



What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Domestic Violence Services Advocates

Child welfare (CW) professionals and domestic violence (DV) services advocates recognize the common co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment. Acknowledgement of the significant overlap¹ has led to more collaboration between these fields, as both groups work to keep families safe. This guide provides an overview of basic child welfare services, describes how domestic violence services and child welfare professionals can support one another's efforts in working with families, and lists resources for more information.

What Is Child Welfare?

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. These agencies are governed by State laws that define child protection roles and processes. (To find specific State laws, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/>, particularly *Child Witnesses to Domestic Violence* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/witnessdv>, and *Definitions of Domestic Violence* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/defdomvio>.) The Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Child Protection and Custody, a project of the Family Violence and Domestic Relations Program of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, also offers State statute resources at <http://www.ncjfcj.org/sites/default/files/chart-exposure-to-dv-as-child-abuse-or-neglect.pdf> and <http://www.ncjfcj.org/sites/default/files/chart-dv-state-definitions.pdf>.

Child welfare comprises an array of services designed to ensure that children are safe and that families have supports to care for their children. CW agencies typically:

- Support or coordinate services to prevent child abuse and neglect
- Receive and investigate reports of possible child abuse and neglect
- Provide services to families that need help protecting and caring for their children
- Arrange for out-of-home care (foster care, kinship care, or other) when children and youth cannot remain safely at home
- Support the well-being of children living with relatives and foster and adoptive families, including ensuring that their health, mental health, and educational needs are addressed
- Work with children, youth, and families to achieve family reunification, adoption, or other permanent family connections for children and youth leaving out-of-home care

¹ See, for example, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/parentsinhome_v2.pdf.

The child welfare field recognizes that it is usually in the best interests of children to remain with a parent if their safety can be ensured with services and resources. CW professionals work to engage parents in safeguarding their children and build on family strengths by enhancing protective factors that help parents find resources, supports, or coping strategies that allow them to parent effectively, even under stress.²

Collaboration Between Domestic Violence Services and Child Welfare: What Works?

Since the groundbreaking “Greenbook,”³ which recommended collaboration strategies for DV and CW professionals, both fields have come to recognize the importance of partnerships. Cross-system collaboration works best if there are established protocols for partnering and if both agencies formally adopt these collaboration strategies. Some agencies colocate a DV services professional within a CW agency⁴ to advise on cases, provide training, accompany CW staff on visits to families, help with family assessments, and make service referrals. Other agencies draw up Memoranda of Understanding⁵ (MOU) that define the partnership between the DV and CW systems, specify roles and responsibilities for workers, and provide guidance on such issues as information sharing, consultation and referral, and promoting community response. A promising collaborative approach to early prevention of both child maltreatment and domestic violence is the use of trained home visitors for at-risk families with young children.⁶ Additionally, partnerships between DV services and CW can broaden the opportunities to offer culturally competent services to families simply by drawing from a greater base of professionals and by having policies that mandate cultural understanding and competence.⁷

How Can DV Services Advocates Assist Child Welfare Professionals?

Domestic violence services advocates bring a unique perspective and expertise to the partnership between DV and CW services. The following are some of the ways that DV services advocates can help child welfare professionals:

- **Supporting families and preventing child abuse and neglect.** Merely being a supportive adult in a child’s life can enhance the child’s resiliency. DV services advocates can help parents in times of crisis; teach and model positive interactions between the non-offending parent and child; and refer families to additional services and supports, which may prevent out-of-home care.
- **Working with parents and children on safety planning and enhancing resiliency.** DV services advocates can advise CW staff on effective ways to engage parents who are victims of DV, recognizing that keeping the non-offending parent safe is strongly related to keeping the children safe. When child welfare professionals connect DV victims to services, advocates can work alongside CW professionals with the parent and child to develop a safety plan, which is critical whether the child remains at home with the non-offending parent, both parents, or the child enters foster or kinship care. Furthermore, DV services advocates can help enhance resiliency as well as improve the relationship between parent and child, which is important because “children’s emotional recovery from exposure to DV depends more on the quality of their relationship with the non-offending parent than any other single factor.”⁸

² Read about the protective factors at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/promoting/protectfactors>.

³ See <http://www.thegreenbook.info/index.htm>.

⁴ Read about New York’s colocation work at http://www.albany.edu/chsr/Publications/CPS_DV%20Study%20final%20report16.pdf and about Oregon’s colocation work at <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/gatewaycenter/article/304526>.

⁵ See Wisconsin’s MOU template at http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/domv/publications/pdf/mou_develop.pdf.

⁶ Read more about this at http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/Children_and_Families/Realizing%20the%20Promise%20of%20Home%20Visitation%202-10.pdf.

⁷ See <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/cultural/services/domviolence>.

