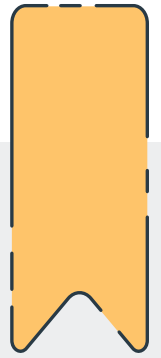# Supporting Student Mental Health And Safety During Remote Learning

Many students are dealing with increased senses of isolation, depression and loneliness as they learn from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some school professionals have been concerned about monitoring student wellbeing in online environments and are worried about possible shifts in student behavior. In this e-book, we spoke with experts to give teachers, administrators and other school leaders tangible resources and tips on how to identify troubling behavior in online environments -- including signs of mental health issues, child abuse/neglect and cyberbullying— so that they can act quickly.

September 2020

Contents

Introduction

Introduction

2020 has challenged the U.S. education system in ways we never thought possible. While navigating the mental and emotional toll of a global pandemic, teachers and students are also learning new technologies for virtual learning as many start a new school year from their homes.

Remote learning has uncovered many issues with the education system in the United States, including accelerated education inequality, increased depression and loneliness among students, and decreased child abuse reports by up to 50% (though, under normal circumstances, child abuse and neglect actually increases during times of crisis and instability) (Callahan & Mink, 2020).

According to the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC), one in five children and adolescents experience a mental health problem, such as stress, anxiety, bullying, family problems, depression, etc. during their school-aged years (2019). In a traditional, in-person school year, some estimates say that 60% of students do not receive the support that they need – so in remote learning environments, it's not difficult to see how even more students aren't receiving the support they need as staff members who would usually be interacting with children are no longer doing so.

Meanwhile, students are dealing with increased senses of depression, social-emotional challenges and even long-term trauma from having to stay at home away from their friends and school.

Mental health experts say that finding ways to cope and create stability in times of crisis are key for students to maintain a healthy outlook. And as the first bridge between students and their learning, educators play a huge role in supporting students with their mental health and wellbeing.

We have a lot to do to keep students safe in these "new normal" virtual learning environments. But in order to ensure their learning doesn't fall anymore behind in virtual environments, we must make sure that they are safe. Educators can be keen to keep students safe by recognizing signs that may be pointing to child abuse or neglect, cyberbullying or mental health issues while remote learning.

Recognizing signs of child abuse or neglect in remote learning environments

Recognizing Child Abuse or Neglect in Remote Learning Environments

It is an educator's responsibility to watch out for child abuse or neglect and understand their role as a mandated reporter (every state has similar, yet individual, mandates). This can help them understand a child's home life, and potentially flag if they suspect that abuse is happening at home.

"Any time a child's behavior or attitudes change, there is cause for concern," says Joe Laramie, a retired police Lieutenant and former Missouri Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force Commander. "It could indicate a variety of things, depending upon their home environment, their relationships with friends, and relationships within their own family. We should be paying attention to moods and behaviors."

Unfortunately, there is no standard "checkbox" for educators to use if they suspect abuse or neglect is happening in a child's home, even as cases around the country may be increasing. However, Laramie does offer some insight into what educators can do and watch out for:

Be aware of student absence without reasonable explanation, or sudden changes in behavior
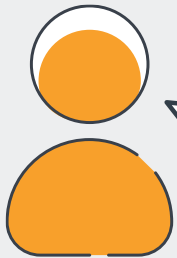
"With any type of child abuse (physical, sexual or emotional), we have to remember that a child's behavior is often controlled by someone else," says Laramie. "In a high-stress situation, such as domestic violence or abuse, a child may be limiting their reaction, or showing no emotion."

Consequently, some students who may be in an abusive home are not only worried about themselves, but they're worried about their parents becoming stressed.

"Children tend to mimic the behavior around them – so maybe their behaviors aren't indicative of abuse, but their behavior may be indicative of a parent who's really struggling," he says. "The first thing that teachers can do is to make sure that they express to their students, "I am here for you." They must be willing to show empathy and talk to students about what they're concerned about.

We should be teaching educators that they should assure their students that part of their job is to make sure students are safe. If a student doesn't feel safe, they should speak with their teacher. How you relay that is important to not put the child at risk."

Educators should be tracking absences in virtual learning in the same way that they might if they didn't come to school. Remote learning technology can help them record absences in a central record, so that they can recognize patterns and act quickly in response.

Supporting student mental health and safety during remote learning

Make sure students have teacher contact information on-hand

In an online class, a student may be noticeably concerned about talking to a teacher with their abuser or overly stressed parent nearby. If a teacher fears that a student may be in harm's way, they can send out mass, general emails to all students with their contact information, or even put a sign behind them that lists their phone number as they chat one-on-one with the student.

