

Navigating Child Welfare: Support for Refugee and Newcomer Families

A TOOLKIT FOR PROVIDERS WORKING WITH
REFUGEE AND NEWCOMER FAMILIES

Introduction

This toolkit is intended for resettlement and other refugee-serving staff who work with newcomer children and youth in the United States. Throughout the toolkit, we use the terms “refugee and newcomer children and youth” to refer to various [ORR eligible populations](#), including refugees, asylees, Cuban and Haitian entrants, Amerasians, Afghan and Iraqi Special Immigrant visa holders, survivors of trafficking, Afghan and Ukrainian humanitarian parolees, and others.

The purpose of this toolkit is to enhance refugee-serving providers’ understanding of the role of child welfare and how to partner with child welfare to best support refugee and newcomer families. For staff looking for ready-to-use language when communicating with families about child welfare topics, see [Appendix III: Staff Script Library](#).

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SECTION 1 What is Child Welfare?

Child welfare is a public system in the U.S. designed to keep children safe, strengthen families, and support child well-being. It is a continuum of services that includes prevention, child protective services (CPS), foster care, and permanency services (reunification, kinship care, and adoption).

Child welfare programs are funded through the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Each state or locality has a public child welfare agency responsible for receiving and investigating reports of child abuse and neglect. While responding to safety concerns is part of the child welfare system, child welfare also includes prevention, voluntary services, and community-based supports that help families before a crisis occurs.

The Primary Goals of Child Welfare



Safety

Protecting children from abuse and neglect, and ensuring they are in a safe, stable environment.



Permanency

Helping children achieve long-term family stability through reunification, adoption, or kinship care.



Well-being

Providing services and support to strengthen families, help children thrive physically, emotionally, and developmentally, protect children from harm, and support families to care for their children safely.



What Child Welfare Is – and Is Not



Child welfare IS

Child welfare is a system focused on child safety and family well-being: The primary goal of child welfare is to protect children from harm while supporting families to care for their children safely.

Child welfare is a continuum of services and supports: This can include prevention services, in-home supports, parenting programs, mental health services, substance use treatment, kinship support, and temporary out-of-home care when needed.

Child welfare is a system that prioritizes keeping families together: When it is safe to do so, child welfare works to keep children with their parents or extended family members and to reunify families if separation occurs.

Child welfare is a partner to families and community providers: Child welfare agencies often collaborate with schools, healthcare providers, resettlement providers, community organizations, and faith-based groups.

Child welfare is a system governed by laws and policies: Child welfare agencies must follow federal, state, and local laws that guide how decisions are made, how families' rights are protected, and how children are cared for.



Child welfare IS NOT

Child welfare is not automatically punitive or focused on “taking children away”: Most families involved with child welfare do not lose custody of their children. Removal is a last resort and should only happen when there is serious and immediate safety risk.

Child welfare is not part of immigration enforcement: Child welfare agencies' role does not include enforcing immigration laws. Their role is child safety and family support, regardless of immigration status.

Child welfare is not only Child Protective Services (CPS): CPS investigations are just one part of the system. Many child welfare services are voluntary and preventive, meaning families can receive help without an investigation.

Child welfare is not part of the criminal justice system: Child welfare is a civil system, not a criminal one. Its purpose is protection and support, not punishment.



Key Child Welfare Terms

Prevention Services

Supports and services offered to families to reduce stress, decrease risk, and prevent child abuse or neglect – before CPS involvement is needed.

Child Protective Services (CPS)

The part of the child welfare system that responds to reports of child abuse or neglect.

Investigation/Assessment

The process used to evaluate reports of child abuse and neglect, assess safety concerns, and determine what supports are needed.

In-Home Services

Services provided to address risk factors or concerns of abuse or neglect while children remain safely at home.

Foster Care

Temporary out-of-home care when children cannot safely remain at home.

Kinship Care

Services provided to address risk factors or concerns of abuse or neglect while children remain safely at home.

Reunification

Services provided to address risk factors or concerns of abuse or neglect while children remain safely at home.

For a full glossary, please refer to [Appendix I](#).

SECTION 2 Child Abuse and Neglect Definitions and Mandatory Reporting

In the United States, the child welfare system is responsible for responding to concerns about child abuse and neglect. Understanding how to identify and respond to child safety concerns helps refugee-serving providers act with care, cultural humility, and a trauma-informed approach.

Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect

The definitions in this section are federal definitions, drawn from the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA, reauthorized in 2010), which defines child abuse and neglect as: “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” to a child.

Note that specific definitions and reporting requirements for child abuse and neglect are governed by state law and vary from state to state. Visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway's [State Statutes Search](#) for more information.

