

The Department of Children and Families

DCF is a state agency that provides many services to help Connecticut's children and youth and their families. The mission of the Department of Children and Families is to protect children, improve child and family well-being, and support and preserve families. These efforts are accomplished by respecting and working within individual cultures and communities in Connecticut, and in partnership with others.

One critical part of our mission is to protect children and youth up to age 18 from abuse and neglect. This pamphlet is intended to help parents understand how protective services work. It will give you an introduction to the role and responsibilities of the Department, and your rights and the rights of your children.

It is important to know, first of all, that state law requires DCF to investigate all reports that meet statutory criteria of suspected child abuse and neglect. It is DCF's legal responsibility to determine if a child has been abused or neglected. An assessment or investigation is the first step. It is also important to know that such an assessment or investigation in and of itself does not necessarily mean abuse or neglect has taken place. Often, DCF's involvement becomes an opportunity to provide support services that can help a family.

DCF's primary goal in any assessment or investigation is to identify any safety concerns that present a risk factor to the children in the household. A Risk Assessment will determine the level of intervention needed, if any, and target services to assist the family.

Q & A for Parents about Protective Services

Why is a DCF Social Worker contacting me?

A social worker is contacting you because the Department received a report that your child may have been or is at risk of being abused or neglected. State law (Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 17a-101) requires DCF to assess or investigate all reports of suspected child abuse or neglect. The social worker will want to talk to you about the report and your child's well-being.

Who reported my child as abused or neglected?

Anyone - a friend, neighbor, family member or stranger - can make a report of suspected abuse or neglect. Any reporter may remain anonymous. However, the reporter's identity may be disclosed under certain limited circumstances. Many professionals, called "mandated reporters," are required by law to report suspected abuse or neglect. Mandated reporters include teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, police officers, mental health counselors, clergy, daycare workers, coaches and others.

Why would a report be made?

Children are reported as possible abuse or neglect for a variety of reasons. Mandated reporters, for example, must contact the Department if they suspect a child:

- has been neglected (which means the child has been abandoned, is being denied proper care and attention, or is being permitted to live under circumstances which harm his or her well-being);
- has non-accidental physical injuries;
- has physical injuries that are inconsistent with the explanation for the injuries;
- has a condition resulting from maltreatment, such as malnutrition, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, emotional maltreatment, cruel punishment or deprivation of necessities like food, clothing, shelter; and
- is placed at imminent risk of serious harm.

The specific allegation in the report is: _____

What happens when DCF receives a report regarding my child?

Each accepted report of suspected abuse or neglect is assigned to a social worker who is responsible for conducting an assessment or investigation. It is the social worker's responsibility to investigate the report and determine if ongoing DCF involvement is required.

Who will the social worker talk to?

First and foremost, the social worker will talk to you, your child(ren) and other family members. It is important to hear from you so the Department can offer help, if needed, to your family. The social worker will contact physicians, teachers, daycare staff, baby-sitters, neighbors, relatives or other people who have first-hand knowledge of you and your child(ren). You may also suggest others who you feel have information concerning your child. In certain situations, the worker may contact people without your consent. The police must be contacted if the report indicates sexual abuse or serious physical abuse or neglect.

What if I don't want to talk to the social worker?

DCF encourages parents to cooperate with the assessment or investigation. This provides parents with the opportunity to tell their story. You can choose not to speak with the social worker, but the Department is still required by law to assess or investigate the report. If DCF believes your child is in immediate danger of serious harm, we will contact the police and, if necessary, file a petition with the court.

Will my children be taken away from me?

The great majority of children served by DCF remain at home with their parents. DCF's goal is to keep families together whenever possible. When support services are needed, your social worker will help arrange them.

There are times when it is determined that the risk to a child's safety requires out-of-home placement. DCF may authorize a child's removal if there is probable cause to believe that the child is at imminent risk of physical harm and that immediate removal is necessary to ensure the child's safety. An emergency administrative removal is called a 96-hour hold. The parent will receive in writing the reason for the Department's actions and the legal basis for the removal. Within 96 hours after the removal, if it is necessary to maintain the child in out-of-home placement, the Department must seek an Order of Temporary Custody (OTC) from the Court. If that is the case, you will be entitled to a Court hearing within 10 days and have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, the

court will appoint one for you. Your child(ren) will be represented by an attorney as well.

When a child must be placed in out-of-home care, DCF's goal is his or her safe return as soon as the family situation is determined to be stable and safe.

What happens after an investigation or assessment?

If DCF finds that your child has not been abused or neglected, the report is "unsubstantiated." This means that there is insufficient evidence to prove that your child was, in fact, abused or neglected. Many "unsubstantiated" cases are immediately closed. However, DCF may determine that there are risk factors present that warrant keeping the case open to provide services to you and your family.

If DCF finds that your child has been abused or neglected, the report is "substantiated," and your case will most likely remain open with DCF for services. Your social worker will then work with you to develop what's called a *case plan*. The social worker will discuss the services you can receive and how DCF will work with you to improve your family's situation.

Can I disagree with the Department's finding?

