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

Child welfare workers and domestic violence services (DVS) advocates recognize that domestic violence adversely impacts family safety and well-being and puts children at increased risk for maltreatment. Acknowledgement of this has led to increased collaboration between professionals in these fields as both groups work to increase safety and foster healthier outcomes for families. This guide provides an overview of basic child welfare services, describes how DVS advocates and child welfare professionals can support one another's efforts in working with families, and presents resources for more information.

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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 public and private agencies often work together as partners and collaborate with their local community organizations to help keep children and families safe. State laws define child protection roles and processes that govern these agencies. (To find specific State laws, search Child Welfare Information Gateway's [State Statutes database](#) and see [Child Witnesses to Domestic Violence](#) and [Definitions of Domestic Violence](#).)

Child welfare comprises an array of services designed to ensure that children are safe and that families have the necessary support to care for their children. Child welfare agencies typically support children and families in the following ways:

- Coordinate or support services to prevent child abuse and neglect
- Receive and investigate reports of possible child abuse and neglect and assess child and family needs, strengths, and resources
- 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 planned permanent living arrangement) 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 children's 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

Child welfare agencies do not work alone. They often collaborate with other public and private agencies and community organizations that provide families with the services they need, such as supportive child care, parenting programs, in-home family preservation services, mental and physical health care, and advocacy and treatment for issues related to domestic violence and substance use. Child welfare agencies also work with courts, which play a central role in child protection decision-making.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES AND CHILD WELFARE: CROSS-SYSTEM COLLABORATION

DVS advocates are often tasked with advocating for the rights of families involved in the child welfare system, and professionals in both fields are increasingly recognizing the importance of cross-system partnerships. Collaboration is most effective when there are established protocols, such as colocated staffing and cross-training initiatives, that enable the exchange of knowledge and resources between DVS advocates and child welfare caseworkers, with the ultimate goal of improving services and outcomes for families. For detailed descriptions of domestic violence collaboration models used in the child welfare field, see the [Child Protection in Families Experiencing Domestic Violence \(2nd ed.\)](#) caseworker user manual, developed by the Children's Bureau.

HOW CAN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES ADVOCATES ASSIST CHILD WELFARE PROFESSIONALS?

DVS advocates bring unique perspectives and expertise to the partnership between domestic violence and child welfare services. Here are some of the ways that DVS advocates can assist 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. DVS advocates can help parents in times of crisis; teach and model positive interactions between the nonoffending parent and child; and refer families to additional services and supports, which may help them better protect and care for their children and prevent the need for out-of-home care.
- **Working with parents and children on enhancing safety and resiliency.** DVS advocates can advise child welfare staff on effective ways to engage parents who have experienced violence, recognizing that keeping the nonoffending parent safe is strongly related to keeping children safe. When connecting families to services and supports, it is imperative that DVS advocates and child welfare professionals involve parents and children in the decision-making process by working together to develop safety plans that minimize risk to families and hold those who have used violence accountable for their actions.
- **Offering guidance on responding to domestic violence.** DVS advocates can provide training and technical assistance to child welfare staff on how to identify and assess domestic violence in families reported for child maltreatment. DVS advocates can share screening protocols, tools, and resources to manage risk assessment for families that come to the attention of child welfare agencies, and they can provide guidance on decision-making in cases where domestic violence is detected. (Visit Information Gateway's [Assessing Child Exposure to Domestic Violence](#) web section for more information.) Even if child maltreatment is not substantiated, identifying and offering domestic violence services can help improve the safety, well-being, and resiliency of both the parent and his or her children.
- **Advising child welfare professionals on offending parents.** DVS advocates can help child welfare workers determine if and how parents who use violence should be located and engaged in services that promote positive behaviors. Advocates ensure that the emphasis is on holding the offending parent, and not the nonoffending parent, responsible for the family violence. If the person who has used violence is a father or father figure, domestic violence professionals can connect child welfare professionals to community-based fatherhood programs that offer various supports for men.

HOW CAN CHILD WELFARE PROFESSIONALS ASSIST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES ADVOCATES?

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

- **Conducting universal screenings of domestic violence.** Soon after a family's initial contact with child protective services, child welfare professionals should screen for domestic violence and, if it is detected, refer the nonoffending parent and his or her children to domestic violence services. These services can help parents and children understand and cope with the violence occurring within their family and provide access to concrete supports.
- **Providing expertise on child maltreatment, including legal requirements.** Child welfare professionals are experts in what constitutes child maltreatment in their States. They can help domestic violence 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 reports), and explore ways to involve survivors in the reporting process. (See Information Gateway's web section on [Identification of Child Abuse and Neglect](#) for more information.) Child welfare professionals can help DVS advocates navigate through child protection policies, practices, and processes.
- **Advocating for children exposed to domestic violence.** Child welfare professionals have insight into 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 children, including the impact of witnessing domestic violence in their own families. Child welfare professionals can be advocates for children, for instance, when they are interviewed about child abuse and neglect or if they are asked to give testimony in court.
- **Enhancing child protection through prevention.** Preventing child maltreatment before it happens is the ideal. Child welfare professionals can provide training and technical assistance on building a family's protective factors that can help prevent child maltreatment, including social connections and resilience for parents and enhanced nurturing and attachment between children and their parents. For more information, see Information Gateway's [Protective Factors to Promote Well-Being](#) web section.
- **Working across agencies to help families receive services and supports.** Like domestic violence services staff, child welfare professionals have experience working with professionals in related disciplines—such as housing, substance use, education, and community services—to support children and their families. Child welfare staff may be more aware of services that will accommodate children and their needs. Child welfare professionals may also be able to help families establish children's eligibility for services through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and other government programs.

- **Sharing information with DVS advocates.** While following agency confidentiality policies (e.g., obtaining informed consent from families when needed, discussing confidentiality in detail with families), child welfare professionals can provide helpful information that may impact children and the nonoffending parent. In particular, child welfare professionals should alert domestic violence advocates when there are changes that might create stress for the children or parent (e.g., new permanency goal, new placement, court date, change in visitation).

Working together, child welfare professionals and DVS advocates can ensure that children and families are safe and resilient. For more information on the extent of overlap between domestic violence services and child welfare, and the trend toward a more collaborative response to the issue, read [Domestic Violence: A Primer for Child Welfare Professionals](#).

RESOURCES

- Child Welfare Information Gateway’s [Domestic Violence](#) web section
- [Promising Futures: Best Practices for Serving Children, Youth, and Parents Experiencing Domestic Violence](#)

- National Council on Juvenile and Family Court Judges’ [Domestic Violence and Child Maltreatment](#) web section
- [National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women](#)
- [National Network to End Domestic Violence](#) (includes information on domestic violence coalitions)
- [National Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) (includes factsheets for parents)
- The Family and Youth Services Bureau’s [culturally specific resource centers](#) for domestic violence
- [State and local examples](#) of domestic violence and child welfare collaboration and best practices

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