Type	Definition
Physical Abuse	Non-accidental injury by a caregiver, such as beating, shaking, burning, biting, kicking, punching, or throwing a child.
Sexual Abuse	Involvement of a child in sexual activity for the benefit of an adult, including touching and non-touching behaviors.
Emotional Abuse	Chronic, non-physical behaviors by a caregiver, such as shaming, belittling, threatening, or withholding affection, that cause serious emotional harm to a child (harm may be evidenced by changes in the child's behavior, emotional responses, and cognition).
Neglect	A caregiver's failure to meet a child's basic physical, emotional, educational, or medical needs, to the degree that a child's health and safety are harmed or threatened.
Child Trafficking	Use of a child for exploitation, forced labor (labor trafficking), or any commercial sex act (sex trafficking).
Domestic Violence Exposure*	When a child witnesses or is aware of violence between caregivers or household members, causing or risking harm to the child.
Caregiver Substance Use*	When a caregiver's substance use results in an inability to provide proper care, supervision, or protection for a child

*Definitions vary by state.

Mandated Reporters

Many refugee-serving providers are mandated reporters, meaning they are legally required to report reasonable suspicions of child abuse or neglect to the appropriate state or local authority. Below are some key points for mandated reporters:

- Reporting timelines vary by state, but most states require mandated reporters to make a report immediately, or within 24 hours, to the state or local Child Protective Services (CPS) when they have reasonable cause to suspect that a child has been abused, neglected, or is in imminent danger of harm. They do not have the burden of providing proof that abuse or neglect has occurred.

- Because mandated reporting requirements and procedures vary by state, it is important to familiarize yourself with [your state's specific reporting requirements](#) to ensure you are meeting your legal obligations.
- It's important to explain your role as a mandated reporter and the limits to confidentiality at the beginning of services and throughout your time working with the child and family. This allows children and families to make informed decisions about what information they choose to share. For guidance on explaining mandated reporting to clients, see [Switchboard's Mandatory Reporting Scripts and Guidance](#).



Supporting Conversations About Abuse and Neglect with Newcomer Children

- Provide a safe space for the child to talk, without forcing them to share details or information they don't feel comfortable disclosing yet.
- Reassure the child with active listening and validation.

Sample Language:

"I believe you. Thank you for sharing that with me."

- Use open-ended, non-judgmental questions.
- Focus on safety and [discuss a safety plan](#) with the child. Consider topics such as coping strategies, safe places, trusted adults, and crisis/emergency numbers when discussing the child's safety plan.
- Do not make promises you cannot keep. Remind the child of your role as a mandated reporter and the limits to confidentiality. Let the child know that you will need to make a report to CPS to ensure their safety and explain [what to expect with Child Protective Services investigations](#).

Children communicate, understand, and process difficult experiences in ways that are shaped by their age and stage of development. When a refugee or newcomer child discloses abuse or neglect, providers should adapt their approach based on the child's developmental level. This is especially important when working with children who have experienced prior trauma, language barriers, or cultural norms that discourage disclosure to adults outside their family or community.

The table on the following page provides guidance on how to adapt your approach based on the child's age and developmental stage:

Age Group	What to Keep in Mind	How to Adapt Your Approach	Sample Language
Early Childhood (Ages 0-5) 	Young children may not have the words to disclose abuse or neglect; however, they may express distress through behavior, play, or physical symptoms. It's important to remember that young children may not understand that what occurred was wrong.	Use simple, concrete language. Prioritize the child's comfort and physical safety. Avoid asking direct or leading questions, and instead, observe and reflect. Let the child set the pace of the conversation. Follow your organization's policies and applicable reporting requirements and avoid conducting your own investigation.	<i>"I can see something is bothering you. You don't have to tell me everything right now. I'm just going to sit with you."</i>
Middle Childhood (Ages 6-12) 	Children in this age range may experience shame, confusion, or loyalty conflicts, particularly if the person who harmed them is a caregiver or family member. They may fear getting someone in trouble or worry about what will happen to their family.	Reassure the child clearly that what happened was not their fault. Use open-ended, non-leading questions. Provide simple, honest explanations of what will happen next. Allow the child to ask questions and take time to answer them. Acknowledge their feelings without minimizing their concerns.	<i>"What happened to you is not your fault. I'm really glad you told me. My job is to help keep you safe, and I'm going to help you understand what happens next."</i>
Adolescents (Ages 13-17) 	Teenagers place high value on privacy, autonomy, and being taken seriously. They may minimize what occurred, recant their disclosure, or refuse to engage if they feel judged or dismissed. For refugee and newcomer youth, fear of family separation, deportation, or community judgment may make disclosure especially difficult.	Engage youth as partners, not just subjects. Be direct and honest about confidentiality and its limited. Avoid being dismissive or rushing the conversation. Involve them meaningfully in safety planning. Explore what support looks like to them, and respect their perspectives, even when they differ from your own assessment.	<i>"I want to be honest with you about what I can and can't keep private. If I'm worried about safety, I may need to share what you've told me with people whose job is to help keep children safe. I'll explain each step to you, and I want to hear your thoughts and answer any questions you have. Your opinion matters."</i>

