

Introduction

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Susan's Voice

My children were placed in the foster care system. I know that a visit from a Child Protective Services (CPS) worker to talk about your family can be difficult and confusing. *A Family's Guide* was created to help you better understand how the child welfare system works, to inform you of your rights and responsibilities, and to help answer questions you may have. Throughout this nation, the absence of information has fueled parents' fear and often their anger. Reading *A Family's Guide to the Child Welfare System* is one way to get information. It can help you become involved and feel empowered within the system. It might help to ease any fear and anger that you may have. Families involved in the child welfare system and other individuals came together to create *A Family's Guide*. We hope you find it helpful.

Welcome to *A Family's Guide*—Purpose of the *Guide*

Welcome to *A Family's Guide to the Child Welfare System*. If you are reading this, you are most likely involved with the child welfare system, or perhaps you know someone who is. We are glad you are reading this *Guide*. We hope it helps you better understand the child welfare system and reach a positive solution for your family.

Think of the *Guide* as a tool to help you learn about

- experiences other families have had with the child welfare system;
- laws and policies within the child welfare system that direct the actions and decisions of agency workers and courts;
- people whom you will meet, the service systems they work in, and their roles with you and your family;
- ways to advocate for your family's rights (your own and your children's);
- your responsibilities as a parent when involved with the child welfare system; and
- practical tips from other parents.

How do I find information in the *Guide*?

The *Guide* is designed to follow a family's path through the child welfare system from first contact. Depending on your situation, you might find some sections of the *Guide* more useful for you and your family than other sections.

The *Guide* asks and answers questions that other families thought would be of interest to you. We have listed all these questions in the table of contents with page numbers. We hope this will make it easy for you to find the information you need.¹

Section 1 describes what the **child welfare system** is all about, what it does, how families become connected to the system, and what happens after families become involved with child welfare.

Section 2 describes **child protective services**. It tells what this part of the child welfare system does and what families can expect when they get involved with child protective services.

Section 3 describes the **service planning process** used by the child welfare system. This process is meant to help everyone (you, your child, the child welfare agency, and others involved with your family) come up with a plan for making the changes that need to happen so that your child will be safe and can live in your home.

Section 4 explains how you and your family can participate in **services in your own home and community** that will help your child remain at home.

¹Throughout the *Guide*, you will notice that we sometimes use the pronoun "he" and sometimes "she" when talking about a child or youth. We recognize that all child welfare services address the needs of both males and females. We use either "he" or "she" for ease of reading.

Section 5 discusses how **out-of-home placement** works. If your child needs to leave your home for a period of time, it will help you understand

- where your child might live,
- how the foster care system works, and
- how the court hearing process you may be involved with works.

Section 6 discusses the dilemma that families face in some states when they cannot afford treatment services for their children on their own. Sometimes these families feel forced to turn to the child welfare system for help.

Section 7 discusses the kinds of services and **choices for permanent placements** that are available to families and children. Most children who are placed outside the home are there temporarily, and they eventually move to permanent placements. Nearly 7 out of every 10 children return to their own homes or to the homes of relatives.

Section 8 talks about the **Indian Child Welfare Act**. It describes what the Act does for tribes and for Indian children and their families.

Section 9 provides a summary of **your rights and responsibilities as a parent** when you are involved with the child welfare system.

Section 10 introduces some of the **approaches** that the federal government, states, and communities are using to make the child welfare system work better and to help families reach their goals.

Terms You May Want to Know

Following **Section 10** we have included a list of terms that are used within the *Guide*. So, if you do not know a term, you can look at the list to find out what it means.

Relevant Federal Laws/Policies

If you want more details regarding laws that are mentioned in the *Guide*, see this section.

Resources

Finally, a section on **Resources** describes where you can get more information or help.

Family Voices

In each section of the *Guide*, we have included examples of feelings and experiences of other families who have been involved with the child welfare system. Look for their voices in the special boxes. These “voices” tell the stories of real families. Some families had good experiences. Others did not. Every family member who contributed a “voice” came to the point that they could talk about and share their experiences with others. Some of these voices are from adults, and some are from youth. Even though your experiences may be different, these families have contributed their stories so that you will know how they felt. We hope that listening to all of their voices will be helpful.

Practical Tips For Families

We have also included **Practical Tips for Families** in most of the Sections. These Tips give examples of questions you can ask and positive actions that you can take to help you and your family. Other parents suggested many of the Tips, which are based on their own experiences.

How can I use the *Guide* to help my family?

There are many different ways to use this *Guide*. Some of them are listed below:

- You can use it on your own.
- You can talk about it with other members of your family or with friends.
- You and your child welfare agency worker can review it together.
- You can review it with your lawyer.
- You can talk with other families involved with the child welfare system about things in the *Guide*.

Can the *Guide* be used by people other than family members?

Yes, it can be used by the child welfare agency in its work with families, in training child welfare staff, and in helping other child and family-serving agencies to understand how the child welfare system works. It also can be used in teaching students who are studying to become social workers.

Will all of the information in the *Guide* apply to the way things work in the state or community where I live?

Not necessarily. Some policies and laws in your state or community may look different from some of the federal laws mentioned in this *Guide*. We have tried to note in the *Guide* the places where individual state or local laws may be different from federal laws.

While all states must obey federal laws, they also are allowed to make some changes so the laws will fit their individual state and local laws. The *Guide* will give you basic information about how federal laws and policies guide and direct state and county child welfare systems.

Some states and communities have developed their own pamphlets or guides for families who become involved with the child welfare system. The authors reviewed many of these documents while developing the *Guide* you are reading. They provided us with information about state differences. Local guides can also provide you with specific information about the child welfare system in your state/community. You may want to ask your agency worker if your state/county has a pamphlet or guide.

Practical Tips for Using *A Family's Guide*

- ✓ You don't have to read this *Guide* from cover to cover. You might find some sections more useful than others.
- ✓ You can use the table of contents to find the questions that are most important to you.
- ✓ If you find this *Guide* is too difficult to read and understand, you can ask someone to help. This could be your agency worker, your lawyer, a friend, a family member, or someone else you trust.
- ✓ If English is not your first language, you can ask someone to help interpret or translate this information for you.*
- ✓ You can ask your agency worker if there is a written guide for families that is specific to your state or local child welfare agency.
- ✓ We suggest that you find out if some of the policies and laws where you live are different from what is described in this *Guide*. You can do this by asking your agency worker, a family organization, or a lawyer.

*A Spanish version of the *Guide* will be available soon. Funding to produce the Spanish version is provided by the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice.

