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Tell-tale signs of child abuse may show up when children return to school after summer vacation

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HARRISBURG, Pa., Aug. 27, 2012 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- If a child has spent the summer in an abusive or neglectful home, it may be in the first few days back at school that the tell-tale signs of abuse are most likely to emerge and be recognized, the director of training for the Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance (PFSA) says.

"It may be easier for teachers and other school employees to recognize that something was or is amiss because of the time lapse," Tina Phillips said. "A child who has been abused or neglected over the summer may look or act dramatically different from when school ended a few months earlier. A returning child also may see school or a teacher as a safe haven and feel comfortable enough to open up."

Teachers and other school employees are considered "mandated reporters," which means they have a legal duty to report suspected child abuse or neglect.

"The first few weeks back at school are when teachers need to be attuned to looking for signs of abuse or neglect," Phillips said. "They may notice behavior or physical signs that suggest abuse. Most kids are coming back from a happy, fun-filled summer, and it shows. Kids that have had a tough time will present a contrast. Teachers need to be alert."

Among the suggestive signs are such things as:

- Unexplained bruises, burns, broken bones, or other injuries, or obviously unaddressed medical or dental needs.
- Showing up at school early or staying late and not wanting to go home, or a fearful reaction to parents.
- Behavior that seems overly compliant, withdrawn, or passive, or aggressive behavior towards oneself or others.
- Poor hygiene or clothing that's dirty or poorly fitted.
- Lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities such as sports, clubs, or playing an instrument.
- Demonstrating sexual knowledge or behavior not typical for the child's age.

Phillips said the behavior of parents at parent-teacher conferences or school open house nights also can signal problems at home—such indicators as showing little or no concern for the child's welfare, blaming the child for problems at home or school, requesting harsh discipline, conveying that a child is worthless or burdensome, making demands on a child beyond his or her developmental abilities, or rejecting offers of help for a child's problems.

"These are some of the signs that something could be wrong—but they are by no means all inclusive," Phillips said.

Phillips stressed that the law does not require certainty when it comes to reporting suspected child abuse or neglect. She said, "The operative word is 'suspected.' It's not necessary to be absolutely sure. The only threshold is reasonable suspicion."

She said it's better to make a report and let Children and Youth Services conduct an investigation than it is to hold back.

Anyone can report suspected child abuse or neglect by calling ChildLine at 1-800-932-0313.

PFSA is a nonprofit agency that annually trains more than 8,000 professionals, including teachers, in how to recognize and report suspected child abuse.

It supported and helped win passage and enactment of Senate Bill 449, which now requires teachers and other school

personnel to receive training on recognizing and reporting child abuse.

PFSA also is the Pennsylvania sponsor of The Front Porch Project®, a community-based training initiative that educates the general public about how to protect children from abuse and works with more than 50 affiliate agencies across Pennsylvania to provide information, educational materials, and programs that teach and support good parenting practices.

Visit the PFSA website at www.pa-fsa.org.

SOURCE PA Family Support Alliance