Additional Considerations for Refugee and Newcomer Children

Refugee and newcomer children bring a range of experiences that may affect how they communicate and respond during a disclosure conversation. **Keep in mind the following:**

- Children who have experienced trauma, displacement, or violence prior to arriving in the U.S. may be more guarded or may have already learned to minimize what has happened to them as a survival strategy.
- Language barriers can significantly limit a child's ability to express what they have experienced. Always ensure a professional interpreter in the child's preferred language is present; never rely on a family member or peer to interpret during a disclosure conversation.
- In some cultural contexts, children are taught not to speak to outside authority figures about family matters. You can acknowledge and validate these norms while gently creating space for the child to share what they are comfortable sharing.
- Children may fear that disclosing will result in consequences for their family, including involvement with government agencies, immigration enforcement, or family separation. Provide clear, age-appropriate reassurance about what will happen next, and remind them that child welfare agencies are separate from immigration enforcement.
- Some children may have had prior negative experiences with government systems, law enforcement, or authority figures in their countries of origin. Building trust through consistent, calm, and transparent engagement is essential before a child feels safe enough to disclose abuse or neglect.

SECTION 3 Making a CPS Report

When to Call CPS

Contact CPS if you have reasonable cause to believe a child may be experiencing:



- Serious physical harm or risk of harm, including trafficking
- Sexual abuse or exploitation
- Severe neglect that puts the child's health or safety at risk
- A situation where a caregiver is unable or unwilling to keep a child safe

Always follow state laws and your agency's guidelines for reporting child abuse and neglect, and staff the case with your supervisor prior to reporting. Visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway's [State Statutes Search](#) and [State Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Numbers](#) for more state-specific information.

Talking with Families Before Calling CPS

When there is no immediate danger, providers should inform the family before making a CPS report to help preserve trust and avoid confusion. Use calm, respectful language and explain that the report is meant to help the family get support and keep children safe, not to punish the family. Focus on what will happen next, answer questions honestly, and let families know they can continue reaching out to you for support.

Sample Language:

"I want to talk with you about something important. I am concerned about your child's safety, and my role as a mandated reporter requires me to ask for extra support in situations like this. This does not mean you are a bad parent. My goal is to help keep your child safe and your family supported."

Making a CPS Call

Reference the [State Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Numbers](#) to know where and how to make a CPS report within a specific state. Some states have a statewide hotline, while others have county-specific numbers to report child abuse and neglect. Providers can also call the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-422-4453) to make a CPS report. Online reporting is an option in some states and may be required in addition to a phone call report, depending on the state.

 Information to Include	 What NOT to Include
• Basic information of those involved: names, ages, address, relationships • Description of the suspected abuse or neglect • Statements by the child or others • Your contact information • The family's language and interpretation needs • Relevant contextual information, such as recent arrival to the U.S., limited familiarity with U.S. systems, abuse or trauma history impacting current safety, etc. • The family's existing supports and strengths	• Personal opinions • The family's immigration records or status • Other case records, unless explicitly authorized by the family • Medical or mental health information unrelated to the safety concern

Use Specific, Factual Language When Making a CPS Report

Instead of:



"The family doesn't supervise their children appropriately"

Say:



"The child, age 4, was left alone in the apartment for approximately one hour on two occasions."

Supporting Families After a CPS Report

Help families understand what to expect by explaining the following:

- CPS reviews each report to determine whether it meets the criteria for a response.
- Some reports lead to further assessment or investigation if abuse or neglect are identified, but not all reports lead to an investigation. Some result in closing the report, or offering voluntary services (counseling, childcare, food banks, etc.).

See [Section 4](#) of this toolkit for more resources and strategies for talking with families about the child welfare system.

Refugee-serving providers can support families involved in the child welfare system by:

- Helping them understand the process
- Explaining received letters, phone calls, and CPS visits
- Confirming that interpretation is being provided by CPS, or offering to support with arranging interpretation when needed and appropriate
- Accompanying families to meetings when appropriate
- Reinforcing the family's strengths and rights
- Offering concrete referrals and/or supports, such as housing, food, childcare, mental health services, etc.
- Coordinating and liaising with child welfare (find more information on effective collaboration in Section 5 of this toolkit)

Supporting Staff Involved in CPS Reporting

Making CPS reports and supporting families through child welfare involvement can be emotionally difficult. Refugee-serving organizations can support staff by:

- Developing clear internal protocols for CPS reporting and decision-making
- Providing regular training on mandated reporting and cultural humility
- Using team consultation before calling CPS, when possible, to support decision-making and plan for addressing the family's needs
- Debriefing with staff after difficult disclosures and CPS reports

Assessing Gray Areas: The Pause and Assess Approach

In situations where there is no clear abuse or neglect, consult your supervisor and explore the following questions to further assess the concerns:

- What is the specific safety concern? Is the child in immediate danger?
- Have we explored other support options that could address this concern?
- Are we interpreting this situation through a culturally informed lens?
- Have we used appropriate language interpretation and confirmed the family's understanding?

