abuse/neglect if interviewed in his/her own home. In order to effectively assess the situation, it is critical for the child to be interviewed in a safe, neutral setting such as school.

INTERVIEWS

To reduce any further risk of abuse to the child, D.S.S. discourages schools from asking parents or legal guardians for their permission to interview students.

However, D.S.S. suggests that when such an interview takes place, a member of the school staff be present. Therefore, prior to an interview with a child, the D.S.S. caseworker will go directly to the Principal's office to present his/her credentials. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, the caseworker will interview the child in the presence of the principal or school psychologist/social worker. The professionals involved with the 51A will decide who will be present at the interview.

51-A LOGS

The reporter of the 51A will maintain a separate log of events for each case. A copy of the written 51A and the log will be secured in the Director of Pupil Services' Office. The Superintendent will be verbally informed of a 51A within 24 hours by the Principal and/or school psychologist/or social worker.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

School staff members are rarely subpoenaed unless they have witnessed the abuse first hand. In such a case, the staff member will contact the building Principal immediately so that arrangements for accompaniment to court can be made.

Questions regarding these procedures should be directed to the building Principals. As confidentiality laws pertain to all 51A cases, all information must be kept in strictest confidence.

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2 of 2