



When Child Welfare Investigates Your Family

Information for Parents and Caregivers

This fact sheet explains why a child welfare social worker is contacting you. It tells what to expect while the DC Child and Family Services Agency is investigating your family.

Every child has the right to be safe. District law defines **child abuse** as:

- *Putting a child in a dangerous situation.*
- *Hurting a child on purpose.*
- *Adult sexual exploitation or contact with a child.*
- *Actions of a parent (or caregiver) that cause mental or emotional harm to a child.*

District law defines **child neglect** as:

Lack of food, shelter, supervision, education, or medical care for a child due to actions or habits of a parent (or caregiver).

By itself, lack of money is not child neglect.

The DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) protects District children from abuse and neglect and helps their families. CFSA receives and investigates reports of abuse and neglect of District young people age 18 and younger. We work to ensure children and teens are safe, healthy, and getting the care they need. Often, our involvement with a family leads to help with their issues, problems, and emergencies.

Why is a CFSA social worker contacting me?

CFSA received a report that your child may have been abused or neglected—or is at risk of abuse or neglect. District law requires CFSA to investigate all reports of suspected child abuse or neglect.



Who's saying my child is abused or neglected?

Anyone who thinks a child has been abused or neglected can call CFSA's 24-hour hotline at 202-671-SAFE. Sometimes, neighbors, friends, relatives, or even strangers call because they are concerned about a child. District law requires certain people to call if they suspect child abuse or neglect. Some of these "mandated reporters" include: doctors, teachers, social workers, police officers, and child care workers. Mandated reporters must give us their names; other people who call don't have to give their names.

By law, the identity of people who report child abuse and neglect is strictly confidential. We cannot tell you who called us.

What happens when CFSA gets a report?

We assign a social worker from CFSA Child Protective Services (CPS) to investigate, usually within 24 hours of getting the report. The social worker's job is to find out whether the report of abuse or neglect is true or false. The social worker also decides whether CFSA or a community organization should continue helping 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 your permission.

Under law, some types of child abuse are crimes. CFSA must contact the police when a report indicates sexual abuse or serious physical abuse. Then, CFSA, the police, and others work together to protect the child. Only the police can arrest people and charge them with crimes. CFSA does not 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. Even if a report is about only one of your children, CFSA must see and talk to all your children. The social worker may see and talk to your children at day care or school before contacting you. The child needs to feel he/she can speak freely.

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 a good opportunity to tell your side of the story. But even if you do not cooperate, we must still investigate the report. If we believe your child is in immediate danger, we will contact the police for assistance. If necessary, we will ask the court to order you to let us see your child.

Will you take my children away from me?

Many children CFSA serves stay at home with their families. Our goal is to keep families together whenever possible. Your social worker may help you get services—such as day care—so your children can stay at home with you.

However, CFSA has the legal responsibility to protect children from abuse and neglect. Sometimes, a home is just not safe. Then, we must remove children to safe places. We try to keep brothers and sisters together in the most family-like setting that will meet their needs. That could be with one of your relatives or in a foster home. When CFSA removes children from home, we have 72 hours (excluding Sundays) to ask DC Family Court to agree or disagree with removing the children.

What happens after the investigation?

Usually within 30 days, the social worker will use information collected during the investigation to decide what happened. CFSA will send you a letter explaining what we found.



If we find your child was not abused or neglected, CFSA will usually not stay involved with your family unless you ask for our help. If we find your child was definitely or probably abused or neglected, CFSA or another organization will stay involved with you. This does not automatically mean we will remove your children from home. However, we must add the name of the abuser to the Child Protection Register. That is the District's listing of people CFSA has found definitely or probably responsible for child abuse or neglect.

In many cases, you may be able to make changes to keep your children at home safely. Your social worker will work with you to develop a case plan. It will list changes you must make for the good of your children. It will also list helping services you must use to make the changes. You will sign the plan and get a copy.

CFSA will visit you regularly to make sure you are following your plan. We will stay involved until we believe you no longer need our help to protect your children.

What kinds of help can CFSA give my family?

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

- Counseling.
- Parent education and support.
- Housing assistance.
- Child care.
- Substance abuse treatment.
- Medical treatment.
- Educational evaluations for children.

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 help you without discrimination on the basis of age; race; national origin; creed; gender; sexual orientation; lifestyle; or physical, mental, or developmental disability. If you think we have discriminated against you, you have the right to file a claim with the DC Office of Human Rights at 202-727-4559.
- Privacy. Under law, CFSA cannot give information about your family or your case to the public.
- Know what's going on and to get clear, honest answers to your questions.
- Have a relative, friend, or any other person 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.

- Have an attorney with you at any time. If CFSA takes your case to court, you should get an attorney. If you cannot pay, the court will appoint an attorney for you. The court will appoint a different attorney to represent your child.
- Information about other ways to get the help you need if CFSA cannot help your family.
- Refuse to take part in our investigation. However, it is in your best interest to cooperate. If you don't, CFSA may seek help from the police or court.



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

You will help your children and yourself when you:

- Tell the truth.
- Ask questions.
- Cooperate with the social worker and others helping you.
- Follow your case plan and take part in required services.
- Attend meetings about your case, including court hearings when the court is involved.
- Improve your family situation for the good of your children.

What if I have a problem with CFSA?

Keep in mind that CFSA has the legal authority to get involved with families where a child has been abused or neglected or is at risk.

- 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 case.
- Try to resolve the problem with your social worker first. Share your concerns and listen to your social worker's answers. Ask questions so you understand decisions and actions on your case.
- Call your social worker's supervisor. Explain why you are dissatisfied. Listen and ask questions.
- If you feel CFSA still is not taking care of your issue, tell the social worker or supervisor that you want to speak to the program manager.

What if I don't agree with your finding of abuse or neglect?

You may request a Fair Hearing to have your name removed from the Child Protection Register. However, if the court is involved, CFSA must hold your request until the court reaches a decision in the abuse or neglect or criminal case.

We will mail you a written notice within seven days of your name being entered into the Child Protection Register. It will explain your right to a Fair Hearing and tell you how to ask for one. In some cases, a CFSA program manager may contact you to talk about your concerns before the Fair Hearing.