Have individual check-in time

Laramie also recommends that educators have daily check-in time with students to chat and see how they're doing. If they're comfortable with it, he says, the student can pick up their laptop and spin it 360 degrees to show the teacher their home learning environment.

Ask the student to describe how they're feeling with one word every day

If teachers repeatedly get answers like, "scared," "frustrated," or "angry," these words may be an indication to dig deeper.

Make a report to the Child Abuse Hotline of your jurisdiction if you have reasonable suspicion that a child is being abused

Teachers have a responsibility as mandated reporters to report suspected child abuse to the Child Abuse Hotline of their jurisdiction. **Do not assume that someone else has made a call.** Just because an adult reports a problem to the hotline, Laramie notes, does not necessarily mean that it will mean that child will be removed from their home. Instead, it means that investigators will make sure that the child is safe.

For a quick reference, he says, ask yourself a few simple questions:

- If I do nothing, will this child be safe?

- If I don't do anything, am I leaving this child in a safe environment?

- Am I putting this child more at risk?

These questions will help you decide.

You can find each state's mandated reporting laws here.

Limiting cyberbullying in online learning environments

Limiting cyberbullying in online learning environments

With more time being spent online for both learning and in relationships during the pandemic, students are likely be exposed to more cyberbullying incidents.

> *"What an adult may call "cyberbullying," kids call, "drama." Laramie says. "With that, they don't consider "drama" as cyberbullying."*
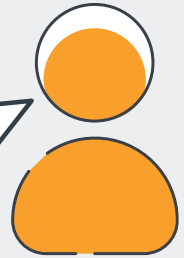
Because of this, a student may not feel inclined in a remote learning environment to report cyberbullying as it happens.

To prevent cyberbullying, Laramie advises, it's the school's responsibility to first build up the individual student, and then build up a community of students who don't allow cyberbullying – or "drama" —to occur.

"What we can do is tell the student, "we're here for you." And, "don't listen to that other person's perspective, you are a good person." Uplift them. We also have lean on the educator to tell and enforce student rules of how we're going to treat people," he says.

Here are a few guidelines for schools to follow to create an environment where cyberbullying is not tolerated:

Create a student support system

When a student acts inappropriate, address their behavior rather than ignore it. Aim to create an environment where students support each other. When a student acts inappropriate, address their behavior rather than ignore it. Aim to create an environment where students support each other.

Teach kids not to respond to bullying

"Though not responding (beyond, "stop, please," or, "don't") can be difficult, the alternative will always escalate the situation," Laramie says.

Teach kids that it's not ok to pass on bully material

Passing on hurtful information makes that person part of the bullying chain. One student engaging in poor behavior makes them just as guilty as the student who "started it." Teach students that they have a responsibility to not promote bully material – and to be the one who does not respond.

Supporting student mental health and safety during remote learning

Using the "like" button for hate is bullying behavior

Using the "like" button on social media to promote malicious content shows this content to other followers and friends and is abusive behavior.

Monitor student behavior online

Educators can use technology like **Impero Education Pro** to receive alerts if a student types or searches for certain keywords or phrases online relating to issues like bullying, violence or suicide and more. With the use of any software, make sure to discuss with students why that extra line of contact with a trusted adult is important for their safety.

The three questions to ask yourself before sharing online

Laramie recommends teaching students (and educators) to ask themselves three questions before sharing or interacting with a piece of content:

- Does it need to be said?
- Does it need to be said by me?
- Does it need to be said by me now?

Asking these three basic questions may slow us all down as we react and respond to content online.

# Supporting mental health in schools

Supporting student mental health and safety during remote learning

Supporting mental health in schools

Students this fall are dealing with isolation, depression, and loneliness because of the pandemic, and this has led to shifts in student behavior. In remote learning environments, there's a huge emphasis on one-on-one time between teachers and students – but it's key to also stress peer-to-peer relationships to create a sense of belonging and positive mental health.

Holly Kelly from the Learning Technology Center (LTC) of Illinois spent nearly 15 years as a public educator, while also receiving a master's degree in counseling. She is well-versed with the lengths that students will go through to mask what is going on in their mental health, where even the best teachers are fooled.
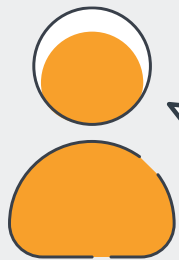
> *"Now that students are learning in remote or hybrid environments, they're possibly only getting four and a half hours a day with their teachers," Kelly says. "Many students can easily hide what's really going on [with their mental health]. We know that if this happens in the classroom, it happens remotely."*

While it may be a little more difficult to spot problematic behaviors in remote environments, there are a few changes in behavior for teachers and administrators to monitor, including:

- Self-isolation
- Significant changes in attendance, including only showing up for certain hours of class.
- Significant changes in how the student is attending class (e.g. suddenly video is off when video used to always be on).
- Increased attention-seeking behavior (e.g. clicking their mute button on and off during a lesson).

