

What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Educators

Educators make crucial contributions to the development and well-being of children and youth. Due to their close relationships with children and families, educators can play a key role in the prevention of child abuse and neglect and, when necessary, support children, youth, and families involved with child welfare. This guide for educators provides an overview of child welfare, describes how educators and child welfare workers can help each other, and lists resources for more information.

What Is Child Welfare?

Child welfare is a continuum of services designed to ensure that children are safe and that families have the necessary support to care for their children successfully. Child welfare agencies typically:

- Support or coordinate services to prevent child abuse and neglect
- Provide services to families that need help protecting and caring for their children
- Receive and investigate reports of possible child abuse and neglect; assess child and family needs, strengths, and resources
- Arrange for children to live with kin (i.e., relatives) or with foster families when safety cannot be ensured at home
- Support the well-being of children living with relatives or foster families, including ensuring that their educational needs are addressed
- Work with the children, youth, and families to achieve family reunification, adoption, or other permanent family connections for children and youth leaving foster care

Each State or locality has a public child welfare agency responsible for receiving and investigating reports of child abuse and neglect and assessing child and family needs; however, the child welfare system is not a single entity. Public child welfare agencies often collaborate with private child welfare agencies, community-based organizations, and other public agencies to ensure that families receive the services they need, such as supportive child care, parenting classes, in-home family preservation services, mental health services, and substance abuse treatment.



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Email: info@childwelfare.gov
<http://www.childwelfare.gov>

How Can Educators Assist Child Welfare Agencies and Families?

Since educators—including teachers, administrators, counselors, and other school personnel—are regularly in close contact with children and families, they are in a unique position to support at-risk children and families, play a role in preventing child abuse and neglect, identify and report suspected abuse or neglect, and be an important resource for children in foster care.

- **Supporting families and preventing child abuse and neglect.** Educators can play a significant role in preventing child abuse and neglect and supporting children at risk for or already experiencing maltreatment. Merely being a supportive adult in a child's life can enhance the child's resiliency. Educators also can help guide parents in times of crisis, teach and model positive discipline practices, and refer children and families for additional services and supports, if needed, which may prevent referrals to out-of-home care.
- **Identifying possible abuse and neglect.** Educators also should be aware of the types of child maltreatment, including neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse; their possible physical, emotional, and behavioral signs; and State definitions about what constitutes child maltreatment.
- **Reporting suspected child abuse and neglect.** In 2010, 16.3 percent of all child abuse and neglect reports were made by educators, with only legal and law enforcement personnel (16.7 percent) reporting more.¹ Educators should be knowledgeable about the child maltreatment reporting protocols for their particular schools and localities. All States designate teachers as mandatory reporters, which means they are required by law to report suspected child abuse and neglect to the appropriate child welfare agency. Other school employees also may be mandatory reporters, but that designation varies by State.
- **Being a resource for child welfare agencies.** Child welfare workers frequently consult with school personnel when assessing a family, developing a case plan, and determining where the child should live. Educators may have information (either in records or through personal knowledge) about the child's or family's strengths and challenges. This information is invaluable to caseworkers as they assess and work with the family to formulate realistic goals. Additionally, when a child changes schools, educators can support a smooth transition by facilitating the timely transfer of records.
- **Being a resource for children involved with child welfare.** Children involved in a child protective services (CPS) investigation or living in out-of-home care (e.g., with relatives or a foster family) need the stability of normal experiences such as attending school and being involved in extracurricular activities. Children who have changed schools a number of times may need extra help in making up schoolwork, earning credits, or filling in gaps in their learning. They also may need support or encouragement to participate in extracurricular activities such as sports, music, drama, and clubs, which can have a

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. (2011). *Child Maltreatment 2010*. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm10/cm10.pdf>.

positive effect on their attendance, academic work, behavior, and ability to make friends. Additionally, educators can assist by learning more about policies and services applicable to children involved with child welfare, such as eligibility for services, scholarship and financial aid opportunities, and confidentiality issues. Furthermore, children involved with child welfare often have experienced various forms of trauma (e.g., abuse, neglect, removal from the home), and educators can support them by recognizing the effects of trauma and utilizing trauma-informed practices.

