Ensuring the Safety of Children Served by College Student Volunteers
Tips for Civic Engagement Administrators

This information is modified from a memo that America Learns sent to their partner organizations in August 2012 related to making sure the children served by AmeriCorps members, service learners and volunteers are as safe as possible. It is especially relevant to campuses who manage student volunteers who volunteer with children (e.g. mentor or tutor) on a regular basis at the same service location.

The America Learns Network is an online hub supporting reflection, shared strategies, and continued learning for their AmeriCorps members; while gathering, measuring and reporting the data they need to share their success. Learn more: http://americalearns.net/

The First Step: Making Sure Volunteers are Trained to Report

Make sure that you include information about how to identify and report signs or suspicions of child abuse or neglect in every volunteer orientation and training. One valuable tool for ensuring ongoing reporting opportunities is to track volunteer hours through online or paper time logs and/or reflection logs.

The Second Step: Making Sure Volunteers are Comfortable Reporting Concerns

Unfortunately, just because volunteers and service learners are trained to report it doesn’t mean that they always make those reports. In other cases, they may make those reports, but do so in a way that does not follow formal reporting procedures. That reality can lead to reporting delays, unnecessarily holding up the process of getting a child into a safe space.

AN EXAMPLE
Sometimes volunteers will use their time logs or reflections to report abuse concerns. For example, the prompt on the log might read, “Please describe the goals you’re working on with this student you are tutoring,” and the tutor might use that space to share concerns about her student’s safety.

When this happens it indicates that the tutor or mentor is uncomfortable discussing the issue in-person or does not know if her suspicion constitutes a valid concern. Since volunteer and service learner coordinators/civic engagement administrators tend to be incredibly busy and aren’t always able to read logs as soon as they’re submitted, valid safety concerns sometimes go unnoticed for weeks or months.

The Third Step: Making Sure Staff Take Members’ Concerns Seriously

Sometimes a volunteer serving in a school does make reports in oral conversations with teachers or administrators but the reports aren’t given any weight simply because they’re coming from a volunteer and especially a college student. It isn’t until a campus staff member contacts a school administrator that the report is taken seriously. This is a frustrating reality that requires the campus to exercise more diligence.
Action Steps to Consider

Action Step #1: Acknowledge That This Situation May Not Be About the Quality of Pre-Service Training/Orientation That You Provide On This Topic

Sometimes the lack of reporting can arise due to the personality of the person serving, the level of comfort that person feels at the service location, and because of the overall culture at that location. Since there are so many variables that can impact this issue, it’s important to create proactive safeguards that offer a near-guarantee that these reports will always be made.

Action Step #2: Proactively Checking In Through Reporting & Reflection Logs

*Check this box if you have any safety concerns about the children you are serving.* ☐

Consider placing a box (see above) on time logs or reporting and reflection forms prompting the volunteer to note whether they have any concerns about the safety of the children they’re serving. It should be on every log or reporting form. It should be located right at the very top or very bottom of each page so you can immediately pick out any concerns as soon as the forms are turned in.

If you don’t use electronic or paper logs, please consider asking each volunteer, at least once a month, about the safety of the children they’re serving—either in person, via e-mail, via scheduled phone calls, or via a simple piece of paper that they can complete as they leave their service site (so long as that paper will be reviewed immediately).

Since some volunteers and service learners do not report concerns unless they’re asked directly (and this happens even when pre-service training/orientation on this issue is incredibly strong), program staff must proactively check in with each person in some way.

Volunteers and service learners have reported that the process of staff proactively checking in leads them to be more aware of potential safety issues while they’re in the field, leading them to pick up on signs that they may have missed otherwise.

Action Step #3: More Training, More Clarity = More Chances to Serve Children Well

It is important to provide individuals serving children with regular reminders as to what the terms “physical, emotional or mental safety” mean. There is no universal sign that will tell if a child has been abused or if a child’s physical, mental or emotional safety may be in danger. It is important, however, that volunteers are aware of the signs and symptoms that a child may exhibit if he or she is experiencing some form of abuse or neglect.

The next page contains a list of some of the behaviors that may indicate that a child’s physical, mental or emotional safety may be in danger; however, it is important to note these behaviors can be observed in children who have NOT been abused. Volunteers should contact the staff at the service site immediately if they have any questions about this extremely important issue.
Signs and symptoms of physical neglect may, but do not necessarily, include:

**Physical Indicators**
- Consistent hunger
- Malnutrition
- Unattended physical or medical needs
- Inappropriate dress for season or activity

**Behavioral Indicators**
- Begging for or stealing food
- Consistent fatigue / falling asleep often
- Aggressive or withdrawn behavior

Signs and symptoms of physical abuse may, but do not necessarily, include:

**Physical Indicators**
- Unexplained bruises and/or welts
- Unexplained burns
- Unexplained lacerations or abrasions
- Unexplained fractures

**Behavioral Indicators**
- Wary of adults
- Too eager to please
- Sudden change in behavior

Signs and symptoms of sexual abuse may, but do not necessarily, include:

**Physical Indicators**
- Abrasions or bleeding in genital or anal areas
- Infection, inflammation, soreness or bruising in genital or anal areas
- Torn or stained clothing

**Behavioral Indicators**
- Regression to an earlier behavioral age
- New fears or phobias
- Sexual knowledge that is too specific for the child's age
- Sexual play with other children, toys and/or self

Signs and symptoms of emotional abuse or neglect may, but do not necessarily, include:

**Behavioral Indicators**
- Aggressive or withdrawn behavior
- Very low self esteem
- Consistent negative affect

Additional resources on this topic can be found below.

- [http://www.helpguide.org/mental/child_abuse_physical_emotional_sexual_neglect.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/child_abuse_physical_emotional_sexual_neglect.htm)

*Modified by Leslie Garvin (September 2012)*