This approach helps prevent unnecessary system involvement and builds trust with families.

Situations that Require Further Support, But May Not Require a CPS Call

- Poverty or lack of resources (housing, food, childcare)
- Different cultural parenting practices that do not endanger a child
- Language barriers or misunderstanding of U.S. systems
- Adjustment stress, trauma symptoms, or family conflict without a safety risk
- Missed medical appointments or delayed school enrollment due to resettlement challenges



Case Examples: Pause and Assess Approach

The following case examples illustrate situations where there may be grey areas and a provider may use a **pause and assess approach** before immediately reporting to CPS.

EXAMPLE 1

A 4-year-old missed two follow-up medical appointments after a recent surgery. The caregiver cites work demands, younger children at home, and transportation challenges as barriers to attending the appointments. The caregiver commits to rescheduling the appointment.

Questions for Further Assessment

1. Does the caregiver understand the importance of the follow-up appointments and the potential risks to the child's health if they are missed?
2. Is the child showing any immediate signs of medical distress, pain, or changes in condition since the surgery?
3. What specific barriers are preventing the family from attending the appointments, and have concrete supports been offered to address the barriers?
4. After receiving education and support to address the barriers, does the caregiver take active steps to reschedule and attend the appointment?

Supports to Mitigate the Concerns, Before Considering a CPS Report

- Education on the surgery discharge plan and the importance of follow-up medical care, including potential consequences if the caregiver does not follow through (risks to the child's health, concerns of medical neglect)
 - Be sure to provide information/education in the caregiver's preferred language, allowing time for questions and to check the caregiver's understanding
- Transportation assistance (Medicaid non-emergency medical transport, community van services, or other options)
- Help with scheduling and appointment reminders
- Childcare support for younger children during appointments
- Connection to a community health worker or patient navigator
- Support reaching out to the caregiver's employer for information/guidance on medical leave rights

EXAMPLE 2

A 15-year-old has missed two weeks of school. Their aunt, the primary caregiver, explains that her partner was injured in a car accident and can no longer work. The youth is staying home to provide care for a younger sibling while their aunt works.

Questions for Further Assessment

1. Is the youth staying home voluntarily, or are they being required to do so by the caregiver? What would happen if the youth decided to go to school instead of staying home to care for their sibling?
2. Is the caregiver aware of compulsory school attendance laws in their state and the potential consequences of the youth's continued absences?
3. Has the school been notified of the situation, and is a school social worker or attendance counselor involved?
4. What is the caregiver's long-term plan for the younger sibling's childcare? Is she actively working on a different solution? What are the barriers?
5. After receiving education and support to address the barriers, does the caregiver take active steps to return the youth to school?

Supports to Mitigate the Concerns, Before Considering a CPS Report

- Education on compulsory school attendance laws and the importance of the youth attending school, including potential consequences if the caregiver does not follow through (impacts on the child's education, concerns of educational neglect)
 - Be sure to provide information/education in the caregiver's preferred language, allowing time for questions and to check the caregiver's understanding
- Affordable childcare options/resources for the younger sibling so the youth can return to school
- Connection to financial assistance, public benefits, or emergency funds for the family
- Connection to support for insurance claims and medical care for the caregiver's partner
- Coordination with the school social worker or attendance counselor to develop a re-entry plan

Reflection: In both examples above, the family is under significant stress and lacking the resources to meet their child's needs. The family may also not have a clear understanding of laws, norms, or systems in the U.S. Providing education and connecting the family to concrete supports to overcome any barriers may resolve the concerns without needing to involve CPS. However, if a caregiver continues to not take action to address the concerns despite the education, support, and resources provided, a CPS report may be warranted for medical or educational neglect.

Six Principles for Communicating with Newcomer Families about Child Welfare

1. Start With Purpose, Not Process

Provide information about why the child welfare system exists before discussing CPS investigations, mandated reporting, or removal.

Sample Language:

"In the U.S., there is a system whose job is to help keep children safe and support families when things feel overwhelming. The goal is to help families, not judge or punish them."

2. Promote Understanding of Child Welfare as a Support System

Frame child welfare as a system that can provide support and protection for families who may be facing challenges.

Sample Language:

"Many families receive help from child welfare without any investigation. Sometimes parents need support to keep their children safe, and that's okay."



3. Use Visuals and Plain Language

Use plain-language explanations of child welfare, using interpretation if needed. Align messaging within your organization so families receive consistent information from staff. Avoid jargon and acronyms when communicating with families and confirm understanding by having families repeat back the information in their own words.

4. Acknowledge and Validate Fears and Concerns, While Providing Clarity on Harmful Misinformation

Validate concerns while addressing potential misinformation. Avoid phrases that may increase fear such as “CPS may take your kids away.” If there are concerns about immigration, reinforce that the child welfare system is separate from immigration enforcement and is required to support all children regardless of immigration status.

Sample Language:

"It makes sense to feel worried when you hear about government systems like child welfare. In the U.S., removing a child is rare and should only happen when there is immediate danger. Most of the time, the focus is on helping families stay together."

5. Be Transparent with Families

Explaining roles and responsibilities upfront can help avoid surprises for families. Providers who are mandated reporters should communicate what that means at the beginning of services and provide regular reminders while working with families.

6. Reinforce Families' Rights During Child Welfare Involvement

Families may feel unsure of what to expect during CPS investigations or other child welfare involvement. You can help by reminding families that they have the right to ask questions, seek clarification, and understand each step of the process. Encouraging open communication can help newcomer families feel more informed, empowered, and supported.

Sample Language:

"If something is unclear, it is okay to ask for more information or clarification."

Language to Use and Avoid When Communicating with Newcomer Families about Child Welfare

 Avoid Saying	 Suggested Language to Use Instead
"CPS will investigate you."	"A child welfare worker may check in to understand what support is needed."
"Mandated reporters" (without explanation or context)	"Some professionals are required to report concerns when they are worried about a child's safety."
"They could take your children away."	"While children may be removed in extreme circumstances, the ultimate goal is to help families stay together when it is safe to do so."
"You must cooperate with child welfare."	"You and your children have rights, and you can ask questions and request the support you need."

SECTION 5 Effective Collaboration Between Child Welfare and Refugee-Serving Providers

Refugee and newcomer families are often navigating language barriers, ongoing cultural adjustment, and trauma, while interacting with multiple systems simultaneously, such as resettlement providers, schools, healthcare, legal services, and, in some cases, child welfare. Strong collaboration between child welfare and refugee-serving providers can ensure support for refugee and newcomer families. Coordinated support between providers should be preventative, rather than solely responsive, and can help to reduce harm, prevent unnecessary CPS involvement, and promote child safety and family stability.

Collaboration works best when agencies view each other as partners with complementary roles, not as siloed or competing systems. Both child welfare and refugee-serving providers share responsibility for:

- Keeping children safe
- Strengthening families
- Preventing crises before they escalate
- Ensuring services are accessible, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed
- Promoting family stability and long-term well-being

Understanding One Another's Roles

Refugee-serving providers and child welfare professionals each bring distinct expertise and can work together to support newcomer children and families through coordinated services, communication, and resource connection.

Refugee-Serving Providers Bring:

- Trusting relationships with families
- Cultural and linguistic expertise
- Knowledge of common stressors and trauma impacting refugee families
- Resources and practices to support cultural and community orientation
- Knowledge of the resettlement process
- Case management and service coordination
- Connections to housing, employment, education, and other community supports
- Ability to explain systems and processes to families in plain language

Child Welfare Agencies Bring:

- Legal responsibility for protecting children's safety and rights
- Access to prevention, in-home, and family support services
- Case management and service coordination
- Knowledge and understanding of the court process, when required

Best Practices for Refugee-Serving Providers When Coordinating with Child Welfare

1. Prioritize Prevention

- Whenever possible, agencies should work together before safety concerns escalate
- Consider inviting child welfare agencies to your existing meeting spaces, like quarterly consultations or other community-wide gatherings, to share information about the refugee community and your agency's services, and build relationships and referral pathways proactively
- Refer families to voluntary prevention services early to help address basic needs, when needed and appropriate

2. Ensure Language Access

- For families involved with child welfare, confirm the family's preferred language and share that information with child welfare

- Partner with child welfare to ensure they offer and use professional interpretation throughout services with the family
- Ensure families receive translated materials from child welfare when available
- Advocate to allow extra time in meetings with child welfare to ensure the family's full understanding, allowing space for questions

3. Center Cultural Humility

- Demonstrate cultural humility by asking the family about their own values, beliefs, and caregiving practices
- Help provide cultural context to child welfare professionals when appropriate, without speaking on behalf of the family, distinguishing between cultural differences and safety concerns
- Help to create space for the family to share their perspectives and concerns, ensuring they feel heard in their interactions with child welfare
- Practice strengths-based language in your interactions with child welfare
- Support child welfare professionals' understanding of the impact of trauma, displacement, and resettlement stress on refugee and newcomer families

4. Coordinate with Child Welfare to Reduce Duplication

- Help the family identify one primary point of contact for their child welfare case
- Coordinate services and appointments with child welfare when possible
- Share information with child welfare appropriately and always with the family's consent; this helps avoid the family having to repeat the same information to different providers
- Work with child welfare to clarify which agency is responsible for which supports, to avoid duplication
 - In general, child welfare focuses on services and supports to ensure child safety and promote family stabilization. Refugee-serving providers can support by connecting the family to additional resources (employment, housing/rental assistance, community services, activities for children, education, etc.)