The trick for understanding what's going on in a child's mind, Kelly advises, is to create activities that get them to talk about it. Here are a few things she suggested:

Create Accountabili-buddies

Connect students with adults with whom they can build relationships, and who may be able to see changes in their behavior.

Assign each student a teacher or support staff to have daily check-ins. Encourage the adults in this relationship to communicate using different available technology (chat, email, video) to find out the best avenue of communication for the student.

Supporting student mental health and safety during remote learning

Add school counselors to school chats

School counselors or social workers can be added to a Google Classroom, Hangout or Microsoft Teams as a collaborator to see how students are working on assignments. These people can also give teachers a professional point-of-view into how students are responding to assignments.

Allow school counselors to work with teachers on social-emotional learning (SEL) assignments

Kelly suggests that counselors and teachers collaborate on assignments. Counselors can often add a complementary piece to what teachers see and suggest ways for the teacher to talk to students if, for example, their artwork is too dark.

Support new students who may have transferred from another school

For counselors/administrators: Get in contact with the counselor from the previous school and request that their transcripts be transferred. Prepare to communicate with previous counselors or school leaders about that student's behavioral patterns before they arrive at your school.

For teachers/aides: Find ways to welcome the new student to the class that makes them feel comfortable and part of the community; don't put them on the spot.

Dealing with COVID-19 specific crises

Students may be going through crises that are pandemic-specific, from increased senses of worry, to dealing with the virus themselves, or dealing with COVID-related family bereavements.

Anxiety from the pandemic is affecting students, educators, administrators, counselors and parents alike. For educators, it's vital to remind students that though they must isolate within their home, they don't have to shut themselves out from the rest of the world.

"We should be able to communicate with our students and talk about emotions so that they can identify them," Kelly says. "It's not teachers' job to be school counselors — but teachers can help facilitate assignments and activities that help students prioritize social and emotional wellbeing."
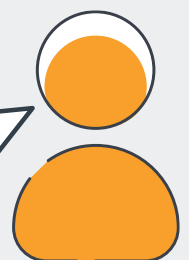
For those students who have experienced familial bereavements, Kelly stressed the importance of grief counseling services that set students up with others who are also experiencing grief to let them know that they're not alone.

Supporting student mental health and safety during remote learning

Having conversations with your students about COVID-19 can also difficult. In *The Conversation*, Steven Siegel from the University of Southern California suggests a few ways for adults to talk about the pandemic when it comes up:

- Minimize discussions about COVID-19 until there's truly something to say (this won't be every day).

- Emphasize that much can be done to reduce risk to yourselves and others.

- Make it clear that smart, capable, and compassionate people are working on the problem.

- Let children know that the pandemic will pass as long as we make smart choices and don't panic.

Supporting teachers' mental health

It would be remiss to exclude the importance of prioritizing teacher mental health and wellbeing. For Kelly, this includes the responsibility of schools to teach teachers how to use new learning platforms and learning management systems.

> *"If COVID has taught us anything, it's empathy," she said. "It's important for schools to tell teachers about what tools they are using so that they can do things like communicate with their students better."*

She suggests sharing a Google Form or Jamboard for teachers to share ideas and gather remotely.

> *"As teachers and administrators learn new tech tools to be able to help their students, they're also needing empathy to acknowledge that we really are all in the same boat, and we just have to learn to paddle together. No matter how fast we're moving, if we're moving forward, then we're making progress."*

For teachers needing a break: prioritize your mental health. Stay connected with your own support system and relationships, limit social media if it affects your mental health, and take care of your physical health.
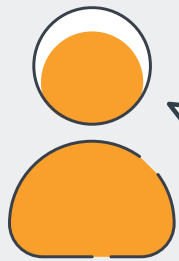
Looking towards the future

Looking towards the future

Since the pandemic started, child abuse material cases have increased worldwide (Solon, 2020). Now, authorities are flagging self-produced material from children as young as age eight.

> *"What's clear to me is that kids aren't connecting with other people," says Laramie. "This virtual world is their only connection — or limited connection -- with somebody else."*

When a child does something like take a picture while at home, they likely feel safe. In the real world, they may not normally take their clothes off in front of somebody else -- but taking a picture of themselves without clothes on, or with limited clothing, may be done online because they feel a false sense of security.

