



Child  
Protective  
Services



# INVESTIGATIONS

## A GUIDE FOR PARENTS



The Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) takes reports of abuse and neglect of children up to age 18 in the District of Columbia. By law, we must look into certain types of reports and act to protect children from abuse and neglect and help their families. Often, our involvement helps families with emergencies or other problems they're facing.

This booklet will help you understand why we're contacting you to conduct a family assessment. It will answer many of your questions and explain your rights and responsibilities while you are involved with CFSA.

## Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect

Every child has the basic right to be safe. Under District law [D.C. Code § 16-2301 (23) (A)], **child abuse** is:

- Physical or mental injury.
- Sexual abuse or exploitation.
- Negligent treatment or maltreatment.
- Behavior of a parent (or caretaker) that causes mental or emotional injury.

Parents have a right to discipline their children. Some examples of actions that are abusive, not disciplinary, are:

- Burning, biting, or cutting a child.
- Hitting a child with a closed fist.
- Shaking, kicking, or throwing a child.
- Purposely injuring a child under 18 months old.
- Interfering with a child's breathing.

- Threatening a child with a weapon (such as a gun or knife) or using a weapon on a child.

Under District law [D.C. Code § 16-2301 (9)(A)], **child neglect** is present when a parent or caretaker:

- Abandons or abuses a child or does not try to protect him/her from abuse.
- Cannot take care of the child due to incarceration, hospitalization, or other physical or mental incapacity.

In addition, child neglect is present when a child:

- Does not get proper care for reasons other than lack of money.
- Is in imminent danger of being abused and another child in the same home has been abused.
- Is left after birth in a District of Columbia hospital for 10 calendar days after being medically cleared to leave and the parent or caretaker has not made an effort to contact the child.
- Tests positive for alcohol or drugs at birth or later due to parental negligence.
- Is regularly exposed to illegal drug activity in the home.

## My Rights and Responsibilities

### What rights do I have when CFSA gets involved with my family?

You have the right to:

- Be treated with respect and courtesy. We must serve you without discrimination on the basis of your age; race; national origin; gender; sexual orientation; lifestyle; or physical, mental, or developmental disability. If you believe you have faced discrimination, you have the right to file a claim with the D.C. Office of Human Rights at (202) 727-4559.
- Privacy. Under law, CFSA cannot release information about your family or your case to the public.
- Have relatives, friends, or other supportive people with you at meetings with CFSA (unless the court has forbidden that person's involvement in your case).

- A court hearing within 72 hours of your child's removal from home (except Sundays).
- Have an attorney with you at any time. If CFSA takes your case to court, you should get an attorney. If you cannot pay for an attorney, the court will appoint one for you. The court will appoint a separate attorney to represent your child.
- Information about other ways to get the help you need if CFSA cannot assist your family.
- Refuse to participate in our family assessment. However, it is in your best interest to cooperate. If you don't, CFSA may seek police or court assistance.





## **What responsibilities do I have when CFSA gets involved with my family?**

You will help your children and yourself when you:

- Give us truthful information.
- Cooperate with the social worker and others helping you.
- Follow any plans to improve your children's safety.
- Participate in services to improve your family situation.
- Attend meetings about your case, including court hearings if the court is involved.

## **The Investigation Process**

### **Why is a CFSA social worker contacting me?**

CFSA got a report that your child may have been abused or neglected—or may be at risk of abuse or neglect. District law requires CFSA to look into all reports of suspected child abuse or neglect.

### **Who reported my child?**

Anyone who thinks a child has been abused or neglected can call CFSA's 24-hour hotline at (202) 671-SAFE. Sometimes, neighbors, friends, or relatives call because they are concerned about a child. District law requires certain people to call if they suspect child abuse or neglect. These people are called "mandated reporters." They include professionals such as doctors, teachers, police officers, sports coaches, and child care workers. By law, the identity of people who report child abuse and neglect is confidential. We cannot tell you who called us.

### **What happens when CFSA decides to investigate?**

We assign a social worker to investigate, usually within **24 hours** of receiving the call. The social worker's job is to find out whether the abuse or neglect report is true or false. The social worker also decides whether CFSA should stay involved with your family.



### **Who will the social worker talk to?**

The social worker will talk to you, your children, and others living in your home. The social worker will also contact people who know you and your children—such as doctors, teachers, baby-sitters, relatives, and neighbors. You can ask the social worker to speak to certain people who have information about your child. The social worker may contact people without asking you first.

Under law, child abuse can be a crime. CFSA must contact the police when a report indicates sexual abuse or serious physical abuse or neglect. Only the police can arrest people and charge them with crimes. CFSA doesn't have that authority.

### **Does the social worker have to talk to my child?**

Yes. The social worker must see and speak to all children living in your home. The social worker may see your children at day care or school before contacting you.

### **What if I don't want to talk to the social worker?**

It is in your best interest to cooperate with our investigation. This is your chance to tell us your story. Even if you don't cooperate, we must still investigate the report. If we believe your child is in immediate danger, we'll contact the police for assistance. If necessary, we'll ask the court to order you to let us see your child.



### **Will you take my child away from me?**

Most children we serve stay at home with their parents. Our goal is to keep families together whenever the children can be safe at home.

However, CFSA has the legal responsibility to protect children from abuse and neglect. Sometimes, we must remove children from home to keep them safe. We try to keep brothers and sisters together in the most family-like setting that will meet their needs. Other members of your family would be the first choice. When CFSA removes children from home, we have 72 hours (excluding Sundays) to get Family Court agreement with the removal.

### **What happens after the investigation?**

If we find that your child has not been abused or neglected, the report is **unfounded**. This means you don't need to be involved with CFSA unless you want to.

If we find that your child has been abused or neglected, the report is **substantiated**. That doesn't mean we will automatically remove your children. However, we will probably stay involved with your family for a time. We will also add the name of the abuser to the Child Protection Registry. That is a central listing of people we have found responsible for child abuse or neglect.

## **What kinds of help can you give my family?**

We can offer or arrange for many helpful services for you and your family. Some may be in your neighborhood and might include:

- Counseling.
- Parent education and support.
- Substance abuse treatment.
- Help with domestic violence.
- Help with housing.

## **Concerns about My Child Welfare Investigation**

Please keep in mind that CFSA has the legal authority to be involved with families where a child has been abused or neglected—or is at risk of abuse or neglect.

Keep a written record of what's happening on your case. Write down the names of CFSA employees you talk to, dates of the conversations, and information they provide. Keep this record with other important papers about your investigation.

Try to resolve the problem with your social worker first. Ask questions so you understand decisions and actions on your case.

Call your social worker's supervisor. Tell why you are dissatisfied. If you feel that conversation doesn't resolve your problem, ask to talk to the supervisor's program manager.

If you're still dissatisfied with CFSA's response, ask to speak to the Ombudsman.

## **What if I don't agree with your findings?**

You may ask for a fair hearing to have your name removed from the Child Protection Registry. However, if the court is involved, CFSA must hold your request until the court reaches a decision in your case.

We will mail you a written notice within seven days of putting your name in the Child Protection Registry. It will explain your right to a fair hearing and tell you how to request one. Depending on your situation, a CFSA program manager may contact you to address your concerns before the fair hearing.





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