



**Illinois
State Board of
Education**

Guidance for Delivering Sexual Abuse Prevention Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all facets of life and weakened many important social safety nets, including some that safeguard children and youth. The safety of children and their ability to live free from all forms of abuse are of the utmost importance during this extraordinary time in our world. Unfortunately, extended school and community closures in 2020 will continue to reduce students' connection to supportive resources, including mandated reporters, that can prevent or respond to child sexual and severe physical abuse.

Sexual abuse prevention education may seem like a difficult topic to address right now, but students need information about their right to safety from sexual harm and how to get help now perhaps more than ever. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reminds us that "it is vital that [youth-serving] organizations create a culture where child sexual abuse is discussed, addressed, and prevented."¹ Schools are one of those organizations; their responsibility to create this culture has not been lessened by the other stressors on schools created by the pandemic.

I. ERIN'S LAW

Erin's Law ([105 ILCS 5/10-23.13](https://www.ilcs.gov/105/10/23/13)) was passed in Illinois in 2011. It requires that all public schools adopt and implement a policy regarding child-focused sexual abuse prevention education that includes age-appropriate curriculum for students in pre-K through twelfth grade on how to recognize child sexual abuse and tell a trusted adult; training for school personnel on child sexual abuse; and educational information for parents and guardians on the warning signs of child sexual abuse, along with needed assistance, referrals, and resources.²

The Erin's Law requirements in statute have not changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and are the same regardless of the learning environment utilized by the school (i.e., in-person, blended, or fully remote). Below are some best practices and special considerations for delivery of sensitive content in the various learning environments.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/PreventingChildSexualAbuse-a.pdf>

² Erin's Law uses permissive rather than mandatory language for the age-appropriate curriculum and limits the policy to students in pre-K through fifth grade. However, the Critical Health Problems and Comprehensive Health Education Act [105 ILCS 110/1 et seq.] requires elementary and secondary schools in Illinois to adopt a comprehensive health education program that includes, as a basis for curricula, "age-appropriate sexual abuse and assault awareness and prevention education in grades pre-kindergarten through 12." 105 ILCS 110/3. Therefore, sexual abuse prevention education is a mandate and should be taught in all grades.

A. Best Practices for All Schools

- **Connect with students and families:** Sexual abuse prevention education provides an opportunity to slow down the regular school day and make meaningful connections with students and their families. Use the time to check in on student emotional, physical, and mental well-being as well as to deliver instruction. The following resources provide helpful tips and recommendations for checking in with students:
 - <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/a-trauma-informed-approach-to-teaching-through-coronavirus> (a Teaching Tolerance resource)
 - <https://www.chicagocac.org/wp-content/uploads/Tips-for-communicating-with-students-during-remote-learning.pdf> (a Chicago Children's Advocacy Center resource)
- **Provide multi-session instruction:** Sexual abuse prevention education should be delivered through a multi-session approach, ideally in at least four sessions annually in every grade.
- **Begin during the first semester:** Students have been away from mandated reporters for an extended period; therefore, instruction pertaining to Erin's Law and connection with students regarding sexual abuse prevention should begin in the first semester of the 2020-21 school year.
- **Be aware of limitations and simplify:** Students may have challenges accessing the instruction you provide for a variety of reasons. Be creative in your approach and keep information direct and simple.
- **Ensure school personnel training:**
 - All school personnel should complete the free online Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Mandated Reporter Training (www.dcfstraining.org) before sexual abuse prevention education begins. The law requires that all mandated reporters receive the training within three months of their date of engagement in a professional or official capacity as a mandated reporter and at least every three years thereafter. Students and families should be given reminders that school staff are mandated reporters before the Erin's Law lessons begin.
 - All school personnel involved directly with students should have the opportunity to learn about Erin's Law, the curriculum their school is using, the plan for delivery, signs and indicators of child sexual abuse, the policies and procedures for reporting abuse suspicions or disclosures, and community resources to support students and families before sexual abuse prevention education begins.
- **Notify parents/caregivers/families:** Schools should send a letter to parents and guardians announcing that sexual abuse prevention education is taking place and giving them the opportunity to reach out with questions. Notifications should be translated into other languages depending on the primary languages spoken in the community.³

³ The law requires schools to notify the parent or guardian of any student in grades kindergarten through 8 of the school's intention to offer a class or course in sexual abuse prevention education not less than five days before such class commences. Such notification must be in writing. Parents or guardians of students in grades kindergarten through 8 have a statutory right to submit a written objection to their child participating in sexual abuse prevention education; the child's subsequent failure to participate in any course or class on sexual abuse prevention education cannot be penalized. 105 ILCS 5/27-13.2.

- **Educate parents/caregivers/families:** Schools should use a variety of communication tools, including school websites, family newsletters, and school social media accounts, to share information with families about free prevention educational resources that will enable them to directly support additional student learning on this subject. When a district engages in open communication about this topic, it encourages families to be more open. Communications and resources should be translated into other languages depending on the primary languages in the community. Please see the resource section at the end of this document if you need assistance identifying trainings and publications that can be shared.