Yes. If you disagree with a finding of substantiated abuse or neglect, you may:

- Request in writing a review of the finding addressed to the Area Office Director of the office handling your case. If you disagree with the results of the review, you can request an administrative hearing.
- You can also send a written statement with the facts you feel are important and ask that your statement be added to your file.

Other Sources of Help...

INFOLINE - a free, telephone information and referral service that can put parents in touch with all kinds of helpful programs and services in the community. INFOLINE can often help in a crisis, whether it is domestic violence, a runaway teenager, a mental health emergency or another problem. **Call INFOLINE at 211.**

PARENTS ANONYMOUS - a self-help group for parents who feel they may take their anger out on their children. Parents Anonymous groups meet regularly in many Connecticut communities to give parents support and help in handling problems. Meetings are confidential and members may remain anonymous. To locate a Parents Anonymous group near you, **call INFOLINE at 211.**

What kind of help can DCF give my family?

The Department of Children and Families provides and funds a wide range of community-based services. Your social worker will explain these and other services available in your community. They may include:

- Individual and Family Therapy
- Intensive Family Preservation Services
- Parent Education and Family Support Centers
- Parent Aide
- Parenting Classes
- Sexual Abuse Treatment
- Substance Abuse Services
- Children's Mental Health Services
- Child Care Subsidy through the Care for Kids Program
- Emergency shelter

If you and the social worker cannot agree on a case plan, you can:

- Participate in case planning conferences. These reviews are held within 45 days of your case being opened for services or your child(ren) going into placement.
- Participate in administrative case reviews of the case plan. These reviews are held every six months. Your social worker will notify you when an administrative case review is scheduled or you may request one at any time.
- Request a case plan hearing to contest the Department's plan and/or the provision of services. A hearing officer will hear both sides and issue a written decision on the appropriateness of the case plan in meeting the needs of the child(ren). You may choose to be represented by an attorney at your own expense. A case plan hearing may be requested by writing to the Commissioner of Children and Families at 505 Hudson Street, Hartford, CT 06106. Your written request must state the specific issues with which you disagree.
- If you are not satisfied after all administrative remedies are provided by the Department, you may have the right to bring an appeal to the Superior Court.

What other rights do I have as a parent?

- You have the right to be treated with respect and dignity.
- You have the right to have an interpreter present to assist you to understand all of the proceedings in your case.

- You have the right to request that all of the documents related to your case be translated into your primary language.
- You have the right to request and receive thorough and understandable answers to any questions you may have about the Department's involvement with your family.
- You have the right to have any person of your choosing (such as friend, relative or clergy person) present during meetings with DCF, unless a court order forbids the involvement of that person.
- You have the right to request and receive information contained in the Department's records about the investigation and findings concerning you and your child(ren). Access to the identity of the person(s) who reported suspected abuse or neglect may be restricted.
- You have the right to privacy. Records regarding you and your family will not be publicly released by the Department without your permission unless authorized by law. However, information may be disclosed to other agencies for investigation, treatment or other purposes as permitted by law.
- You have the right to have information about your case expunged under certain circumstances.
- You have the right to contact the DCF Ombudsman's Office for assistance in resolving any dispute you may have with DCF staff, providers or foster parents. The Ombudsman can be reached from 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. Monday thru Friday at (860) 550-6301.

How can I contact the Department of Children and Families?

Our Area Offices are open from 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. weekdays. You can find Area Office telephone numbers and other information on our website www.state.ct.us/dcf. After 5:00 P.M. and on weekends and holidays, you may call the **DCF HOTLINE** at **1-800-842-2288**.



In accordance with Connecticut law, you have the following rights regarding your child _____ :

You are not required to permit a DCF employee to enter your residence.

You are not required to speak with a DCF employee.

You are entitled to seek the advice of an attorney and to have that attorney present when a DCF employee questions you.

Any statement you or your family members make to a DCF employee may be used against you in court or administrative proceedings.

A DCF social worker is not an attorney and cannot provide you with legal advice.

You are not required to sign any document presented to you by a DCF employee and you are entitled to have your attorney review any document before you sign it. This includes, for example, a release of claims or a service agreement.

Please be advised that choosing not to communicate with a DCF employee may have serious consequences, which may include DCF filing a petition to remove your child from your home. It is, therefore, in your best interests to either speak with the DCF employee or immediately seek the advice of an attorney.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF RECEIPT

The Department of Children and Families is required by Connecticut law to give you written notice of your legal rights. These rights are listed on the front panel of this brochure under the DCF logo.

Under the same laws, the social worker who is presenting you with this brochure must request that you sign and date a copy of the notice so there is evidence that you have received it. Your signature **DOES NOT** mean that you are giving up any rights or that you agree with anything. It simply indicates that you were provided with written notice of your rights.

If you refuse to sign and date the notice, the social worker will write on the notice that you have refused. The social worker will sign his or her name and the date and provide you with a copy.

I HAVE RECEIVED A WRITTEN NOTICE LISTING MY RIGHTS.

_____ Print Name _____ Print Name

_____ Signature of Parent or Guardian _____ Signature of Parent or Guardian

_____ Date _____ Date

_____ refused to sign the notice of rights presented to him/her on _____ (date)

_____ Print Name _____ Social Worker