For older kids, Laramie says, a concern is that they can't do what they'd normally do — like be out in public with their arms around each other. They're limited to living in an online world. "I worry that they may feel irrelevant unless they do something risky to get another person's attention," he said. Educators should be aware that as this happens, social normative behavior changes and this behavior becomes normal.

What we can do is adapt, both in our conversations with students, and in our technology choices.

The importance of open conversations

Communication is critical to making sure education is working. Children's mental health relies on high-quality relationships within families, and it's an educator's responsibility to encourage familial relationships and parental engagement. At the highest level, educators can encourage their students to build relationships with classmates and family members.

In addition, consistency of communication with the teacher themselves is key. Teachers should schedule video sessions at the same time every day to provide structure and help students plan their day. It's important for daily check-ins, and to continue therapeutic services remotely when students need it.

Supporting student mental health and safety during remote learning

You've got to empower kids to take control of their school environment," says Laramie. "We have kids who are afraid to tell somebody in authority what's going on because they're afraid people in authority are going to try to fix it, but make it worse. Instead, enable them to fix it themselves. Give them the ability to handle a situation with the knowledge that you're going to support them, and they'll become more confident."

"As educators, we want to help everyone," says Kelly. "But the biggest thing for productivity is finding ways for students to be able to communicate effectively with a teacher or support staff who doesn't necessarily live under their roof."

Laramie also stresses how important it is for teachers to share information about children and families with other educators in the school. For example, if one teacher had a child as a student last school year, they should be encouraged to share information with the student's current teacher about that child's personality and home environment.

In addition, administrators should give teachers permission to use class time to check-in with students and make their social emotional development a priority.

Choosing the right technology

It's imperative for a school to choose the right technology to help prioritize student mental health and wellbeing and intervene quickly if necessary.

Impero offers software that puts student mental health and safety first, and that addresses many of the issues above – like the ability to view chronological orders of student concerns. **Impero back:drop** is a free solution for schools to effectively manage and record student safety concerns, from first aid, to COVID symptom tracking, to more complex mental health issues, all from one centralized system.

Impero back:drop offers access to Impero's premium suite of **classroom management**, **device management** and **learning wellbeing solutions**. For example, **Impero Education Pro's** keyword detection library was developed with the help of Mental Health America to help detect potential mental health concerns among students. Learn more about how Impero products can help your school improve student safety, health and productivity here.

We won't always be living in a global pandemic. We've been encouraged to spend more time inside, which has felt isolating and can even feel like society is fragmenting. But by opening conversations and supporting each other – parents, teachers, administrators, and students alike -- we'll all exit this era in the same way we entered it: together.

About the authors

Supporting student mental health and safety during remote learning

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Impero Software

Impero Software offers remote monitoring and management software, relied upon by education establishments around the world. Founded in 2002, Impero Software is now accessed by over 2 million devices in over 90 countries. Learn more at www.imperosoftware.com/us.

Lt. Joe Laramie, retired

Lt. Joe Laramie, retired spent 31 years in law enforcement at the Glendale Police Department in St. Louis County, Missouri. He was a police juvenile officer responsible for investigating child abuse and dealing with youth who were involved in dangerous or criminal situations, and a DARE Officer. After attending training at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, he established and became the founding Commander of the Missouri Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force, which deals with online child exploitation, cyberbullying and technology safety. He continues to work with the National ICAC Program, facilitating the ICAC Public Awareness Working Group.

Holly Kelly, MS

Holly Kelly, MS spent 15 years working as a public educator as an English teacher and library media specialist at the high school level in Illinois. Currently, she works as the Regional Educational Technology Coordinator for the Learning Technology Center (LTC) of Illinois.

The Illinois Learning Technology Purchase Program (ILTPP) is a program of the Learning Technology Center (LTC). The statewide program supports all K-12 districts, schools, and educators through technology initiatives, services, and professional learning opportunities that further four main focus areas: digital teaching, learning, and leadership; network and technology infrastructure; student data security and safety; and equity and access. The LTC's goal is to maximize school districts' access to technology and enhance districts' use of technology to improve educational opportunities for the students of Illinois. One of the ways in which the LTC increases "access" is by increasing affordability through ILTPP and it partnerships with companies like Impero. More information about ILTPP and the LTC is available at ltcillinois.org.

ILLINOIS LEARNING TECHNOLOGY PURCHASE PROGRAM

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