B. Best Practices for Schools Providing In-Person or Hybrid Instruction

- Schools providing a combination of in-person and remote instruction should prioritize sexual abuse prevention education for every grade during periods of in-person learning when two or more well-trained staff members can be physically present in the room during instruction. Ideally, one of those staff members will be a school social worker or counselor.
- Any community expert who is invited into the classroom to deliver content should either come in-person (following all applicable health and safety guidelines) or should provide instruction remotely while the teacher is physically in-person in the classroom with students. This enables the teacher to closely monitor and respond to any student needs.
- **Handling student disclosures during an in-person lesson:**
 - If there are any signs that the student is emotionally unstable, a school staff member (ideally a social worker/counselor) should provide that student with the opportunity to leave the room, making efforts to minimize disruption or special attention being placed on the student. The staff member should then assess safety with the student and report the abuse disclosure to the child abuse hotline that day.
 - The student can remain in the lesson if the disclosure is made in a matter-of-fact way without signs of emotional distress. A school staff member (ideally a social worker/counselor) should take steps to immediately check in with the student when the lesson ends and should report the abuse disclosure to the child abuse hotline that day.

C. Best Practices for Fully Remote Schools

- Ensure that at least two school staff members (ideally at least one in the role of social worker/counselor) are present in online classrooms during sexual abuse prevention education. This ensures that no adult is placed in a situation where they must manage an entire classroom while also responding to a triggered student or a disclosure of abuse without backup. **ISBE strongly advises that districts offering sexual abuse prevention education remotely ensure that two staff members can be present during synchronous learning.**
- Ask students to be seated at a table or desk with their video on during these lessons to better enable staff to monitor emotional response.

- Turn off any private chat functions for participants to reduce opportunities for bullying or unmonitored one-on-one conversations. However, ensure that the remote learning platform being used allows private chat between an individual participant and the host, since some students may be more comfortable disclosing information in writing than verbally.
- Provide and communicate about a means (text/phone/email/remote learning messenger) for students to raise safety concerns to school staff/social worker/counselor after the lesson ends.
- Students and families should be well informed as to the fact that these lessons are taking place and should receive multiple reminders ahead of time.
- **Handling student disclosures over video or in the chat during a remote lesson:**
 - If there are any signs that the student is emotionally unstable, a school staff member (ideally social worker/counselor) should immediately attempt to meet with that student privately in a breakout room or call them on the phone to assess safety. In addition, the abuse disclosure should be reported to the child abuse hotline that day.
 - The student can remain in the lesson if the disclosure is made in a matter-of-fact way without signs of emotional distress. A school staff member (ideally social worker/counselor) should take steps to immediately check in with the student over video chat or by phone when the lesson ends and should report the abuse disclosure to the child abuse hotline that day.
- **Special considerations for preK-8th grade students:**
 - Sexual abuse prevention education should be delivered in a synchronous manner by a well-trained school staff member or community expert.
 - Parents/guardians of young students are encouraged to be physically present with their children during the synchronous lesson, when possible.
 - Lessons should not be long, should be delivered more than once in the semester, and should include opportunities for open discussion.
 - Follow-up activities to be done independently by the student after a synchronous lesson are appropriate for students in Grades 6 through 8.
 - School personnel should plan ahead to check in with each student individually after the lesson takes place and should remind students that support is available.
- **Special considerations for high school students:**
 - Sexual abuse prevention education can be a combination of synchronous and asynchronous lessons from a well-trained school personnel or community expert.
 - Lessons should combine different elements of media/learning/interaction to keep attention and should be delivered more than once in the semester and include opportunities for open discussion.
 - School personnel should plan ahead to check in with students after the lesson takes place and should remind them that support is available.

II. RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

A. Suggested online trainings for school staff members:

- Illinois DCFS Mandated Reporter Training is at www.dcfstraining.org.
- Reach out to a local community organization to have it deliver a presentation to your staff. [Rape Crisis Centers](#) and [Children's Advocacy Centers](#), among many other community organizations, offer this to schools.
- The Second Step program is currently offering all-staff sexual abuse prevention and bullying prevention trainings for free to the public through Dec. 31, 2020. See <https://www.secondstep.org/covid19support>.
- Darkness to Light offers online trainings for groups of individuals about child sexual abuse response and prevention. See <https://www.d2l.org/>. Some of the trainings are currently being offered for free in consideration of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

B. Suggested curriculums that school staff members can use with students:

- Reach out to build partnerships with local organizations, including your community's [Rape Crisis Center](#), [Children's Advocacy Center](#), and [Domestic Violence Organization providing Prevention Services](#). They can help deliver Erin's Law curriculum to students.
- Erin Merryn's website provides links to resources and programs for sexual abuse prevention education at <http://www.erinslaw.org/resources/>.
- Free training/education about online safety for children and families in English and Spanish is at www.NetSmartz.org.

C. Suggested online resources that schools can share with parents/caregivers:

- Invite a local community organization to offer parents/caregivers a virtual or pre-recorded educational session about talking to their children about sexual abuse prevention. Rape Crisis Centers, Children's Advocacy Centers, and other organizations often offer this type of parent/caregiver education.
- Share a list of prevention strategies for families during social distancing created by Chicago Children's Advocacy Center. See <https://www.chicagocac.org/reducing-risk-child-sexual-abuse-isolation/>.
- Chicago Children's Advocacy Center offers free downloadable workbooks for parents/caregivers, which may be the most beneficial for parents/caregivers of children in preK-5th grades. See www.chicagocac.org/kmfs.
- Parents can learn about online safety and guide children through child-focused education at www.netsmartz.org, www.netsmartzkids.org, and www.nsteens.org.
- Committee for Children and the Second Step program have a number of videos and family resources available at <https://www.earlyopenoften.org/>.
- Darkness2Light is offering a few trainings at no cost for parents about protecting children during a crisis and talking to them about prevention. See <https://www.d2l.org/protective-steps/>.