

American International School of Freetown



Child Protection at AISF

Handbook
2024-2025

An important note for parents

Dear Parents,

Child protection is extremely important and we are committed to ensuring the protection of all of our students. In March, 2024, the school revised a Child Protection Policy which sets definitions for child abuse as well as outlines preventative measures and guidelines for the school's response in case of suspected abuse.

By enrolling your child at AISF, you agree to work in partnership with the school and abide by our policies. All of us at AISF want you to know that we genuinely value our partnership with you in providing for the safety and care of your children.

Following this policy, AISF is committed to setting up procedures to verify the previous employment for any new job applicants as well as to ensure all members of the AISF community are informed and educated regarding symptoms of child abuse.

We hope you share our commitment and will work with us to ensure our children are safe as well as knowledgeable about their rights and responsibilities. Your support in our efforts is important

Thank you in advance for working with us on this important initiative.

Elizabeth Minnigin

Elizabeth
Minnigin

AISF Director

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*Many thanks to the International Community School of Abidjan on which this document was based.
Thanks as well to the AISA Child Protection Handbook which has been a model for schools worldwide.*

AISF Child Protection Policy

The American International School of Freetown is committed to child protection and the safeguarding of AISF students. AISF expects all members of the AISF community to share this commitment and responsibility to protect children. AISF seeks to be a haven for students who may be experiencing abuse or neglect in any aspect of their lives.

Child abuse and neglect persist as global concerns, violating the fundamental rights of children and obstructing their educational, physical, emotional, and spiritual development. The American International School of Freetown aligns itself with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child principles, a commitment upheld by our host country, The Republic of Sierra Leone.

Recognizing Child Abuse

- **Physical Abuse:** Non-accidental physical injury including but not limited to female genital mutilation (FGM), burns, human bites, bruises, lacerations, bone fractures, missing teeth, and any internal or head injuries, any of which have been intentionally inflicted.
- **Sexual Abuse:** Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including penetrative (i.e. rape) or non-penetrative acts.
- **Emotional Abuse:** Mental anguish and/or chronic emotional pain caused by such things as rejection, isolation, severe humiliation, excessive teasing and verbal assault.
- **Domestic Violence:** Allowing a child to witness violence within his/her immediate environment.
- **Neglect:** Neglect entails the continual abandonment of a child, characterized by the failure to provide essential elements like food, water, clothing, shelter, or medical care. Additionally, it involves neglecting a child's emotional and psychological needs and failing to shield them from potential dangers that could impact their health or developmental well-being.

Reporting

It is a requirement for all staff members at the American International School of Freetown to immediately report any instances of child abuse or neglect if they have a reasonable belief that a child has encountered or is at substantial risk of experiencing abuse or neglect. The reporting and subsequent actions regarding suspected incidents of child abuse or neglect will adhere to the administrative regulations associated with this policy. Additionally, suspicions of child abuse or neglect may be communicated to the relevant employer, the respective consulate in Freetown, the appropriate child protection agency in the home country, and/or local authorities.

Background Checks and Education

The American International School of Freetown will distribute this policy annually to all parents and applicants, will communicate this policy to students, will provide training for all staff, and will make every effort to implement hiring practices to ensure the safety of children. AISF requires appropriate background checks for all employees.

<https://www.icmec.org/aisa-child-protection-handbook/> <https://www.unicef.org/about-unicef>

How are abuse and neglect defined?

Definitions of abuse are complex and based in various cultures of child-rearing behaviors, gender and role responsibilities and expectations. The primary determination of abuse is that it is dependent on some form of a relationship that is used to meet the needs of the more powerful person, either a member of the family, a teacher, or a friend. Research guides much of the definitions that are based in understanding the impact of certain behaviors.

Physical abuse

- Inflicting physical injury on a child by other than accidental means, causing skin bruising, burns, disfigurement, impairment of physical or emotional health, or loss or impairment of any bodily function, death; and/or
- Creating a substantial risk of physical harm to a child's bodily functioning; and/or
- Committing acts that are cruel or inhumane regardless of observable injury. Such acts may include, but are not limited to, instances of extreme discipline demonstrating a disregard of a child's pain and/or mental suffering; and/or
- Assaulting or criminally mistreating a child as defined by either the criminal code or school policy; and/or
- Engaging in actions or omissions resulting in injury to, or creating a substantial risk to the physical or mental health or development of a child; and/or
- Failing to take reasonable steps to prevent the occurrence of any of the above.

