

Child Protective Services: A Guide for Caseworkers

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2003

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

CHAPTER 2

Child Protective Services Theory and Practice

The basis for child protective services (CPS) is a concern for the care of children, which is expressed through laws established in every State. The legal authority and the mandates that evolved from child abuse laws are described in *A Coordinated Response to Child Abuse and Neglect: The Foundation for Practice*. These laws do not specify all that must be done to assist families and children, but they do provide a framework within which action can be taken.

This chapter further explores how CPS staff fulfill their responsibilities of protecting children at risk of child maltreatment. It begins with an expanded discussion of the philosophical tenets of child protection that are described in *A Coordinated Response to Child Abuse and Neglect: The Foundation for Practice*. The chapter continues with a discussion of the theoretical and practical framework for CPS practice. Finally, there is an examination of the competencies required of CPS workers.

PHILOSOPHY OF CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

The basic philosophical tenets of CPS include the following:

A safe and permanent home and family is the best place for children to grow up. Every child has a right to adequate care and supervision and to be free from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. It is

the responsibility of parents to see that the physical, mental, emotional, educational, and medical needs of their children are adequately met. CPS should intervene only when parents request assistance or fail, by their acts or omissions, to meet their children's basic needs and keep them safe.

Most parents want to be good parents and, when adequately supported, they have the strength and capacity to care for their children and keep them safe. Most children are best cared for in their own family. Therefore, CPS focuses on building family strengths and provides parents with the assistance needed to keep their children safe so that the family may stay together.

Families who need assistance from CPS agencies are diverse in terms of structure, culture, race, religion, economic status, beliefs, values, and lifestyles. CPS agencies and practitioners must be responsive to and respectful of these differences. Further, CPS caseworkers should build on the strengths and protective factors within families and communities. They should advocate for families and help families gain access to the services they need. Often, securing access means helping families overcome barriers rooted in poverty or discrimination, such as readily accessible transportation to services.

CPS agencies are held accountable for achieving outcomes of child safety, permanence, and family well-being. To achieve safety and permanence for

children, CPS must engage families in identifying and achieving family-level outcomes that reduce the risk of further maltreatment and ameliorate the effects of maltreatment that has already occurred.

CPS efforts are most likely to succeed when clients are involved and actively participate in the process. Whatever a caseworker's role, he or she must have the ability to develop helping alliances with family members. CPS caseworkers need to work in ways that encourage clients to fully participate in assessment, case planning, and other critical decisions in CPS intervention.

When parents cannot or will not fulfill their responsibilities to protect their children, CPS has the right and obligation to intervene directly on the children's behalf. Both laws and good practice maintain that interventions should be designed to help parents protect their children and should be as unobtrusive as possible. CPS must make reasonable efforts to develop safety plans to keep children with their families whenever possible, although they may refer for juvenile or family court intervention and placement when children cannot be kept safely within their own homes. To read

more about the working relationship between CPS and the court system, please refer to the user manual on working with the courts.

When children are placed in out-of-home care because their safety cannot be assured, CPS should develop a permanency plan as soon as possible. In most cases, the preferred permanency plan is to reunify children with their families. All children need continuity in their lives, so if the goal is family reunification, the plan should include frequent visits between children and their families as well as other efforts to sustain the parent-child relationship while children are in foster care. In addition, the CPS agency must immediately work with the family to change the behaviors and conditions that led to the maltreatment and necessitated placement in out-of-home care.

To best protect a child's overall well-being, agencies want to assure that children move to permanency as quickly as possible. Therefore, along with developing plans to support reunification, agencies should develop alternative plans for permanence once a child enters the CPS system. As soon as it has been determined that a child cannot

Philosophical Underpinnings of CPS

Additional sources of information on the philosophical underpinnings of CPS and other child welfare service programs include:

- Pecora, P. J., Whittaker, J. K., Maluccio, A. N., Barth, R. P., & Plotnick, R. D. (2000). *The child welfare challenge* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators. (1999). *Guidelines for a model system of protective services for abused and neglected children and their families*. Washington, DC: American Public Human Services Association.
- Child Welfare League of America. (1999). *CWLA standards of excellence for services for abused and neglected children and their families* (revised edition). Washington, DC: Author.
- Waldfoegel, J. (1998). *The future of child protection: How to break the cycle of abuse and neglect*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Horejsi, C. (1996). *Assessment and case planning in child protection and foster care services*. Englewood, CO: American Humane Association, Children's Division.

be safely reunited with his or her family, CPS must implement the alternative permanency plan.

FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICE

This section explains how practitioners apply the philosophical tenets described above to practice. Practitioners generally agree that a “child-centered, family-focused, and culturally responsive” framework for child welfare practice will promote the best outcomes for children.¹ This integrative framework for practice builds on five main perspectives described below:

- **Ecological perspective.** This perspective conceptualizes human behavior and social functioning within an environmental context. Personal, family, and environmental factors interact with each other to influence the family. Child maltreatment is viewed as the consequence of the interplay between a complex set of risk and protective factors at the individual, family, community, and society levels.
- **Strength-based perspective.** This perspective refers to practice methods and strategies that draw upon the strengths of children, families, and communities. Strength-based practice involves a shift from a deficit approach, which emphasizes problems and pathology, to a positive partnership with the family. The assessments focus on the complex interplay of risks and strengths related to individual family members, the family as a unit, and the broader neighborhood and environment.
- **Developmental perspective.** This perspective refers to understanding individual growth and development and family development from a lifespan perspective, and examines individuals and families interacting with their environments over the course of time. Effective case planning takes into account which interventions are effective with a specific child or family problem,

in a specific environmental setting, and at a particular developmental stage.²

- **Permanency planning orientation.** This orientation holds that all children have a right to a permanent home. Child welfare service delivery should focus on safely maintaining children in their own homes or, if necessary, placing them permanently with other families. Interventions include a set of goal-directed activities designed to help children live in safe families who offer a sense of belonging and legal, lifetime family ties.
- **Cultural competence perspective.** This perspective requires CPS practitioners to understand the perspective of clients or peers who may come from culturally diverse backgrounds and to adapt their practice accordingly. Basic cultural competence is achieved when organizations and practitioners accept and respect differences, engage in ongoing cultural self-assessment, expand their diversity knowledge and skills, and adapt service models to fit the target populations, culture, situation, and perceived needs.³

CASEWORKER COMPETENCE

Developing CPS caseworker competence is an ongoing process. Caseworkers build competence through education, training, experience, and supervision. Examples of the core qualities, values, knowledge, and skills associated with competency in CPS are included in Exhibit 2-1.

Since the 1990s, the need for competent workers has increased. This reflects concerns about the quality of the delivery of services; the increasing complexity of child welfare cases; and the need for inter- and intra-system collaboration and coordination with the courts as well as mental health, juvenile justice, education, domestic violence, health care, and substance abuse services. It also stems from the legislative mandates of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997,

which requires the provision of timely assessment and intervention services to the children and families served within the CPS system.⁵

In response to ongoing staffing crises, some child welfare agencies are trying to address organizational problems and overburdened staff by setting standards for worker educational background and licensure—an effort toward “re-professionalization” of child welfare.⁶ To increase the competency of CPS staff, many States have developed and implemented competency-based training and certification programs. Some of these programs include readiness assessments and competency exams.

There is research that strongly suggests that higher education is essential for developing caseworker competencies. Both the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA) and the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) suggest that CPS staff should have a bachelor’s or master’s degree in social work (B.S.W. or M.S.W.) or a degree in a closely related field. Social work education appears to be related to job retention and staff stability, which helps produce better child welfare practice.⁷

An important strategy for increasing the preparedness of CPS workers is to direct Federal funding toward

Exhibit 2-1	
CPS Worker Values, Knowledge, and Skills	
Core Values	
Belief that:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All people have a reservoir of untapped, renewable, and expandable abilities (mental, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual) that can be used to facilitate change.• Each child has a right to a permanent family.• Each child and family member should be empowered to work toward his or her own needs and goals.	
Commitment to:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Using a strength-based, child-centered, family-focused practice.• Assuring the safety of children in the context of their family.• Practicing complete confidentiality.• Ensuring accountability and an end-results orientation.• Implementing quality professional practice.• Continuing pursuit of knowledge and skills to effectively accomplish the mission of CPS.	
Respect for:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Persons of diverse racial, religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, and a belief that there is strength in diversity.• Each person’s dignity, individuality, and right to self-determination.	

