

GLOSSARY



CHILD WELFARE TERMS

SOURCE: CHILD WELFARE INFORMATION GATEWAY

Many child welfare terms are subject to interpretation. The [Child Welfare Information Gateway Glossary](#) identifies commonly held definitions for terms that can be found on the [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#) website or in products and materials developed by external entities (e.g., Federal or State Agencies or other reliable organizations).

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Abandonment: A situation in which the child has been left by the parent(s), the parent's identity or whereabouts are unknown, the child suffers serious harm, as a result of his/her desertion, or the parent has failed to maintain contact with the child or to provide reasonable support for a specified period of time.

Alternative Response: A responsive approach that is usually applied in low and moderate-risk cases that does not usually require a formal determination or substantiation of child abuse or neglect or the entry of names into a central registry. (See differential response.)

Caregiver: One who provides for the physical, emotional, and social needs of a dependent person. The term most often applies to parents or parent surrogates, child care and nursery workers, health-care specialists, and relatives caring for children, elderly, or ill family members.

Child Abuse and Neglect: Defined by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) as, at a minimum, any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or trafficking, or an act or failure to act that presents an imminent risk of serious harm. While CAPTA sets federal minimum standards for states that accept CAPTA funding, each state provides its own definitions of maltreatment within civil and criminal statutes. (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act)

Child Custody (In Child Welfare): A court's determination of which parent, relative, or other adult should have physical and/or legal control and responsibility for a child who is younger than age 18. Child custody can be decided by a local court if a child, relative, close friend, or state agency questions whether the parents are unfit, absent, dead, incarcerated, or dangerous to the child's well-being. In such cases, custody can be awarded to a grandparent or other relative, a foster parent, a state agency, or other organization or institution. There is a difference between physical custody, which designates where the child will actually live, and legal custody, which gives the custodial person(s) the right to make decisions for the child's welfare. Whoever has legal custody can enroll the child in school, give permission for medical care, and give other legal consents. (Adapted from The People's Law Dictionary)

Child Protective Services (CPS): The social services agency designated (in most States) to receive reports, conduct investigations and assessments, and provide intervention and treatment services to children and families in which child maltreatment has occurred. Frequently, this agency is located within larger public social service agencies, such as departments of social services

Cross-Reporting: Information sharing among professional entities ([Cross-Reporting Among Agencies that Respond to Child Abuse and Neglect](#))

Differential Response: A way of structuring child protective services to allow for more flexibility in how it responds to low- and moderate-risk cases and better meet the needs of families. In differential response systems, screened-in reports are assigned to one of two (or more) tracks based on factors such as the type and severity of the maltreatment, the number and sources of previous reports, and the willingness of a family to participate in services. (See [alternative response](#).)

Dual-System Served/Crossover Youth: Youth who are involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. These youth are also sometimes referred to as joint-case or multisystem-involved youth. (Adapted from [Center for Juvenile Justice Reform & Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps](#))

Fictive Kin: People not related by birth or marriage who have an emotionally significant relationship with an individual.

Guardianship: A judicially created relationship between a child and caretaker that is intended to be permanent and self-sustaining as evidenced by the transfer to the caretaker of the following parental rights with respect to the child: protection, education, care and control of the person, custody of the person, and decision-making. (Adapted from the [Code of Federal Regulations](#))

Human-Trafficking: A crime involving the exploitation of someone for the purposes of compelled labor or a commercial sex act through the use of force, fraud, or coercion. Exploitation of a minor for commercial sex is human trafficking, regardless of whether any form of force, fraud, or coercion was used. ([Human Trafficking Hotline](#))

Informal Kinship Care: A kinship care arrangement that occurs outside the child welfare system. These informal arrangements are often made by family members without the involvement of the child welfare or juvenile court systems and are sometimes referred to as either informal or private kinship care.

Investigation: A type of child protective services' response that involves the gathering of objective information to determine whether a child was maltreated, or is at risk of maltreatment, and establishes if an intervention is needed. It generally includes face-to-face contact with the alleged victim and results in a disposition as to whether or not the alleged maltreatment occurred. ([Child Maltreatment reports](#))

Investigation Response: Response involving the collection of forensic evidence and formal determination (substantiation decision) of whether child maltreatment has occurred or if the child is at risk of abuse or neglect. In child protection systems utilizing differential response, investigation response is generally used for reports of maltreatment that occur in institutions, the most severe types of maltreatment (e.g., serious physical harm, sexual abuse), and those that may involve the legal or judicial systems.