How Can Child Welfare Workers Assist Educators?

Collaboration between the education and child welfare systems can assist educators by:

- **Ensuring that children are ready to learn.** Children who have experienced abuse or neglect may have cognitive difficulties or developmental delays, and they may perform below their peers in school. Child welfare workers can help ensure that children and families receive the services and supports they need, including access to early intervention, special education, mental and behavioral health, and prevention services. These services and supports can build resiliency to reduce the effects of previous maltreatment, thereby improving children's school readiness and overall well-being.
- **Keeping children in their home schools.** When students are able to remain in the same school, they remain connected to friends and adults in the school and avoid the academic and emotional challenges that can be caused by changing schools. This prevents disruption in their education, eases their transition to a new living arrangement, and ensures that previous community supports are still in place. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (the Fostering Connections Act) requires that child welfare workers try to place children with relatives or others in their community in order to minimize school moves. In certain cases, the Fostering Connections Act permits child welfare agencies to use funds to provide transportation to support school stability. If a child must move to a new school, Fostering Connections requires child welfare workers to coordinate with schools to ensure a smooth transition.
- **Inviting educators to participate in a multidisciplinary team.** Child welfare workers can assist educators and support school success by being active participants in individualized education program (IEP) team meetings, school discipline meetings, and transition meetings to discuss a child's postsecondary goals. Similarly, given their strong connection to the child and family, educators are in a unique position to provide their expertise at multidisciplinary team meetings arranged by child welfare workers. These meetings bring together family members and professionals to discuss the child's and family's needs and develop a case plan that supports both. Coordinating child welfare and education plans and ensuring the appropriate individuals are involved helps improve outcomes for children and families.

Working together, educators and child welfare workers can ensure that families have the supports and services they need to successfully care for their children, that children are safe and well, and that children and youth have the opportunity to achieve positive educational and social outcomes.

Resources

Child Welfare, Education and the Courts: A Collaboration to Strengthen Educational Successes of Children and Youth in Foster Care (National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections) - http://www.nrcpfc.org/education_summit/

Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators (National Child Traumatic Stress Network) - http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/Child_Trauma_Toolkit_Final.pdf

Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway) - http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/define.cfm

Foster Care and Education (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education) - <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/FosterCareEducationBrochure.pdf>

Foster Care and Education Data Sheet (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education) - <http://www.casey.org/resources/publications/EducationalOutcomes.htm>

Fostering Connections Implementation Toolkit: Improving Education Outcomes for Children and Youth in Foster Care (Legal Center for Foster Care & Education) - http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/migrated/child/education/publications/toolkit_combined_with_cover.authcheckdam.pdf

A Look at Child Welfare From a Homeless Education Perspective (National Center for Homeless Education) - http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/ch_welfare.pdf

Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect: Summary of State Laws (Child Welfare Information Gateway) - http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/manda.cfm

Preventing Child Maltreatment and Promoting Well-Being: A Network for Action: 2012 Resource Guide (Child Welfare Information Gateway) - <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/guide2012/guide.pdf>

The Role of Educators in Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse and Neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau) - <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/educator/index.cfm>

State Child Abuse Reporting Numbers (Child Welfare Information Gateway) - http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?rs_id=5&rate_chno=W-00082

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The Children's Bureau, within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is the Federal agency with primary responsibility for administering Federal child welfare programs. The Children's Bureau was created by President Taft in 1912 to investigate and report on infant mortality, birth rates, orphanages, juvenile courts, and other social issues of that time. With an annual budget of over \$7 billion, the Children's Bureau works with State and local agencies to develop programs that focus on strengthening families, protecting children from abuse, and finding permanent families for those who cannot safely return to their homes. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/index.htm>

The Children's Bureau's information clearinghouse, Child Welfare Information Gateway, links child welfare and other professionals to thousands of resources: <http://www.childwelfare.gov>



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau

