



FACTSHEET | MAY 2025

How the Child Welfare System Works

All families face challenges, and it may be difficult for parents or caregivers to reach out for help, especially if they're not sure about the types of supports that are available. This factsheet offers an overview of the child welfare system, which provides families with services and supports to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children. Child welfare can help equip parents and caregivers with the resources they need to care for their children safely. Agencies, services, and programs within the child welfare system work to protect children from abuse and neglect (also referred to as "child maltreatment"), provide temporary foster care for children who cannot remain safely at home, strengthen and stabilize families, reunify families safely, and provide services to prevent reentry into foster care.

Child welfare systems are complex, and their specific procedures vary by jurisdiction. Read this factsheet to learn more about the general purposes and functions of child welfare.

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WHAT IS THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM?

The child welfare system is a continuum of services designed to protect the well-being of children by promoting safety, achieving permanency, and strengthening families. Through a trauma-informed approach to child welfare, child protection, and family services, the child welfare system can help strengthen families and communities. Key elements include the following:

- **Prevention services** aim to support families before they reach a crisis point, preventing child maltreatment and the unnecessary entry of a child into foster care.
- **Child protective services (CPS)** interventions work to protect children from maltreatment. CPS investigates reports of child maltreatment and, if necessary, places children in out-of-home care if their homes are deemed to be unsafe.
- **In-home services** are designed to strengthen and stabilize families that come to the attention of CPS and are provided while children are living at home.
- **Out-of-home placement** occurs when children are placed in temporary foster care or kinship care (with relatives or those close to the family) while services are offered to parents or other caregivers. When children are separated from their parents' care, the priority is reuniting them when it is safe to do so.
- **Permanency planning** involves assessing a child's needs and developing a plan to provide them with a permanent, stable, and loving family, whether it's through family reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other permanency.¹

- **Postpermanency services** are the ongoing support and resources provided to families after a child has achieved a permanent living arrangement.

Families may first encounter the child welfare system due to a report of suspected [child maltreatment](#), which is defined as serious harm (for example, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, or neglect) caused to children by parents or primary caregivers, such as extended family members or babysitters. Child maltreatment also can include harm that a caregiver allows to happen to a child or does not prevent from happening.

Additionally, families may encounter the child welfare system through prevention efforts. The prevention-focused approach uses whole-family, community-based strategies to help address families' basic needs to keep children and families safely together.

While the primary responsibility for child welfare services rests with the States, the Federal Government supports States through program funding and legislative initiatives. Public agencies, such as departments of social services or child and family services, often contract and collaborate with private child welfare agencies and community-based organizations to provide services to families. [Tribes](#) are sovereign nations, and most Tribes operate some form of social services and have their own laws, courts, and child welfare programs. The Children's Bureau, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, holds the primary responsibility for implementing Federal child and family legislation.

¹ The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 requires a permanency hearing to be held no later than 12 months after the child enters foster care.

The [Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act \(CAPTA\)](#), enacted in 1974, provides Federal funding to States in support of the prevention, assessment, investigation, and prosecution of child abuse and neglect as well as grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations.

The [Indian Child Welfare Act \(ICWA\)](#), signed into law in 1978, governs the removal and out-of-home placement of American Indian and Alaska Native children and delineates the roles of State and Tribal governments in child welfare cases.

The [Adoption and Safe Families Act \(ASFA\)](#), enacted in 1997, aims to expedite the permanent placement of children in foster care. The law mandates timely permanency hearings (within 12 months of entering care) and requires that States initiate termination of parental rights for children who have been in foster care for 15 out of the last 22 months, with certain exceptions.

The [Family First Prevention Services Act \(FFPSA\)](#), signed into law in 2018, aims to prevent children from entering foster care and funds prevention services for mental health, substance abuse, and parent skill-based programs.

For more on child welfare legislation and policy, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Major Federal Legislation Concerned With Child Protection, Child Welfare, and Adoption](#) and [How Federal Legislation Impacts Child Welfare Service Delivery](#). For more on how child welfare programs are funded, see Information Gateway's [Funding web section](#).

Each State has its own laws that define child abuse and neglect, the reporting obligations of individuals, and the required State and local CPS agency interventions. In general, child welfare agencies do not intervene in cases of harm to children caused by acquaintances or strangers. These cases are generally the responsibility of law enforcement. (In those cases, criminal charges may be filed in court against the perpetrators of child maltreatment.) In some cases, law enforcement officers may jointly respond to incidents with CPS caseworkers.

To learn more about child maltreatment and find State-by-State information about laws related to child abuse and neglect, visit

Information Gateway's [What Is Child Abuse and Neglect? Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms, Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect](#), and the [State Statutes Search](#). For data regarding child maltreatment as well as outcomes within the child welfare system, refer to the Children's Bureau's [Data & Research web section](#).

The graphic at the end of this factsheet provides an overview of the process described in the following sections. The information in the factsheet presents a linear process, but a family's child welfare experience may not always follow this exact pathway.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ALLEGED ABUSE OR NEGLECT IS REPORTED?