5. Keep Families Centered in Services Through Family Team/Partnership Meetings

- Invite youth to bring together their caregivers, extended family, and other natural supports to create plans for safety, stability, and well-being
- Engage and collaborate with families as the primary decision-makers – centering youth voice, honoring cultural and community strengths, and building on what the family already does well
- Ensure other supports identified by the youth and family are included in the meeting to coordinate services across partners, such as the child's school, behavioral health provider, child welfare, and other community or faith-based supports

6. Continue Supporting Families After CPS Involvement

- Continue to collaborate with child welfare through the family's involvement in additional services, if relevant
- Jointly support families with coordinating transportation, appointments, and follow-up
- Continue to reinforce family strengths and progress with child welfare

SECTION 6 Court Involvement, Case Plans, and Reunification

It's important for refugee-serving providers to understand that a child welfare case that goes to court is not the same as a criminal case, meaning not all child welfare cases that are court-involved result in criminal charges against the parents or caregivers. While court involvement may result in children being removed from the home, the court's ultimate role is to ensure that children are safe and that families receive the support they need.



Child welfare cases may involve the court when:

- There is imminent danger and a child needs to be removed from the home while a CPS investigation is ongoing
- A report of child abuse or neglect is substantiated, meaning the CPS investigation determines that abuse or neglect has occurred, or a child is at significant risk of harm

When child welfare cases involve the court system, refugee and newcomer families may feel overwhelmed. The following are strategies for refugee-serving providers supporting refugee and newcomer families in child welfare cases that become involved in the court system.

1. Help Families Understand the Court Process

Refugee-serving providers can explain to families that:

- Child welfare court is a civil legal process, not a criminal one. While some child abuse or neglect cases may also result in separate criminal charges, child welfare court proceedings focus on child safety, risk, and services to address concerns identified by the court.
- Hearings are scheduled as check-ins for the court to review updates on the family's progress and make decisions about services, child safety, and next steps.

- Parents and caregivers involved in a child welfare court case have the right to an attorney. If they cannot afford an attorney, they have a right to a court-appointed attorney.

Sample Language:

"The court checks that everyone is doing what they said they would do to keep your child safe and help your family move forward."

2. Support Families with Child Welfare Case Plans

A case plan outlines what families need to do to address safety concerns and work towards reunification. Refugee-serving providers can support families by:

- Reviewing the plan with the family in their preferred language
- Clarifying what is required versus what is recommended
- Breaking down steps into manageable action items
- Coordinating and advocating with child welfare to help address barriers the family may be facing in achieving the action steps laid out in their case plan

Sample Language:

"The case plan is a roadmap that shows the steps to help bring your family back together."

3. Help Families Access and Stay Engaged in Services

Families may face barriers related to transportation, scheduling, language, trauma, or other stressors. Refugee-serving providers can support families by:

- Helping with scheduling and sending reminders for important appointments
- Coordinating transportation to ensure the family's attendance at court and service appointments
- Advocating for interpretation at all meetings, including court hearings
- Connecting families with culturally and linguistically appropriate providers when possible

4. Prepare Children and Youth for Court and Case Planning Meetings

Court and formal case planning meetings can be intimidating and confusing for newcomer children and youth. While young people do not typically attend court hearings, they may participate in case planning meetings or have questions about the court process and decisions that affect them. Providers can help by preparing children and youth in age-appropriate, trauma-informed ways.



- Before any hearing or formal meeting, take time to explain, in their preferred language, what the meeting is for, who will be there, what will be discussed, and what kind of things they can share if they choose to.
- Ask the child or youth what they want to share and help them decide how they want to share it – whether verbally in the meeting, through a written statement, through their guardian ad litem (GAL) or attorney, or through you as their provider and advocate. A GAL is a court-appointed advocate, often an attorney or trained volunteer, who represents the best interests of the child, independent of the parents or the child welfare agency. GALs are typically assigned by a judge at the start of a child welfare court case, particularly when a child has been removed from the home or when there are ongoing court proceedings related to child abuse, neglect, or custody. Their role is to investigate the child's situation, speak with the family and providers, and make recommendations to the court about what outcome would best serve the child's safety, well-being, and permanency.
- **Young children (under age 6):** Young children are unlikely to participate directly in court or formal meetings in any meaningful verbal way. Providers can advocate for their voices by sharing observations about the child's behavior, emotional state, and needs that have been identified. Coordinate with child welfare to ensure trained professionals such as forensic interviewers or play therapists are involved in assessing very young children's experiences and perspectives.
- **School-age children (ages 6-12):** Children in this age range can understand simplified explanations of what is happening and can begin to express their preferences and wishes. Prepare them before any formal meeting. Let them know they can ask questions. After meetings, check in and answer their questions honestly and using age-appropriate language.
- **Teens (ages 13-17):** Older youth should be actively involved in case planning whenever possible. Their goals, preferences, and concerns should be documented and communicated to all relevant parties. Providers should advocate for teens to attend and speak at their own hearings, when appropriate and if they choose to do so. When applicable, providers should coordinate with the youth's attorney or Guardian ad Litem to support the youth in understanding the process, preparing for the hearing, and debriefing afterward.

