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SECTION 1



What is the Child Welfare System?

What does the child welfare system do?

The child welfare system was created to help every child have a safe and secure home life. This responsibility has been given to public child welfare agencies, but they can't do it alone. The courts, private child welfare agencies, and other service systems (such as mental health, substance abuse, healthcare, education, and domestic violence) are all partners in serving children and families who come to the attention of the child welfare system.

The public child welfare system is responsible for

- responding to reports from people in the community who think that children are being abused or neglected
- helping families solve the problems that cause abuse or neglect
- helping children to be safe and secure
- preventing separation of children from their families
- working with the families so their children can return home (when children have been separated from their families to be safe)
- ensuring that children receive adequate care while they are away from their families
- finding another suitable permanent home for children who cannot return home

In 2001, child welfare agencies around the country received 2,672,000 reports of child abuse or neglect. The agencies accepted more than half (1,789,000) of these reports for investigation. Less than half (578,051) of those investigations turned out to be actual abuse or neglect.

In 2001, 290,000 children were placed in foster care. During this same period, 263,000 children left foster care. Nearly 7 of every 10 (174,690) children who left foster care returned to live with their families or a relative.

To accomplish these goals, the agency works with families to identify their strengths and needs. The agency helps families find the services and supports that they need.

Why does the child welfare system get involved with families?

To ensure the safety of children—The major role of the child welfare system is to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children. The law in most states gives the child welfare system the responsibility for responding to and following up on reports and calls about the safety of and risk of harm to children in the community.

To provide services—If a child is not safe or has been harmed at home, the child welfare agency will provide services to ensure that the child is safe. It will also offer services to the family to help them if the child is at risk of harm.

In some states, children and youth are identified as “in need of assistance,” “in need of services,” or “in need of supervision” if their behavior is out of their parents’ control. In these states, the court can order the child welfare agency to provide services and supervision to these families. This might be done to keep children and youth out of the juvenile justice system. States may use different names to identify these children and youth. For example, children in need of supervision might be referred to as “CHINS” in one state or as persons in need of supervision, “PINS”, in another state.

Sometimes a family will ask the child welfare system or the court for services, even when no one has reported a concern about their child’s safety. This may happen when a family has tried unsuccessfully to obtain the right services for their child who may have a serious emotional disorder, a developmental disability, and/or a physical disability. Some families have found that this is the only way they can get the services their children need. When children are placed in the care of the child welfare agency, the state is responsible for providing the services they need. (See Section 6 for more information.)

Practical Tips for Families

- ✓ The child welfare system is very complicated. You should feel free to ask questions and to ask the same questions over and over if you need to.
- ✓ Check to see if there is a family organization in your community that can give you support and information about the child welfare system.
- ✓ If there is not family organization, try to find other parents to talk to who have been through the child welfare system.