

The primary responsibility for implementing Federal child and family legislation rests with the Children’s Bureau, within the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The Children’s Bureau works with State and local agencies to develop programs that focus on preventing child abuse and neglect by strengthening families, protecting children from further maltreatment, reuniting children safely with their families, or finding permanent families for children who cannot safely return home. For more information, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/impacts/index.cfm>

Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). *Child Welfare Information Gateway*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare Information Gateway website:

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/impacts/index.cfm>

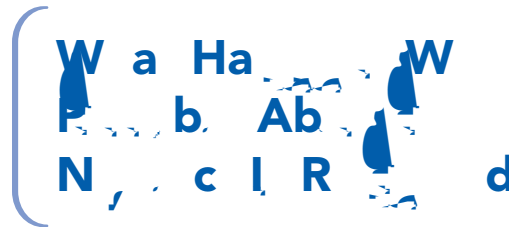
Most families first become involved with their local child welfare system because of a report of suspected child abuse or neglect (sometimes called “child maltreatment”). Child maltreatment is defined by CAPTA as serious harm (neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse or neglect) caused to children by parents or primary caregivers, such as extended family members or babysitters.<sup>1</sup> Child maltreatment also can include harm that a caregiver allows to happen or does not prevent from happening to a child. In general, child welfare agencies do not intervene in cases of harm to children caused by acquaintances or

services or child and family services, often contract and collaborate with private child welfare agencies and community-based organizations to provide services to families, such as in-home family preservation services, foster care, residential treatment, mental health care, substance abuse treatment, parenting skills classes, domestic violence services, employment assistance, and financial or housing assistance.

Child welfare systems are complex, and their specific procedures vary widely by State. The purpose of this factsheet is to give a brief overview of the purposes and functions of child welfare from a national perspective. Child welfare systems typically:

- Receive and investigate reports of possible child abuse and neglect
- Provide services to families that need assistance in the protection and care of their children
- Arrange for children to live with kin or with foster families when they are not safe at home
- Arrange for reunification, adoption, or other permanent family connections for children leaving foster care

The Appendix provides a graphic overview of the process described in the following sections.



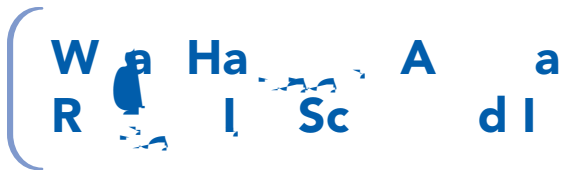
Any concerned person can report suspicions of child abuse or neglect. Most reports are made by “mandatory reporters”—people who are required by State law to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect.<sup>3</sup> As of August 2012, statutes in approximately 18 States and Puerto Rico require any person who suspects child abuse or neglect to report it.<sup>4</sup> These reports are generally received by child protective services (CPS) workers and are either “screened in” or “screened out.” A report is screened in when there is sufficient information to suggest an investigation is warranted. A report may be screened out if there is not enough information on which to follow up or if the situation reported does not meet the State’s legal definition of abuse or neglect.<sup>5</sup> In these instances, the worker may refer the person reporting the incident to other community services or law enforcement for additional help.

<sup>3</sup> See Information Gateway’s *Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect* ([\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](#)  
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[\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](#))

The Children's Bureau publishes an annual report of national and State statistics on child abuse and neglect. To find the latest version of *Child Abuse and Neglect Statistics*, visit the Children's Bureau website:  
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>

In these jurisdictions, when the risk to the children involved is considered low, the CPS caseworker focuses on assessing family strengths, resources, and difficulties and on identifying supports and services needed, rather than on gathering evidence to confirm the occurrence of abuse or neglect.

At the end of an investigation, CPS caseworkers typically make one of two findings—unsubstantiated (unfounded) or substantiated (founded). These terms vary



CPS caseworkers, often called investigators or assessment workers, respond within a particular time period, which may be anywhere from a few hours to a few days, depending on the type of maltreatment alleged, the potential severity of the situation, and requirements under State law. They may speak with the parents and other people in contact with the child, such as doctors, teachers, or child care providers. They also may speak with the child, alone or in the presence of caregivers, depending on the child's age and level of risk. Children who are believed to be in immediate danger may be moved to a shelter, a foster home, or a relative's home during the investigation and while court proceedings are pending. An investigator also engages the family, assessing strengths and needs and initiating connections to community resources and services.

Some jurisdictions now employ an alternative, or differential, response system.



child maltreatment. In many States, certain types of abuse, such as sexual abuse and serious physical abuse, are routinely referred to law enforcement.

Whether or not criminal charges are filed, the name of the person committing the abuse or neglect may be placed on a State child maltreatment registry if abuse or neglect is confirmed. A registry is a central database that collects information about maltreated children and individuals who are found to have abused or neglected those children.<sup>6</sup> These registries are usually confidential and used for internal child protective purposes only. However, they may be used in background checks for certain professions that involve working with children to protect children from contact with individuals who may mistreat them.



Depending on the severity of the case, children may remain at home or be removed into foster care.



In low-risk cases, children may remain in their own homes with their families, and the families may receive in-home services and supports. These may include parent education, safety planning, counseling, and more. Families may also be connected with community services that provide concrete

<sup>6</sup> For more information about these databases, see Information Gateway's *Establishment and Maintenance of Central Registries for Child Abuse Reports*: [https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/centreg.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/centreg.cfm)

help (e.g., housing, food) as well as services such as therapy, parent training, and support groups.



Most children in foster care are placed with relatives or foster families, but some may be placed in a group or residential setting. While a child is in foster care, he or she attends school and should receive medical care and other services as needed. The child's family also receives services to support their efforts to reduce the risk of future maltreatment and to help them, in most cases, be reunited with their child. Visits between parents and their children and between siblings are encouraged and supported, following a set plan.

Every child in foster care should have a permanency plan. Families typically participate in developing a permanency plan for the child and a service plan for the family, and these plans guide the agency's work. Family reunification, except in unusual and extreme circumstances, is the permanency plan for most children. In some cases, when prospects for reunification appear less likely, a concurrent permanency plan is developed. If the efforts toward reunification are not successful, the plan may be changed to another permanent arrangement, such as adoption or transfer of custody to a relative.<sup>7</sup> (For information on concurrent planning, see Information

<sup>7</sup> Under the Adoption and Safe Families Act, while reasonable efforts to preserve and reunify families are still required, State agencies are required to seek termination of the parent-child relationship when a child has been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months. This requirement does not, at the State's option, apply if a child is cared for by a relative, if the termination is not in the best interests of the child, or if the State has not provided adequate services for the family.

Gateway's *Concurrent Evidence* (see *Concurrent Evidence* at [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue\\_briefs/concurrent\\_evidence/index.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/concurrent_evidence/index.cfm).)

Federal law requires the court to hold a permanency hearing, which determines the permanent plan for the child, within 12 months after the child enters foster care and every 12 months thereafter. Many courts review each case more frequently to ensure that the agency is actively pursuing permanency for the child.

Whether or not they are adopted, older youth in foster care should receive support in developing some form of permanent family connection, in addition to transitional or Independent Living services, to assist them in being self-sufficient when they leave foster care between the ages of 18 and 21.

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McCarthy, J., Marshall, A., Collins, J., Arganza, G., Deserly, K., & Milon, J. (2003). *A national technical assistance partnership for child and family mental health at Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development*. Washington, DC: National Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health at Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development. Retrieved from <http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/72140.html>

**Sources:**  
Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2013). *Child Welfare Information Gateway*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.



# And That's Child Welfare Services