Neglect

The failure to provide for a child's basic needs within their own environment.

Furthermore, neglect may be:

- Physical (e.g., failure to provide necessary food or shelter, or lack of appropriate supervision - this would include failure to provide proper adult guardianship, such as leaving children unsupervised at home for any extended period of time).
- Emotional (e.g., a pattern of actions, such as: inattention to a child's emotional needs, failure to provide psychological care, or permitting the child to use alcohol or other drugs, specific examples may include verbal humiliation, refusing to acknowledge presence of child, invasion of privacy for no specific reason, violent threats, etc.).

Emotional abuse

The persistent emotional ill treatment of a child so as to cause severe and adverse effects on a child's emotional development.

- **It may involve:** conveying to children that they are worthless or unloved; that they are inadequate or valued only if they meet the needs of another person; age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children; causing children frequently to feel frightened; the exploitation or corruption of child's innocence. Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of ill-treatment of a child, though it may also occur alone.

Sexual abuse

Committing or allowing to be committed any sexual offense against a child as defined in either the criminal code of the host country or school policy, or intentionally touching either directly or through clothing, the genitals, anus, or breasts of a child for other than hygiene or child care purposes.

- Sexual abuse has some different characteristics of child abuse that warrant special attention. While physical abuse is often the result of immediate stress and not usually planned, sexual abuse requires planning with results that are more insidious.

The planning, referred to as child sexual exploitation or grooming, often results in victims accepting the blame, responsibility, guilt and shame for the sexual behavior of the offender. Sexual abuse requires far more secrecy than other forms of child abuse, so is more difficult to report.

Child Sexual Exploitation (Grooming)

The use of a variety of manipulative and controlling techniques with a vulnerable subject used in a range of settings to establish trust and/or normalise sexually harmful behaviour with the overall aim of facilitating abuse and/or prohibiting exposure.

- Grooming may happen over long periods of time or rapidly. It may include manipulation of family members, colleagues, and organizational practices in addition to victims.
- Many victims, through the process of grooming, are taught that the sex is a form of love, so tend to love their offender and often present as happy and well-adjusted children with no negative symptoms because of their perception of being loved.

Peer on Peer Abuse

Any form of physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse, and coercive control, exercised between children, and within children's relationships (both intimate and non intimate), friendships and wider peer associations.

- Peer-on-peer abuse can take various forms, including (but not limited to): serious bullying (including cyberbullying), relationship abuse, domestic violence and abuse, child sexual exploitation, youth and serious youth violence, harmful sexual behaviour, and/or prejudice-based violence including, but not limited to, gender-based violence.
- Examples of online peer-on-peer abuse would include sexting, online abuse, peer-on-peer grooming, the distribution of youth involved sexualised content, and harassment

Procedures: Preparing for a Disclosure

Adults working with children must understand and know how to respond appropriately to disclosures from students. It is important that employees listen carefully to students, giving them the time they need to talk about what happened to them and how they are feeling. Students often cannot easily talk about an abuse problem because they may:

- Try to forget in order to cope
- Worry they will lose the love of their parents or friends
- Fear the shame of abuse or getting in trouble for telling (especially older children)
- Be under threat by the offender to harm them or their family

Understanding these fears of disclosure will help you in your response. Respond calmly and matter-of-factly. Even if the story that the student tells you is difficult to hear, it is important not to register disgust or alarm.

Do:

- Accept what the student tells you, even though your first reaction may be, “This can’t be true.” It is very unlikely the student will make up an abuse experience, particularly a sexual abuse experience. It is important to report to the CPO immediately. Ask the student to accompany you to the office.
- Affirm the student by acknowledging the importance of talking about the abuse and getting help. Do not assume that the student knows how to talk about it.
- Support the student. Reinforce that a student who has been victimized is not to blame.
- Empower the student. A victim often feels helpless and powerless. Affirm and support feelings: listen to fears, concerns and needs; and assure that every effort will be made to keep them safe.

Don’t:

- Do not promise the student that “you won’t tell” - You are required to tell.
- Do not let a student swear you to secrecy before telling you something you may need to report.
- Do not lead the student in telling (just listen, letting him/her explain in his/her own words).
- Do not pressure the student for a great amount of detail.
- Do not make judgmental or disparaging comments about the offender - it is often someone the student loves or with whom he/she is close.
- Do not make promises to the student that things will get better.
- Do not confront the offender.