Exhibit 2-1 CPS Worker Values, Knowledge, and Skills

Core Knowledge

Understanding of:

- Family systems, the family's environment, the family in a historical context, diverse family structures, and concepts of family empowerment.
- Individual growth and development with particular attention to attachment and bonding, separation, loss, and identity development.
- Child abuse and neglect dynamics.
- Cultural diversity, the characteristics of special populations, and the implications for assessment and intervention.
- Continuum of placement services including the foster care system, the residential care system, kinship care, placement prevention, familial ties maintenance, family reunification, and adoption.
- Services including crisis intervention, parenting skills training, family counseling, conflict resolution, and individual and group counseling.

Command of:

- Case management issues and responsibilities.
- Child welfare and child protection programs and models.
- Principles of permanency planning for children and the role of out-of-home care.

Familiarity with:

- Special problems of poverty, oppression, and deprivation.
- Substance abuse issues and their effect on children and families.
- Dynamics of community and family violence, including partner abuse and the impact of trauma.
- Direct services available to children and families in the mental health, health care, substance abuse treatment, education, juvenile justice, and community systems.
- Wraparound services available for families through the economic security, housing, transportation, and job training systems.
- Legal systems related to child welfare practice.
- Political and advocacy processes and how they relate to funding and acquiring services.

Exhibit 2-1 CPS Worker Values, Knowledge, and Skills

Core Skills

Ability to:

- Identify strengths and needs and engage the family in a strength-based assessment process.
- Take decisive and appropriate action when a child needs protection.
- Analyze complex information.
- Be persistent in approach to CPS work.
- Employ crisis intervention and early intervention services and strategies.
- Assess a family's readiness to change and employ appropriate strategies for increasing motivation and building the helping alliance.
- Function as a case manager and a team member, and collaborate with other service providers.
- Assess for substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and mental illness.
- Work with birth families to create a permanent plan for a child in foster care, kinship care, or group care.

Aptitude for:

- Developing and maintaining professional relationships with families.
- Listening.
- Remaining flexible.
- Working with involuntary clients, including those who are hostile or resistant.
- Working with legal systems, including documentation and court testimony.
- Empowering the child and family to sustain gains and use family and community supports.

Expertise in:

- Assessing for abuse, neglect, and the safety of the child and others in the family setting.
- Negotiating, implementing, and evaluating the case plan with the family.
- Working with the family and key supports to accomplish the service agreement goals.
- Applying knowledge of human behavior and successful intervention methods with children and adolescents at various developmental stages.⁴

The Link Between Higher Education and Improved Child Welfare Practice

Research findings support the efficacy of social work education for public-sector child welfare practice. The following are highlights of several key studies:

- A national study of job requirements for child welfare workers found that turnover was consistently higher in States that do not require any academic social work preparation for child welfare positions and is consistently lower in States that require an M.S.W.⁸
- A Florida study suggested that workers without education in child welfare work were most likely to leave before 1 year.⁹
- A study by Hess, Folaron, and Jefferson found that caseworker turnover was a major factor in failed reunification efforts.¹⁰
- A Maryland study found that having an M.S.W. degree appeared to be the best predictor of overall performance in social service work.¹¹
- A study of social service workers in Kentucky found that staff members with social work degrees were better prepared for their work than those without them.¹²
- Abers, Reilly, and Rittner found that child welfare staff with B.S.W. and M.S.W. degrees were more effective in developing successful permanency plans for children who had been in foster care for more than 2 years than were staff without these degrees.¹³

the education and recruitment of social work students into public child welfare work. The Title IV-E Public Child Welfare Education Program represents a shift in Federally funded education and training of public child welfare workers from an emphasis on traditional inservice training through workshops, conferences, consultation, and staff development,

to an emphasis on university and public agency collaboration and partnership.¹⁴ B.S.W. students report that financial support opportunities (such as loan forgiveness or stipends) and exposure to child welfare practice during their social work education program are important factors in helping them choose child welfare as a future career.¹⁵

For examples of State and Federal initiatives focused on increasing the competency of child welfare personnel, see *Partnerships for Child Welfare* newsletters published by the Council on Social Work Education. Available at: www.cswe.org.

Child welfare training information and materials can be found on the Online Network of Child Welfare Training Resources: www.childwelfaretraining.org.