

# Child Welfare System Glossary for Kids



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Many different words and phrases are used to talk about the child welfare system, and some of these may be unfamiliar, confusing, or have different meanings in different places. This glossary explains some of these terms, so that you can better understand what's happening with your case, what you're being asked to do, and what might happen next.

If it's helpful, you can use this glossary alongside the Child Welfare Process Map to see how everything fits together.

1. **Allegation**

When someone has reported that a child may have been abused or neglected by their parents or caregivers, but CPS hasn't figured out what happened yet.

2. **Case**

After an investigation or assessment has finished and it's been decided that CPS (or another agency) will work with a family, they open a case on the child and family. In some situations, the word 'case' is used right from the beginning, as soon as a report of possible abuse or neglect has been made.

3. **Child Abuse and Neglect or Child Maltreatment**

Every state has its own way of defining child abuse and neglect, but in general it means that an adult has done something that seriously harmed a child or didn't do enough to stop a child from being seriously harmed.<sup>1</sup> Types of child abuse and neglect include:

□ **Emotional Abuse**

*Hurting a child's feelings so badly that it changes the way the child behaves, feels and thinks.<sup>ii</sup>*

□ **Neglect**

*When a parent or caregiver does not give a child the things they need to grow up healthy and strong, like food, clothing, shelter, seeing a doctor when they need to, or going to school.*

□ **Physical Abuse**

*Hurting a child's body on purpose, including punching, kicking, burning, biting, or doing anything else that might cause physical injury to a child.*

□ **Sexual Abuse**

*When an older person touches a child's private parts, makes a child look at or touch their private parts, or makes a child do something else that is sexual.*

**4. Children's Advocacy Center (CAC)**

Places where lots of people, such as police, doctors, lawyers, CPS workers and counselors, work together to help children who have been abused.

**5. Child Protective Services (CPS)**

In most states, this is the agency that works with children and families to try to keep children safe at home, but in some communities, CPS has a different name. CPS is part of the local government and might be part of a larger agency like the Department of Social Services.

**6. Child Welfare Services or Agencies**

Services or agencies that work with families to help keep children safe. Some also work with children who are staying in out-of-home care. They may be part of the government, like CPS, or may work in the community.

**7. Court (Dependency, Family or Juvenile Court)**

A building (or room) where judges, lawyers, social workers and other people work together and make decisions about how to keep children safe.

**8. Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)**

An adult volunteer who is assigned to a child by the judge. They get to know the child and tell the judge what the child needs and what they think is best for the child.

**9. Court Order**

Instructions from the judge saying what people involved in the case must do. This could include the parents going to classes or programs or telling the parents when they can visit with their child.

**10. Custody**

The legal responsibility to live with and take care of a child and to make decisions for them.

**11. Dispositional or Dependency Hearing**

A meeting at court where a judge makes decisions about where a child will stay while their family receives help and services.

**12. Emergency Removal/Placement**

If CPS is very worried for a child's safety at home and thinks that they could be in danger, they can take the child to stay in another home while their family works on ways to keep them safe. The child might stay with someone that the parents choose (which is sometimes called a 'voluntary arrangement'), or the child might stay in a foster home. If it's not a 'voluntary arrangement,' CPS will have to go to court to make sure that a judge agrees with their decision. If the judge does not agree, then the child will return home.

**13. Family Assessment or Assessment**

When a worker from CPS (or another agency) talks with different people to learn about what's going on with a family, including what's working well and things they may need help with. The assessment is usually done at

the beginning, when the family first becomes involved with child welfare, but it can also be done later on and at several times.

**14. Family Group Conferencing or Family Team Decision Making**

A meeting where family members and other supportive people come together to make decisions and create plans that help keep a child safe at home. These meetings are usually led by someone from the child welfare agency.