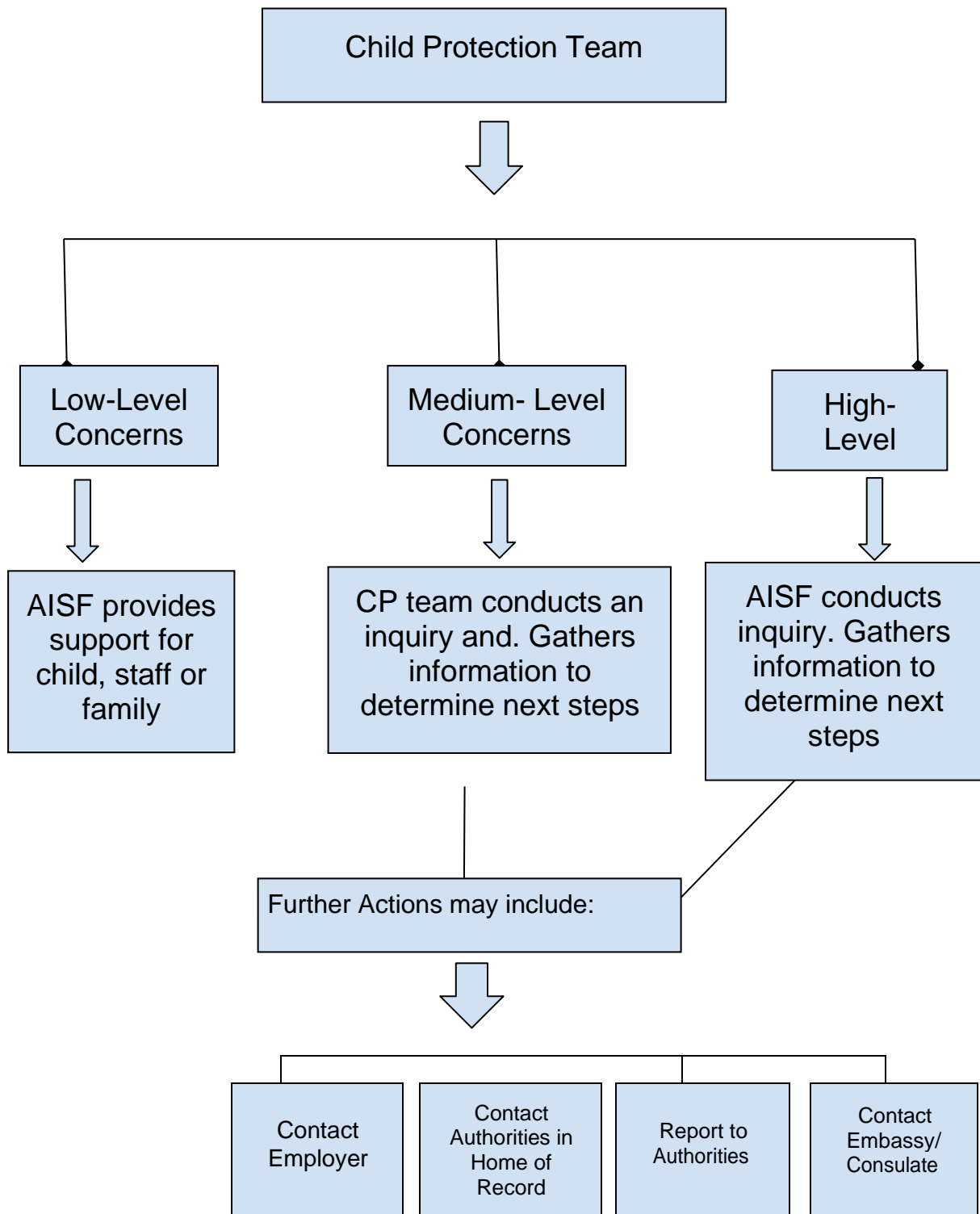
Share with the Child Protection Officer (CPO) or administrator, but limit information to other staff. Explain to the student that you must tell someone else to get help. Try to let the student know that someone else might also need to talk with him/her and explain why. If the student does not want to go home, this should be considered an emergency. Report to the CPO or school director immediately.

