

Child Welfare System Process Map for Kids

The child welfare system is made up of many agencies that work together to help families and try to keep children safe. There are many steps and processes in the system, which can be very confusing. This map provides a basic outline of some of the things that can happen in a child welfare case, with the arrows showing the different directions that a case can go. You can use this map to better understand what might happen with your case, and you can find explanations of the words that are underlined in the 'Child Welfare System Glossary.'



Someone is worried that a child has been abused or neglected, or is unsafe at home with their parents or caregivers.



They make a report to Child Protective Services (CPS), their local police, or a child abuse hotline.



A worker decides whether or not to accept the report. This is called 'screening.'



If there is not enough information provided, or the report doesn't meet the state's definition of child abuse or neglect, then the report will not be accepted.



If the report is accepted, then it is sent to the local CPS agency.



If CPS thinks that the child's risk of harm is low, they might complete something called a family assessment.



After the family assessment, a child welfare agency might work with the family for a short time, or the case might be closed.

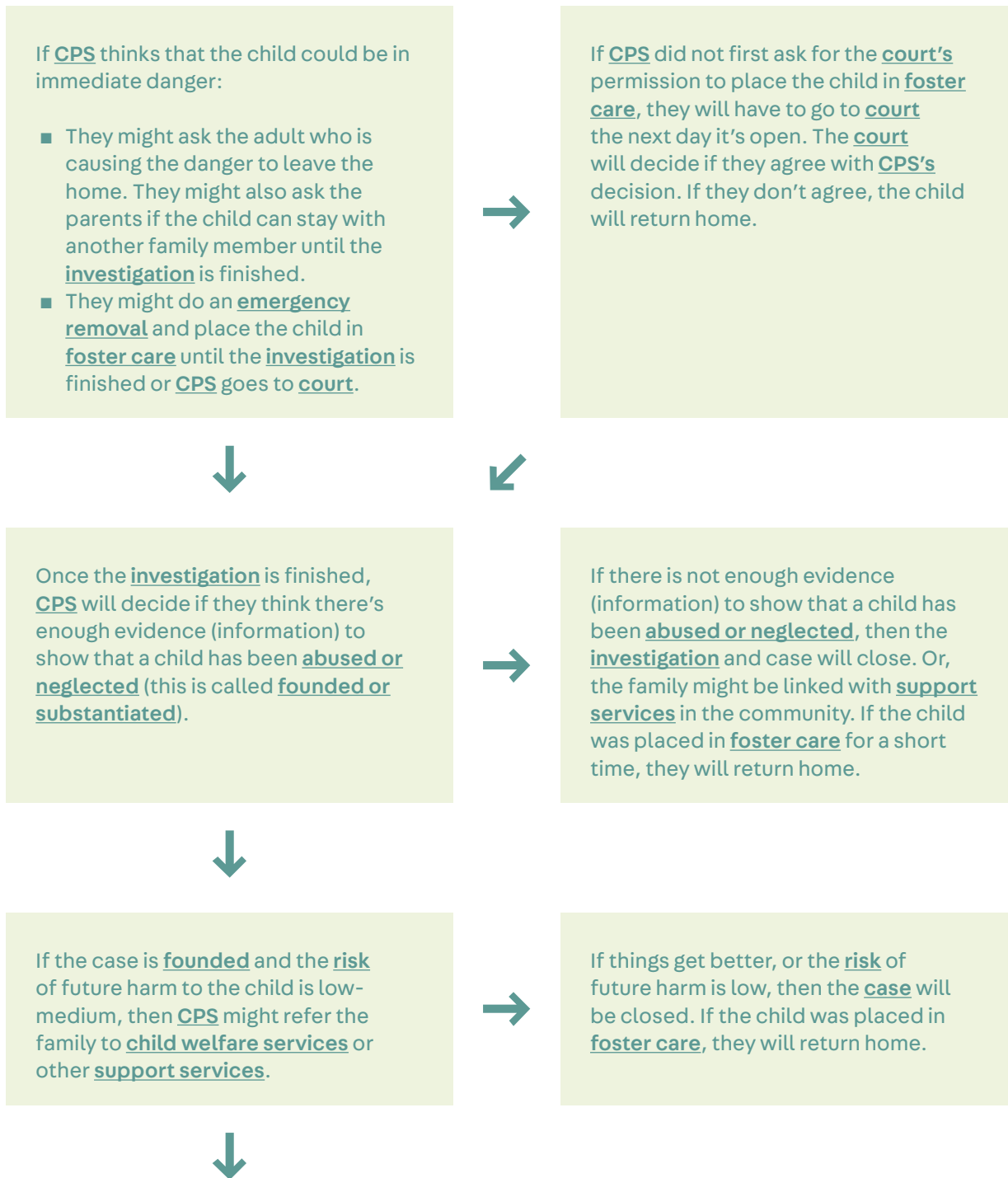


If CPS has concerns about the child's safety at home and thinks that the risk of harm is medium or high, then they will do an investigation.



The investigation must start quickly, and will involve workers speaking with the child, their parents/caregivers, teachers, doctors and others, to gather as much information as possible. Sometimes the police are involved and might also want to speak with the child. And in some investigations, the child might talk about what happened at a Children's Advocacy Center (CAC).





If things don't get better, or **CPS** still has concerns for the child's safety and thinks that the **risk** of future harm is high, they might go to **court** and file a **petition**.



In **court**, the judge will decide if it's safe for the child to stay at home while the family works with **child welfare agencies** or **support services**. If the judge decides that it's not safe, they will order that the child be placed in **out-of-home care** or continue to stay in **foster care** if they were removed earlier. The judge will also order **visits** between the child and their family, as well as **support services** that the parents must complete. In some cases, the judge might want to speak with the child about how they are doing and what they would like to happen. Or they might speak to another adult who is working with the child to learn about what the child wants and feels. The judge may also give the child their own lawyer or a **Court Appointed Special Advocate**.



If things don't get better and the **court** still has concerns for the child's safety and the **risk** of future harm is still high, then the child will continue staying in another home. **Permanency plans** will be made to find a long-term home for the child.



If things get better in the family home, the **court** no longer has concerns about the child's safety, and the **risk** is low, then the child can return home. The **case** might then close, or the family might continue to work with **support services**. In some cases, a **reunification plan** is put in place.

For More Information

Adapted from: Child Welfare Information Gateway (2020). How the child welfare system works. childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/cpswork.pdf

For training and technical assistance, visit us at innovatingjustice.org.

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