5. Support Reunification Efforts

Reunification refers to helping children return safely to their parents, caregivers, or home of origin after a separation due to abuse or neglect, and is the primary goal in most child welfare cases. Refugee-serving providers can support reunification by:

- Reinforcing reunification as a shared goal among child welfare, the refugee-serving provider, and the family
- Encouraging the family's consistent participation in services required by child welfare and the court
- Recognizing progress and helping the family navigate setbacks without judgment

6. Provide Ongoing Emotional Support

Court involvement can be stressful and triggering for newcomer families. Refugee-serving providers can support families by:

- Normalizing fear and stress
- Offering reassurance and helping families feel supported, informed, and empowered throughout the process
- Encouraging community, faith-based, and peer support
- Referring families to counseling services if they are interested and willing to participate
- Reminding families they are not alone

7. Work with Child Welfare and Legal Partners

Legal partners in a child welfare case may include the parent's attorney, the child welfare agency's attorney, the child's immigration attorney, and a GAL.

Refugee-serving providers can work collaboratively with child welfare and legal partners by:

- Communicating regularly and sharing relevant information, with the family's consent
- Participating in family team/partnership meetings
- Helping the family prepare questions for their attorney
- Referring legal questions to attorneys and avoiding giving families any legal advice

CONCLUSION

For many refugee and newcomer families, interactions with the child welfare system may feel confusing and intimidating, and may be shaped by past experiences with government systems, trauma, displacement, and resettlement stress. Refugee-serving providers play an important role in helping newcomer families feel informed and supported throughout the process. They can also help child welfare professionals better understand the cultural, linguistic, and migration-related factors that influence a family's experience and advocate for equitable, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed practices. Working together, child welfare and refugee-serving providers can better support the safety, well-being, and stability of refugee and newcomer children and families.

By approaching families with empathy, transparency, and respect, providers can help reduce fear, increase understanding, and support more positive engagement with child welfare. While refugee-serving providers should not take on the role of legal or child welfare experts, they can play a meaningful role in helping refugee and newcomer families navigate the child welfare system, access support, advocate for their needs, and maintain a sense of dignity and stability.

Continue on to our Appendix sections, which include additional resources, tools, and references to support providers working alongside refugee and newcomer children, youth, and families involved with the child welfare system.



APPENDIX I: Glossary of Child Welfare Terms

Term	Definition
Assessment	A process used by child welfare to understand a family's situation and decide what support or services may be needed. An assessment is not always a full investigation.
Case Plan	A written plan explaining what concerns need to be addressed, what services are required or recommended, and what steps will help a family move toward case closure or reunification.
Child Abuse	When a child is intentionally harmed by a caregiver physically, sexually, or emotionally.
Child Neglect	When a child's basic needs (food, shelter, supervision, medical care, education) are not met in a way that puts the child's safety or health at risk.
Child Protective Services (CPS)	The part of the child welfare system that responds to reports of child abuse and neglect and determines whether a child may be at risk.
Child Welfare	A public system designed to keep children safe, support families, and promote child well-being. It includes prevention, family support, CPS, foster care, and reunification.
Court Hearing	A meeting in child welfare court where a judge reviews a case, checks progress, and makes decisions about next steps.
Foster Care (Out-of-Home Care)	Temporary care for a child who cannot safely remain at home; meant to be short-term while families receive support.
In-Home Services	Services provided to families while children remain safely at home, including parenting support, counseling, and case management.

Term	Definition
Investigation	A formal process used to determine whether child abuse or neglect occurred and whether a child is safe. Not all CPS reports lead to an investigation.
Kinship Care	Care provided by relatives or close family friends when a child cannot remain with their parents.
Mandated Reporter	A professional legally required to report concerns about child abuse or neglect. Requirements vary by state but typically include social workers, case managers, counselors, school/education and healthcare professionals, and law enforcement.
Prevention Services	Voluntary supports designed to help families address needs before safety concerns escalate, including parenting programs, home visiting, and mental health services.
Reunification	The process of helping a child safely return home after being placed outside the home. Reunification is the primary goal in most child welfare cases.
Safety Plan	A short-term plan to address immediate safety concerns while longer-term services are arranged.
Screening	The process a CPS hotline uses to decide whether a report meets criteria for a child welfare response.
Termination of Parental Rights (TPR)	A legal decision that permanently ends a parent's legal relationship with a child. Occurs only after extensive court involvement and is not the goal in most cases.
Voluntary Services	Supports families can choose to access without a court order or CPS investigation.

APPENDIX II: CPS Reporting Hotlines by State



In case of imminent danger, always call 911 first.

Most CPS hotline numbers are available 24/7. If outside the state's hotline service area, call the **Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453** for to make a CPS report.

Reporting requirements and hotline numbers vary by state. Some states have a single statewide hotline, while others use county-specific numbers. To find the correct reporting number for your state, visit the [Child Welfare Information Gateway: State Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Numbers](#), which provides up-to-date contact information for every state and territory.

If you are unable to reach your state's reporting line, or need additional guidance, contact the **Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453**, available 24/7.