Procedures: Reporting Suspected Child Abuse or Neglect

Where there is cause to suspect child abuse or neglect, it is the responsibility of the staff member to report his or her suspicions to the Child Protection Officer (CPO) or the Director In all cases.

All staff, faculty, and administrators are mandated to report incidences of abuse and neglect. All AISF employees are also required to report suspicion of abuse or neglect. All reports of abuse and neglect must be made to the CPO within 48 hours for immediate response.

Disclosure



Step 1: Disclosure and Information Gathering

Following a disclosure, the Child Protection Officer (CPO) will take initial steps to gather information regarding the reported incident and will meet with the director and Child protection Team (and other members of the response team as needed) to address the concern. In all cases, follow-up activities will be conducted in a manner that ensures that information is documented factually and that strict confidentiality is maintained. The following procedure will be used:

1. Interview staff members as necessary and document information relative to the case
2. Consult with school personnel to review the child's history in the school
3. Determine the course of follow-up actions (i.e. see Disclosure Flowchart)

Step 2: Response

The School shall take all reports of abuse seriously. In response to suspected abuse, the School shall take reasonable, responsible and legal steps to protect the child. The CPO has a coordinating role and has the additional task of ensuring confidentiality and keeping the Director informed in all decisions.

Step 3: Support

Subsequent to a reported and/or substantiated case of child abuse or neglect:

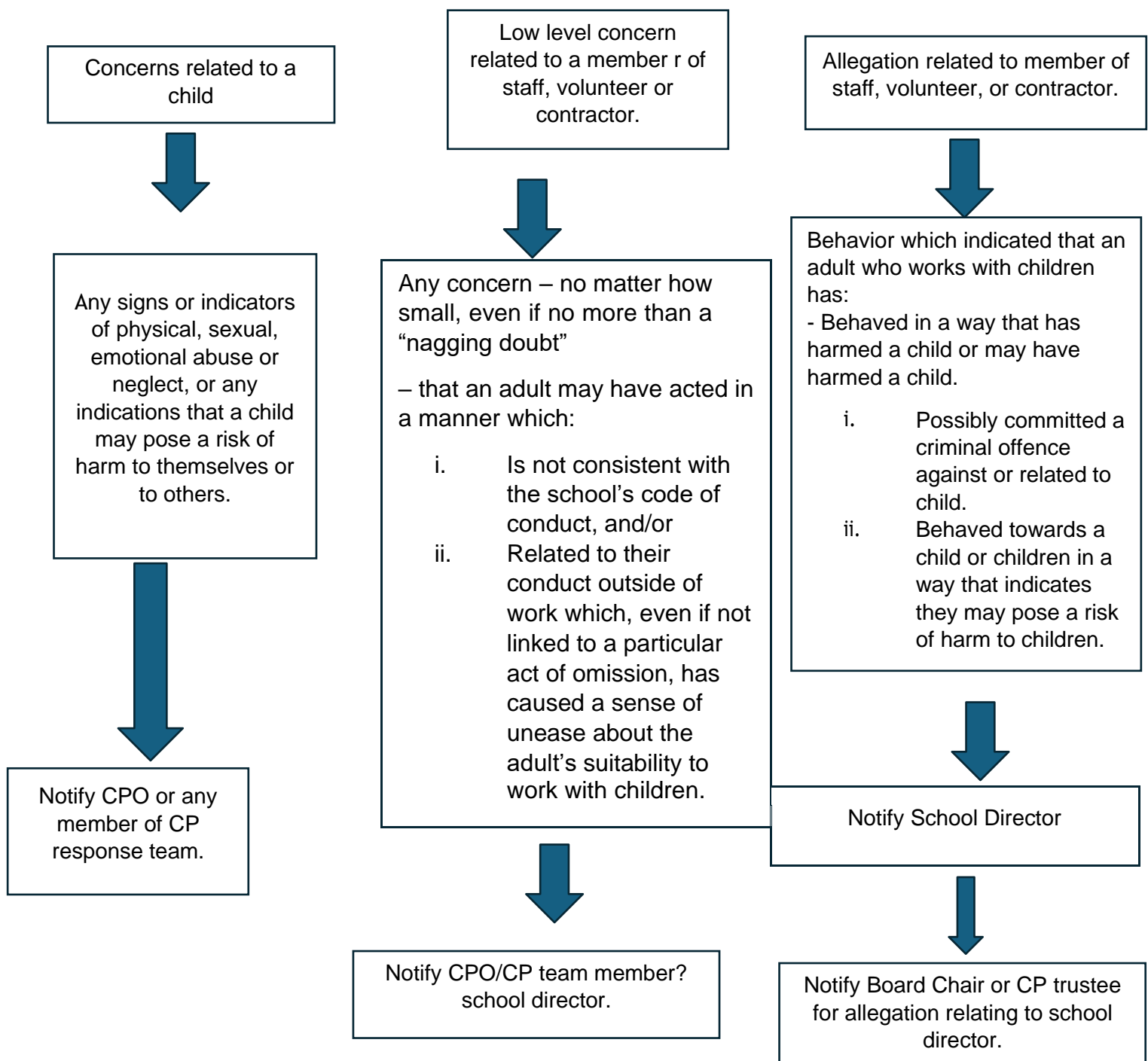
- The Child protection Team (CPT) will maintain contact with the child and family to provide support and guidance as appropriate
- The CPT will provide the child's teachers and the director with ongoing support
- The CPT designate will provide resource materials and strategies for teachers
- The CPT will maintain contact with outside therapists to update the progress of the child in school.