⁸ Bancroft L., & Silverman, J. *The Batterer as Parent: Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Violence*. 2002. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

- **Providing resources to identify and assess domestic violence.** DV services advocates can provide training and technical assistance to staff to identify and assess domestic violence for families reported for child maltreatment. Domestic violence services advocates can share screening protocols, tools, and resources to use with all families that come to the attention of child welfare agencies to manage risk assessment. Even if child maltreatment is not substantiated, identifying and offering DV services can help improve the safety and well-being of both parent and child.
- **Advising CW professionals on batterers.**⁹ Helping children maintain healthy relationships with both parents is a child welfare goal. DV services advocates can provide guidance on working with perpetrators of domestic violence, connect CW professionals to batterer intervention programs, and ensure that the emphasis is on holding the perpetrator, not the victim, responsible for the family violence. If the batterer is a father or father figure, DV professionals can connect CW professionals to healthy fatherhood programs. CW professionals are obligated by law to look for fathers and paternal relatives unless there is some outstanding reason not to.

How Can CW Professionals Assist DV Services Advocates?

Child welfare professionals, collaborating with DV advocates, can help domestic violence services staff in the following ways:

- **Conducting universal screenings of domestic violence.** Soon after initial contact with child welfare, child welfare professionals should screen for domestic violence and refer the non-offending parent and child to domestic violence services. CW professionals can share information on healthy relationships and the negative impact of domestic violence on children universally.
- **Providing expertise on child maltreatment, including legal requirements.** CW professionals are experts in what constitutes child maltreatment in their States. They can help DV staff identify signs and symptoms of child abuse or neglect, advise on reporting protocols (who is required to report, what must be reported, to whom the report is made, what the outcomes of reporting are, and provisions for confidentiality of reports¹⁰), and explore ways to involve victims in the reporting process. CW professionals can help DV services advocates navigate through child protection policies, practices, and processes.
- **Advocating for children exposed to domestic violence.** CW professionals have experience with the impact of child maltreatment at various stages of child development. They are concerned about the trauma that severe or chronic abuse or neglect can cause, including the impact of witnessing domestic violence in their own families. CW professionals can be advocates for children, for instance, when they are interviewed about child abuse and neglect/child development or if they are asked to give testimony in court.
- **Enhancing child protection through prevention.** Preventing child maltreatment before it happens is the ideal. CW professionals can provide training and technical assistance on building a family's protective factors¹¹—including social connections and resilience for parents and enhanced nurturing and attachment between children and parents—that can help prevent child maltreatment.
- **Working across agencies to help families receive services.** Like DV services staff, CW professionals have experience working with professionals in related disciplines, such as housing, substance use, education, and community services, to support children and their families. CW staff may be more aware of services that will accommodate children and their needs, including their educational needs. Child welfare professionals may also be able to help families establish children's eligibility for services through TANF and Medicaid or CHIP.¹²

⁹ For more information on CW working with fathers who are batterers, see <http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/dv/Locating%20and%20Engaging%20Fathers.pdf>.

¹⁰ Chamberlain, L., & Levenson, R. (2011). *Healthy moms, happy babies: A train the trainers curriculum on domestic violence, reproductive coercion and children exposed*.

¹¹ Read about the protective factors at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/promoting/protectfactors>.

¹² TANF refers to Temporary Cash Assistance for Needy Families; CHIP is the Children's Health Insurance Program.

- **Sharing information with domestic violence services advocates.** While following agency confidentiality policies, CW professionals can provide helpful information that may impact the child and non-offending parent. In particular, CW professionals should alert DV services advocates when there are changes that might create stress for the child or parent (e.g., a new permanency goal, new placement, court date, change in visitation).

Working together, CW and DV advocates can ensure that children and families are safe and have the best chance for achieving well-being in their communities. For more information on the extent of the overlap between domestic violence services and child welfare, and the trend toward a more collaborative response to the issue, read *Domestic Violence and the Child Welfare System* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/domestic-violence/>.

Resources

- Child Welfare Information Gateway:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/domviolence>
- Promising Futures: Best Practices for Serving Children, Youth, and Parents Experiencing Domestic Violence:
<http://promising.futureswithoutviolence.org/>
- National Council on Juvenile and Family Court Judges:
<http://www.ncjfcj.org/our-work/domestic-violence>
- National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women:
http://www.vawnet.org/domestic-violence/intervention.php?type=web_desc_TT&filterby=Child%20Abuse
- The Greenbook website section on tools and resources for child welfare and domestic violence:
<http://www.thegreenbook.info/read.htm>
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (includes factsheets for parents):
<http://www.nctsn.org/content/resources>
- Safe and Together:
<http://endingviolence.com>
- State examples of DV and CW collaboration and best practices:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/domviolence/collaboration/examples/>

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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 works with State and local agencies to develop programs that focus on strengthening families, protecting children from abuse and neglect, and finding permanent families for those who cannot safely return to their homes. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/index.htm>



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