Any concerned person can report suspicions of child abuse or neglect, and in some States, reports may be made anonymously. Most reports are made by [mandatory reporters](#), who are individuals required by State law to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect. These reports are generally received by the child welfare agency and are either screened out or screened in for a response.

- **Screened-out** referrals do not meet agency criteria for an investigation and may be diverted from CPS to other community agencies. 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.
- **Screened-in** referrals meet CPS agency criteria to receive an investigation or alternative response from the agency.

For additional information, refer to Information Gateway's [Making and Screening Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect](#).

In 2023, more than half (52.5 percent) of child abuse and neglect referrals were screened out (Children's Bureau, 2025).

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER A REPORT IS SCREENED OUT?

If a child welfare agency determines that a referral does not meet its criteria for an investigation, the referral is screened out. The family may then be offered supportive services or connected to community-based agencies for help with issues like substance use or housing. In addition, [211.org](#) offers information on local resources to help families meet their essential needs. By engaging families in voluntary prevention services, the risk of child maltreatment can be mitigated by building the family's social connections, increasing financial stability and self-sufficiency, and improving family functioning and well-being.

Preventing Child Maltreatment

Prevention in child welfare aims to reduce the risk of child maltreatment and prevent unnecessary child welfare system involvement by providing support services and strengthening family well-being. One approach to prevention focuses on engaging families by emphasizing their strengths—or protective factors—and identifying areas where families may need additional support to reach their full potential. Protective factors are positive conditions or attributes in individuals or families that can mitigate or eliminate risk and help increase health and well-being. For more information, see Information Gateway's [Prevention web section](#).

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER A REPORT IS SCREENED IN?

Screened-in referrals meet CPS agency criteria to receive an investigation or alternative response from the agency. CPS caseworkers respond within a few hours to a few days after a report is entered, depending on the type of maltreatment alleged, the potential severity of the situation, and requirements under State law. In some cases, law enforcement officers may accompany CPS caseworkers. They may engage with the parents and other people in contact with the child, such as family members, doctors, teachers, or child care providers. They also may engage 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 of continued maltreatment may be moved to a group home, foster home, or kinship care with relatives or fictive kin (those close to the family) during the investigation and while court proceedings are pending. The caseworker also engages the family members to assess their strengths and needs and connect them to community resources and services.

Alternative or Differential Response

Some jurisdictions employ an alternative, or differential, response system. In these jurisdictions, when the risk to the child is considered low, the CPS caseworker—rather than investigating the occurrence of abuse or neglect—focuses on assessing family strengths, resources, and challenges and on identifying supports and services needed.

This approach allows caseworkers to initiate a therapeutic alliance that seeks to support families. The alternative response pathway involves partnering with parents or caregivers in identifying their individual needs, which can help create the motivation for change. Taking such an approach—rather than automatically investigating all reports—can help encourage family engagement with services and lead to better outcomes for children and families. To learn more about differential response, read Information Gateway's [*Differential Response: A Primer for Child Welfare Professionals*](#).

When there is an investigation, CPS caseworkers typically make one of two findings—unsubstantiated (unfounded) or substantiated (founded). These terms may vary from State to State.

- **Unsubstantiated** means there is insufficient evidence for the caseworker to conclude that the child was abused or neglected, or that what happened does not meet the legal definition of child abuse or neglect.
- **Substantiated** maltreatment typically means that an incident of child abuse or neglect, as defined by State law, is believed to have occurred.

In 2023, among reports that were screened in, 14.7 percent were substantiated (Children's Bureau, 2025).

WHAT HAPPENS IN CASES WHERE ABUSE OR NEGLECT OCCURS?

Cases where an incident of child abuse or neglect, as defined by State law, is believed to have occurred are referred to as "substantiated." If a report of abuse or neglect is substantiated, the next steps for the child and parent depend on State or local policy, the severity of the maltreatment, an assessment of the child's immediate safety, the perceived risk of continued or future maltreatment, the services available to address the family's needs, and whether the maltreatment prompted the child's placement in out-of-home care or a protective court action.

When a report is substantiated through a court hearing, the court may order a parent to comply with services necessary to alleviate the abuse or neglect. Orders may contain provisions regarding family time (also known as visits) between the parent and the child, agency obligations to provide the parent with services, and services needed by the child.

For additional information about the legal process, refer to Information Gateway's [Understanding Child Welfare and the Courts](#).

In 2023, nearly two-thirds (64.1 percent) of all child maltreatment cases were related to neglect (Children's Bureau, 2025). Poverty has a significant impact on family stability; however, [poverty does not inherently equal neglect](#). Providing economic and other concrete supports to families is recognized as a protective factor in preventing child maltreatment.

The CPS worker or the courts may make decisions about services and other next steps based on the perceived risk for future maltreatment. While each agency may have different labels for categories of perceived risk, here is an example of the types of categories that may be used:

- **Little or no risk.** The family's case may be closed if a determination is made that the maltreatment was a one-time incident, the child is considered to now be safe, and there is little or no risk of future incidents. Any services the family needs will be provided through community-based resources and service systems.