All documentation of the investigation will be kept in the child's confidential file. Confidential records may only be released with parent consent. One exception to this is if the School believes the child continues to be at risk. In these cases, AISF has the responsibility to relay potential safety concerns to the new school.

Flowchart for reporting All Concerns

In the event that the abuse or neglect allegation involves a staff or faculty member of AISF, the school director must be informed. The school director will follow School policy to ensure ethical behavior.

If the designated CPO or school director is in any way involved in the suspicions, the employee must report to the Chair of the Board. The Chair shall bring the matter to a closed session of the Board.



Child abuse prevention

In order to protect the students and staff of the School:

- The School shall conduct a comprehensive verification of previous employment of any applicant.
- The Director shall establish regulations for staff and volunteers for the prevention, reporting, investigation and follow up of (suspected) child maltreatment, and shall ensure that particular care is taken with respect to the collection of evidence in a confidential matter.
- The Director shall ensure that the School staff is periodically informed and educated regarding the symptoms of child abuse, reporting obligations and appropriate regulations for dealing with such issues in the School environment.

The Director shall periodically undertake a review of policies and regulations in the following areas as part of the effort to prevent child abuse.

- Guidelines for field trips involving overnight accommodation
- Guidelines for appropriate conduct between students and staff
- Educational programs on child protection issues
- Educational programs on human sexuality
- Criteria for screening School volunteers
- Privacy guidelines.

Child Protection Key Contacts

School Contact

- Becky Ogundele
Child Protection Officer
Email: childprotection@ais-freetown.net

AISF Concern Report Form

This form is to be completed and submitted within 48 hours of suspected child abuse.

Name of Child:	Age:	
Grade Level:	DoB:	
Gender:	Date of Incident/Concern:	Date Form completed:
Name(s) & Contacts of parent(s)/carer(s):		

Your details

Your name:	Your position and relationship with student (e.g Homeroom teacher, counselor, specialist teacher, TA, admin, support staff, activities supervisor or other):
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Details of Concern: (Please provide details of the incident or concerns you have, including times, dates, description of any injuries, whether information is first hand or the account of others, including any other relevant details.

Is this the first time you have been concerned about this student?
Have you spoken to anyone else about this concern? Whom?:
Provide details of anyone who witnessed the incident or who shares the concerns:
<p><u>Are the parents/guardians aware of your concern?:</u></p> <p><i>Please note: concerns should be discussed with the family unless:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The view is that a family member might be responsible for abusing the child</i> • <i>Someone may be put in danger by the parents being informed</i> • <i>Informing the family might interfere with a criminal investigation.</i> <p><i>If any of these circumstances apply, the CP team will consult with the local authority children's social care department to decide whether or not discussions with the family should take place.</i></p> <p><i>If you have spoken to the child's parents/carers please provide details of what was said. If not, please state the reason for this:</i></p>
Have you spoken to the student? What did they say? Use the student's own words.
Are you aware of any previous incidents or concerns relating to this child and of any current risk management plan/ support plan? If so, please give details

Your Signature:	Date and Time:
Handed to CPO (Time and Date):	CPO Signature: