

Definitions & Questions about Services: Child Welfare

What is child welfare?

The child welfare system is a group of public and private services that are focused on ensuring that all children live in safe, permanent and stable environments that support their well-being. Child welfare services may interact with entire families, or they may be focused on direct intervention with children.

The public child welfare system operates at the federal, state, and local levels. Additionally, many private and community-based organizations are involved in providing for children's well-being. Thus, the child welfare system varies dramatically from state to state.

When the DCWC refers to "child welfare", we are referring to any of the elements of this system. Thus, a family who is child welfare involved may be receiving services but still be intact (family preservation), or the child or children may be removed from the home, either temporarily or permanently.

For more information about child welfare programs and services, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway at: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/>

What is child protection?

Child protection is a term that is often used to refer to the child welfare system. Specifically, it is most often used to describe the government response to child maltreatment.

Child protective services (CPS) is a term used most often to refer to the government social services agency designated to receive reports, conduct investigations and assessments, and provide treatment and intervention services to children and families in which child maltreatment has occurred.

CPS may be administered at the state or county level. Frequently, this agency is located within larger public social service agencies, such as departments of social services or human services.

For more information about CPS visit:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/overview.cfm>

What is out-of-home placement?

Many children who are referred to the child welfare system are NOT removed from their homes. Instead, the entire family will receive support and services intended to improve family functioning. However, if the risk to the child is considered too high for them to remain in their home, then the child may be placed in out-of-home placement. Out-of-home

placement may be short or longer term (ie: it may only be for a few hours or it may be for longer than that), and may occur in a number of settings. It is not intended to be a permanent solution for a child; the goal is always to find a permanent, stable, and safe home.

Some of the most common types of out-of-home placements include:

- *Family foster care* is when the child lives in a private home with a family or adult.
- *Kinship care* is when the child lives with other relatives (for example, grandparents, aunts and uncles) after being moved from their parents' home.
- *Treatment foster care* includes placements that occur when the child has been identified as needing special services and supports; for example, if the child is medically fragile, HIV+, or has some type of emotional or behavioral disorder. Treatment foster care placements, sometimes called therapeutic foster care, mean that the foster parents have received special training or support so that they can better meet the needs of these children.
- *Residential or group care* settings include institutional settings, such as treatment centers or correctional facilities, community-based group homes, and residential living in campus settings.
- *Emergency care* settings are used by some states and counties when a child is first removed from their family's home. They are generally settings where a child stays less than 7 days, and may be with a family or in a more institutional setting.

For more information about the types of out-of-home placement go here:

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/types/>

What is guardianship? What is state guardianship?

Guardianship is the legal transfer of parental and legal authority of a child to another caregiver. State guardianship means that the state assumes parental responsibility and legal authority for the child. Assumption of legal guardianship does not require termination of parental rights, as is required for an adoption. Each state has different laws around guardianship and establishing guardianship.

For more information: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/permanency/guardianship.cfm>

What is adoption?

Adoption is the process in which children who will not be raised by their birth parents become full and permanent legal members of another family. For adoption to occur, the legal relationship between and child and their biological parents must be terminated.

For more information:

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/intro.cfm>

What are the goals of child welfare?

The child welfare system has three primary goals for children. These are:

Safety: No child should suffer maltreatment, both in their own home and when they are in out-of-home placement.

Permanency: All children should have stable and continuous family relationships and connections. Stable, caring relationships in a family are essential for healthy child development.

Well-being: Any effects of child maltreatment on the child's physical, mental, or emotional health must be identified, and preventative or treatment interventions should be provided if they are needed.

These goals are specifically described in the text of the [Adoption and Safe Families Act](#).

How is the child welfare system structured?

The child welfare structure and system varies widely from state to state. All states are responsible to the federal government for reporting, funding, and some standards of care. However, each state also has their own child welfare system. Some states provide both the oversight and the administration of child welfare services and programs, while in other states, the state provides oversight but counties provide the actual services and programs.

Regardless of the state role in oversight and administration, the child welfare system is far reaching and includes public and private service providers, as well as the courts and legal system.

What is differential response (multiple track, alternative response)?

Differential response (sometimes called multiple track or alternative response) refers to when child welfare agencies use two or more paths or tracks of response to reports of child maltreatment. Typically, differential response includes an investigative approach and an assessment or alternative approach. In an investigation, child welfare workers gather evidence and make a formal determination whether child maltreatment has occurred. This approach is most often used for reports of the most severe types of maltreatment or for cases that are potentially criminal.

In lower risk cases, some child welfare agencies will employ an alternative response, in which they take a strengths-based approach to the family and focus on offering services to meet the family's needs and support positive parenting. Although a formal determination

or substantiation of child abuse or neglect may be made in some cases, it is typically not required. The purpose of differential response is typically to recognize and respond to the variation in the nature of reports and types of cases.

For more information:

http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/differential_response/differential_response.cfm

What are the key pieces of legislation that regulate child welfare in the United States?

Each state has its own child welfare system, and in many states child welfare is administered through county agencies. Thus, there are a multitude of policies that impact child welfare programs, at federal, state, and local levels. For more information about state policies, visit your state's human services web page.

On the federal level, key child welfare policies include:

- [the Child Abuse and Prevention Act](#) (CAPTA)
- [the Adoption and Safe Families Act](#) (ASFA)
- [Indian Child Welfare Act](#) (ICWA)
- [Multi Ethnic Placement Act](#) (MEPA)
- [Foster Care Independence Act](#) (John H. Chafee Independent Living)
- [Fostering Connections Act](#)

For more information on federal policies on child welfare go to:

http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/federal/index.cfm?event=federalLegislation.showForm