**15. Foster Care or Out-of-Home Care**

When it's not safe for a child to live at home with their parents or caregivers, they stay somewhere else for their safety (the amount of time is different for every child). It can be agreed to by the parents, which is sometimes called a 'voluntary arrangement,' or it could be ordered by the court. Foster care/out-of-home care placements can be with other family members or family friends (kinship placement), in a foster home, or in a group home.

**16. Foster Home or Family Foster Home**

A home where a child will be looked after by a foster parent (or parents). There may be other children living in the home, too.

**17. Foster Parent**

A licensed and trained adult who takes care of children in their home.

**18. Founded, Substantiated or Determined**

When CPS finishes their investigation and thinks there's enough evidence (information) to show that a child has been abused or neglected.

**19. Group Home**

A foster home where a group of children who are not from the same family all live together. Paid staff work at group homes to take care of the children.

**20. Guardian Ad Litem (GAL)**

This person, who is usually a lawyer, represents the child in court and talks about what is best for them.

**21. Guardianship**

When another adult (not the child's parents), looks after and has legal responsibility for a child.

**22. Home Visit**

When a worker from CPS (or another agency) comes to visit the child and family in their home, to get to know them and find out how things are going.

**23. Independent Living Program (ILP)**

Services for older youth who are in foster care to help them become independent adults. This can include a home where the youth can live by themselves, as well as education programs.

**24. Investigation**

When CPS gathers information about the allegations. In some cases, the police also join CPS in the investigation.



## **25. Kinship or Relative Placement**

When a child stays with a family member, a family friend or another adult who is close to the family, such as a neighbor, when they cannot stay at their regular home.

## **26. Permanency Planning**

When the adults working on the case try to find a long-term home for a child who is in out-of-home care. In most cases, the goal is to return the child to their birth family, which is called ‘reunification.’ If this can’t happen or if it’s still unsafe for the child to return home, then another long-term home will be found. In some cases, a new family is found for the child, and the child is adopted or gets a new guardian.

## **27. Petition**

When CPS is very worried about a child’s safety and thinks that they are in danger, they file a report with the court called a petition, to ask for the court’s help with keeping the child safe. This could include asking the court to place the child in out-of-home care or keep them there.

## **28. Report**

When someone is worried that a child is unsafe at home with their parents or caregivers, or might have been abused or neglected, they contact their local CPS, police, or a child abuse hotline to make a report.<sup>iii</sup> Anyone can make a report but some adults in the community, like teachers and doctors, are called ‘mandatory reporters.’ This means that they are required by law to make a report if they think a child might be unsafe at home.

**29. Residential Treatment Facility**

A place where a child stays overnight so they can receive mental health treatment, health care<sup>iv</sup>, and other supportive services. The child may also attend school at the facility.

**30. Reunification Plan**

If a child is in out-of-home care and the court decides they can live with their parents again, then a plan is created in some cases to describe how and when this will happen.

**31. Risk or Risk of Harm**

What CPS or the court thinks is the likelihood (or chance) that a child will be abused or neglected by their parents or caregivers in the future. They decide this based on all the information that they have.

**32. Service or Case Plan**

An agreement between the family and CPS (or another agency), that talks about why the agency is working with the family; what's working well with the family; what the family needs; and what everyone will do to help make things safer at home for the child.

**33. Support Services**

Programs and other resources that help families, so their child can stay safely at home or can return home, such as counseling and parenting programs.

**34. Termination of Parental Rights**

When the court says that a parent doesn't have the right to take care of or make decisions about their child anymore.

**35. Therapeutic or Specialized Foster Care**

A type of foster home where the foster parent has had special training and can provide care for children who have mental health or other special medical needs.

**36. Unfounded, Unsubstantiated, Undetermined or Not Indicated**

When CPS hasn't found enough evidence (information) during their investigation to show that a child has been abused or neglected. This doesn't mean that the maltreatment didn't happen, just that CPS didn't find enough evidence.

**37. Visits or Contact**

When a child staying in out-of-home care spends time (or visits) with their parents, caregivers and/or siblings. A visit can either be 'supervised' or 'unsupervised.'

