



Understanding California's Child Welfare System: Key Concepts & Definitions

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What is the child welfare system?

The child welfare system (CWS) is a network of government and community services designed to ensure the safety and protection of children.

Respond

Investigate reports of child abuse and neglect.



Prevent

Provide upstream services that prevent foster care entry.

Support

Provide in- and out-of-home services to address child safety concerns. Help children leave foster care to family reunification, guardianship, or adoption.

Defining child abuse & neglect

Failure to meet a child's basic physical and emotional needs, although financially able to do so.

Neglect

Acts or omissions that result in psychological or emotional harm as evidenced by anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or aggression.

Emotional abuse

Any nonaccidental behavior toward a child that causes or could cause physical injury or impairment.

Physical abuse

Any involvement of a child in sexual activities for gratification or financial gain.

Sexual abuse

Continuum of child welfare involvement



“Evaluate out”



Prevention services

Prevention services are designed to prevent foster care placement.

- May be administered by child welfare agencies or community-based organizations
- Family First Prevention Services Act (2018) has increased focus on prevention

Allegation

An allegation is a report of suspected child abuse or neglect.

- Often made through child protection hotlines
- The worker assesses the allegation and decides to screen in the report or “evaluate out”

Continuum of child welfare involvement



Investigation

Caseworker investigates screened-in allegations. Evidence is used to make a disposition: Unfounded, inconclusive, or substantiated.



In-home services

Designed to stabilize families in cases where children can safely remain at home.

Continuum of child welfare involvement



Foster care

Children who cannot safely remain at home are placed in out-of-home care.

- Kinship care, non-relative foster care, congregate care, or other settings
- Extended foster care provides transitional support for young adults (ages 18-21)



Exit

Children can exit foster care in several ways:

- Family reunification
- Guardianship
- Adoption
- Emancipation
- Aging out
- Incarceration
- Hospitalization
- Running away

Child Welfare in California

- State-supervised, county-administered child welfare system
- Counties
 - Tailor service delivery to local communities
 - Collaborate with community-based organizations
- State
 - County oversight and compliance (e.g., Assembly Bill 636)
 - Statewide policy and priority setting