APPENDIX III: Staff Script Library

These examples are intended to support respectful, clear, and trust-building conversations with refugee and newcomer families about child welfare involvement. Providers should adapt language and their approach based on each family.

1. Explaining What Child Welfare Is

Purpose: Support an understanding of the child welfare system and reduce fear

Sample Language:

"In the U.S., there is a system called child welfare. Its job is to help keep children safe and to support families when things feel overwhelming. Most of the time, the goal is to help families stay together and get the support they need."

2. Explaining that Child Welfare Is Not Connected to Immigration

Purpose: Address common fears related to child welfare directly

Sample Language:

"Child welfare is not connected to immigration, the police, or deportation. Their role is to focus on child safety and family support, regardless of the family's immigration status."

3. Responding When a Family Expresses Fear of CPS

Purpose: Validate emotion while addressing misinformation

Sample Language:

"I hear that this feels scary, and that makes sense. Removing children is rare and only happens when children are being abused, neglected, or are in danger. Most of the time, the focus is on helping families stay together."

4. Explaining Mandatory Reporting

Purpose: Ensure an understanding of what mandatory reporting is and why it exists.

Sample Language:

"Some professionals, including people in my role, are required by law to report concerns if we are worried about a child's safety. This does not mean you are a bad parent. The system is designed to bring support and extra help when there are safety concerns for a child."

5. Preparing a Family for a CPS Call

Purpose: Help families understand what is happening, why a report is being made, and what support may be available moving forward.

Sample Language:

"I want to talk with you about something important. I'm concerned about your child's safety, and my role requires me to contact child welfare for support. I want to help you understand what will happen and how I can continue to support you through this."

6. Explaining What Happens After a CPS Call

Purpose: Help families understand what may happen after a report is made and prepare them for possible next steps.

Sample Language:

"Child welfare may contact you, speak with your child, visit your home, or ask questions to better understand the situation and assess safety concerns. They may also talk with you about services or supports that could help your family."

7. Explaining the Child Welfare Court Process

Purpose: Decrease fear of the court system

Sample Language:

"Child welfare court is not criminal court. It's a place where a judge checks that children are safe and that families are getting the support they need. It's important to follow the requirements of your case so the judge can see you are making efforts to ensure your child's safety."

8. Explaining a Child Welfare Case Plan

Purpose: Frame the case plan as supportive, not punitive

Sample Language:

"The child welfare case plan is like a roadmap. It shows what the court wants to see so your family can move forward. Each step is meant to help address concerns and work toward bringing your child home safely."

9. Supporting Families Overwhelmed by Services

Purpose: Normalize stress and encourage service engagement

Sample Language:

"This is a lot to manage, especially in a new country. You're not expected to do this alone. We can help with scheduling, transportation, and understanding what's being asked of you by child welfare and the court."

10. Talking About Reunification

Purpose: Reinforce hope with realistic framing

Sample Language:

"In most cases, the main goal is reunification and helping children return home safely. Progress matters, even small steps. Setbacks don't mean failure."

11. Responding When Families Feel Judged or Misunderstood

Purpose: Repair trust and acknowledge cultural context

Sample Language:

"Sometimes systems don't fully understand cultural differences or what families have been through. If something feels misunderstood, let's talk about it together so we can help explain your perspective."

12. After Case Closure or Reunification

Purpose: Reinforce ongoing support and prevention

Sample Language:

"Even though the child welfare case is closed, our support doesn't end. We're still here to help your family stay stable and connected to resources."

Key Language Reminders



Use

- "Support," "safety," "help," "next steps"
- "Most of the time..."
- "You have rights"
- "We're here with you"



Avoid

- "They'll take your kids"
- "Always," "never"
- "You have no choice"
- "The law says..." (without explanation)
- Jargon and acronyms without context

RESOURCES

The following resources may be helpful for providers working with refugee families and the child welfare system:

- [Building and Sustaining Child Welfare Partnerships](#) National Child Welfare Workforce Institute
- [Common Abbreviations in Child Welfare](#) Our Community, Our Kids
- [Guidance for Immigrant and Refugee Families: The Child Welfare System](#) Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau
- [Making and Screening Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect](#) Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau
- [Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect](#) Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau
- [Mandatory Reporting Sample Scripts to Use with Clients](#) Switchboard
- [Podcast: Connecting Cross-Border Families, Episode 57](#) Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau
- [Refugees and the U.S. Child Welfare System: A Toolkit for Service Providers](#) Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services
- [The Center on Immigration and Child Welfare Initiative](#) CICW
- [What Do Child Welfare Leaders Need to Know About Supporting Families When Caregivers Are Facing Immigration-enforced Detention or Deportation?](#) Casey Family Programs
- [What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Behavioral and Mental Health Professionals](#) Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau
- [Working With Immigrant and Refugee Families: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies](#) Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau
- [Working With Parents Involved in the Child Welfare System](#) National Child Traumatic Stress Network