- *A supervised contact/visit is when another adult like a social worker is there to make sure the child is safe. The visit can happen at the agency, in a court building, or out in the community.*
  
- *An unsupervised contact/visit happens without another adult there and can usually happen anywhere.*

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**You might hear other words that aren't explained here, so don't be afraid to ask the adults working with you to explain anything that you don't understand.**

# Endnotes

- i. "Glossary - C." n.d. Child Welfare Information Gateway. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/glossary/glossaryc/>.
- ii. "Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect." 2019. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/define.pdf>.
- iii. "Making and Screening Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect." 2017. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/repproc.pdf>.
- iv. "Glossary- R." n.d. Child Welfare Information Gateway. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/glossary/glossaryr/>  
"Foster Care." n.d. Child Welfare Information Gateway. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/foster-care/>.  
"Glossary of Terms." n.d. Help One Child. <https://helponechild.org/families/foster-care-resources/glossary-of-terms>.  
"How the Child Welfare System Works." 2020. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/cpswork.pdf>.

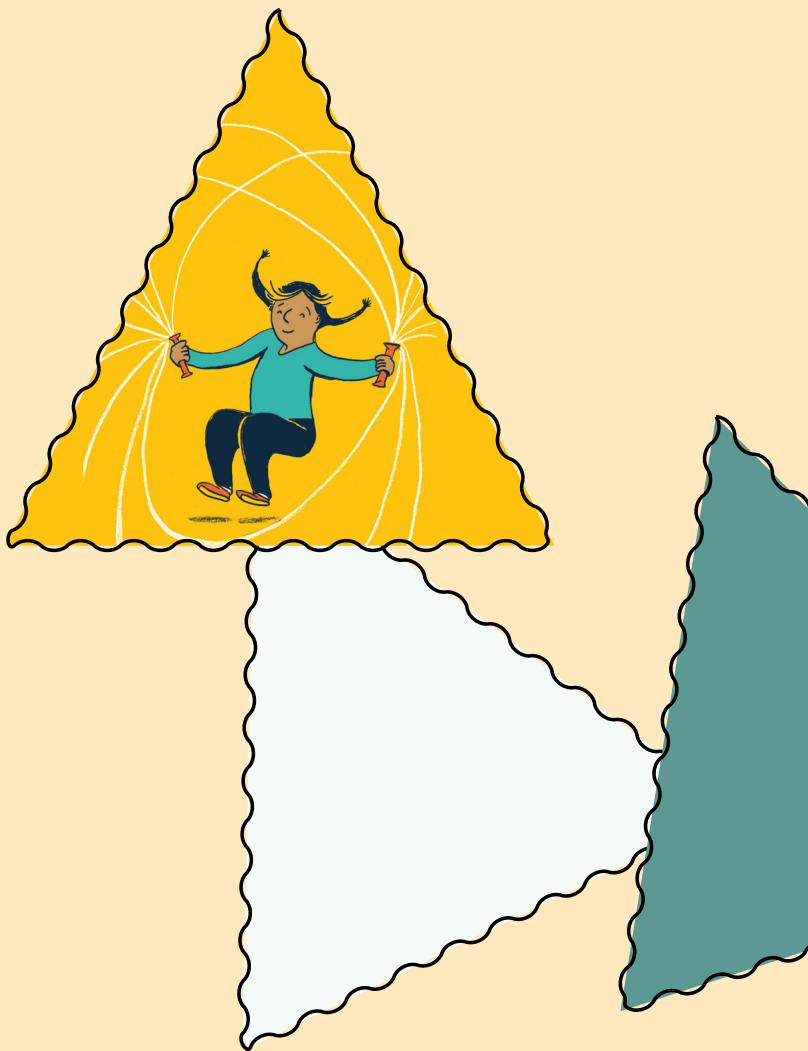
# Additional Resources

"How the CAC Model Works." n.d. National Children's Alliance. <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/cac-model/>.









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