- **Low to moderate risk.** Referrals may be made to community-based or voluntary [in-home child welfare services](#) if the CPS worker believes the family would benefit from these services and the child's present and future safety would be enhanced. (This may happen even when no abuse or neglect is found if the family needs and is willing to participate in services.) Local [family resource centers](#) or other organizations can provide community-based services related to parent skill training, child care, housing needs, job training, substance use and mental health counseling, or respite and crisis care services.
- **Moderate to high risk.** The family may be offered voluntary in-home services to address safety concerns and help reduce the risks. If these are refused, the agency may seek intervention by the juvenile dependency court. The court may, in turn, require the family to cooperate with services. If the child has already been seriously harmed or the child's safety is threatened, the court may order the child's placement in out-of-home care or affirm the agency's prior out-of-home placement of the child. The child may be placed into kinship care with a relative or in foster care.

If abuse or neglect is substantiated, the name of the person committing the maltreatment may be placed in a State registry. For more information about these registries, see Information Gateway's [Establishment and Maintenance of Central Registries for Child Abuse or Neglect Reports](#).

FOSTER CARE, PERMANENCY, AND REUNIFICATION

Depending on the severity of the case and other factors, children may be separated from their parents and placed in foster care or kinship care. Foster care can include being placed with foster families or in group or residential settings, while kinship care is when children live with relatives or fictive kin (those close to the family). Kinship care is the preferred option because it can help maintain family connections and cultural traditions and minimize the trauma of separation. Learn more about kinship care by reading Information Gateway's [Kinship Care and the Child Welfare System](#).

While in foster care or kinship care, the child attends school and receives 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 help them reunite with their child. Research shows that [siblings placed together](#) experience increased placement stability and improved well-being outcomes. Federal law mandates that States prioritize placing siblings together in foster care unless doing so would be detrimental to their safety or well-being. Specifically, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 requires reasonable efforts to be made to place siblings together or have frequent visits if separate. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 further requires notification to siblings' parents when a child needs placement. Family time visits between parents, their children, and other family members are critical to promoting family bonding and setting the stage for successful

reunification. These visits are established according to the case plan. Learn more by exploring Information Gateway's [Foster Care web section](#).

Engaging Families in Permanency Planning

Engaging children, youth, and families in permanency planning and involving them in placement decisions are important approaches to promoting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in foster care. Federal law requires the court to hold a permanency hearing, during which a child's permanency plan is developed. States may also have their own policies and procedures related to permanency. The permanency hearing should take place within 12 months of a child entering foster care and every 12 months thereafter. (Many States require permanency hearings more frequently, such as every 3 or 6 months.)

Children (especially older youth) and family members typically also participate in developing the permanency plan and the family's service plan. As experts on their own lives, youth and family members should be recognized as essential and capable partners in permanency planning. Learn more from Information Gateway's [Permanency web section](#) and by reading the publication [Belonging Matters—Helping Youth Explore Permanency](#).

When children are separated from their parents' care, the priority is to reunite them when it is safe to do so. Family reunification is the primary permanency plan for most children, and in most jurisdictions, a concurrent plan is also developed when a child is first placed in out-of-home care. Concurrent planning is a type of permanency planning in which reunification services are provided to the child's family while an alternative permanency plan is made for the child. When reunification cannot occur, children can achieve permanency through adoption, guardianship, or other permanent placements.

Depending on State law, youth may age out of foster care somewhere between the ages of 18 and 21. Young people transitioning from foster care should be connected to and supported in maintaining positive [relational connections](#) with trusted adults and others who can provide stability and introduce them to programs and services to help improve their life skills, knowledge, and self-sufficiency. Connecting youth and young people to information and services can equip them to make informed decisions about their transition. In addition, older youth in foster care should receive transitional or independent living services to help prepare them for self-sufficiency in the event they leave foster care without a permanent family. Maintaining and developing further positive connections is essential for overall mental health and well-being. Information Gateway's [Independent Living and Transition From Foster Care webpage](#) offers related resources.

For more information, see Information Gateway's [Supporting Timely and Successful Reunifications](#) and [Concurrent Planning for Timely Permanence](#).

CONCLUSION

The goal of the child welfare system is to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and equip parents and caregivers with the resources they need to care for their children successfully. The child welfare system works to prevent child abuse and neglect, provide temporary foster care for children who cannot remain safely at home, strengthen and stabilize families, reunify families safely, and provide services to prevent reentry into foster care. Child welfare systems are complex, and their specific procedures may vary by jurisdiction, including by State, Territory, or Tribe. Families may first experience the child welfare system due to a report of suspected child abuse or neglect, or they may encounter the system through prevention efforts that aim to support families before they reach a crisis point. Among children who enter foster care, most will return safely to the care of their own families. When reunification cannot occur, children can achieve permanency through adoption, guardianship, or other permanent placements.

REFERENCE

Children's Bureau. (2025). *Child maltreatment 2023*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. <https://acf.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2023>

SUGGESTED CITATION

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau



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The Child Welfare System

This flowchart presents a linear process, but a family's child welfare experience may not always follow this exact pathway. States or jurisdictions have their own laws and policies that may influence this process. Learn more on Information Gateway's [State Statute Search](#).