Kinship Foster Care: An arrangement that can occur when a public child welfare agency has legal custody and places a child with relatives or kin in a foster care arrangement. This type of arrangement is often referred to as either “formal” or “public” kinship care. Kinship foster homes may be either licensed or unlicensed, depending on State licensing requirements and family preferences.

Legal Guardian: An adult to whom the court has given parental responsibility and authority for a child. Appointment as guardian requires the filing of a petition and approval by the court and can be done without terminating the parental rights of the child's parents.

Mandated Reporter: A professional who is required by State statutes to report suspected child abuse and neglect to the proper authorities (usually child protective services or law enforcement agencies). Mandated reporters typically include educators and other school personnel, health care and mental health professionals, social workers, child-care providers, and law enforcement.

Ombudsman (in child welfare): A Government official who is responsible for addressing and resolving citizens’ complaints. Although the purpose, responsibilities, and duties vary by State, an ombudsmen or ombudsperson, also known in some jurisdictions as a child advocate, provides oversight of children’s services. Ombudsman offices may be instituted by legislation, executive order, or by a child welfare agency. A children’s ombudsman can be an independent office or it may be created within the child welfare agency. (Adapted from the National Conference of State Legislatures)

Physical Abuse: Generally defined as "any nonaccidental physical injury to the child" and can include striking, kicking, burning, or biting the child, or any action that results in a physical impairment of the child. In approximately 38 States and certain territories, the definition of abuse also includes acts or circumstances that threaten the child with harm or create a substantial risk of harm to the child's health or welfare.

Physical Neglect: Failure to provide for a child's basic survival needs, such as nutrition, clothing, shelter, hygiene, and medical care. Physical neglect may also involve inadequate supervision of a child and other forms of reckless disregard of the child's safety and welfare.

Psychological Maltreatment: A pattern of caregiver behaviors that negatively affect the child's cognitive, social, emotional, and/or physical development. These include acts of omission (ignoring need for social interactions) or commission (spurning, terrorizing). They may be verbal or nonverbal, active or passive, and with or without intent to harm. (Adapted from American Academy of Pediatrics)

Residential Services: Services that are provided within a residential treatment setting to support children, youth, or adults that struggle with psychological, behavioral, and/or substance use issues and require supportive services or treatment that are not available in a less secure or less restrictive environment. Time-limited services may include around-the-clock supervision and a variety of counseling, education, and therapy.

Residential Treatment Center: A time-limited, interdisciplinary, and therapeutic structured program with community linkages, provided through coordinated and specialized services and interventions. RTCs provide highly customized care to individuals following a community-based placement or more intensive intervention, with the aim of moving individuals toward a stable, less intensive level of care or independence. (Office of Refugee Resettlement)

Residential Treatment Facility: Structured, 24-hour facility that provides a range of therapeutic, educational, recreational, and support services for children by a professional, interdisciplinary team.

Respite Care Services: Short-term child care services intended for parents and other caregivers that offer temporary relief, improve family stability, and reduce the risk of abuse or neglect. Respite can be planned or offered during emergencies or times of crisis.

Short Term Guardianship: A type of guardianship granted to an individual who accepts care and custody of a minor for a defined amount of time, usually for one year or less, which authorizes him/her to exercise the full decision-making rights of a guardian. These rights include enrolling the child in school, allowing for participation in school and community activities, and consenting to the provision of medical care and treatment.

State Child Welfare Agency: Agency mandated to investigate and respond to reports of child abuse and neglect and intervene as needed to protect the children, in accordance with State laws. An agency is responsible for providing a range of services for children and families, including family preservation, child protection, out-of-home care, family reunification, and permanency planning.

Substantiated: An investigation disposition concluding that the allegation of child maltreatment or risk of maltreatment was supported by State law or policy, i.e., that credible evidence exists that child abuse or neglect has occurred. (Children's Bureau)

Unsubstantiated (Not Substantiated): An investigation disposition that determines that there is not sufficient or credible evidence under State law or policy to conclude that the child has been maltreated or is at serious risk of maltreatment. (Children's Bureau)