

Navigating the Child Welfare System

It can be quite a shock to have Child Protective Services (CPS) at your door and having your children removed from your home can be a traumatic experience. These experiences can leave you confused, fearful, angry, and sad. You are also probably wondering how this could happen. Trying to figure out what to do next can be overwhelming and exhausting. One important thing to keep in mind is that there are things you can do.

One of the keys to successfully navigating the child welfare system is to **follow the process and complete all the required steps that are asked of you**. This is critical to keeping your children in your home or having them returned to you.

This section will seek to give you a little more information about the child welfare process beginning with a complaint to CPS and what you can do to successfully navigate the process and either keep your children in your home or have them returned to your home.

Child Protective Service Investigations follow these Basic Steps:

1. A complaint is made.
2. Within 24 hours the CPS worker must begin to investigate (or try to find out if it is true) the complaint. Their investigation will include talking to your child, you and other people in your house. They may visit your child at school or daycare and may even talk to other people you know. They will basically ask a lot of questions about what happened and how things are going in your home.
3. Next the worker will write a report with their conclusions (or what they decided) based on their investigation. Their report will include:
 - If they feel there was abuse or neglect based on what they heard.
 - If they feel there is a risk for further abuse or neglect, and,
 - If they feel it is safe for your children to stay in your home.
 - They will also make a recommendation on whether or not your family needs services.
4. The investigation and the report should be completed within 30 days. After the report is completed, CPS will either end or continue based on the findings.
 - If the report determines that your child was not abused or neglected, your involvement with CPS will end.
 - If the report determines that your child has been abused or neglected, your CPS worker will work to create a safety plan for your child.

Usually if it has been determined that your child was abused or neglected the CPS worker will still work with you to create a plan so your child can remain in your home. However, if the foster care worker's report determined that your child is unsafe in your home, CPS can ask the court to remove your child.

Even though this process can be very scary and stressful, keep in mind is that the goal of CPS to strengthen families by providing supports and services. When your plan is created you will still work together with the worker to develop the goals for your family. Remember that you have valuable information to share about your family's strengths and the things that will help you.

Your worker may recommend that you attend counseling or get help for substance abuse, domestic violence, or anger issues. They may also require that you attend parenting classes. It is important that attend everything you are asked to participate in but be sure to let your worker know if the class you are attending are not specific to your needs. They may be able to help you find a job or housing to help you better care for your child. They can also help you access legal or mental health services or help you to better meet your family's basic needs by helping you learn about and connect to resources for food and clothing if needed.

While you are working toward meeting your goals and the requirements of your plan, the foster care worker can help you, as part of their role is to assist you.

If you follow the plan, reach the goals, and do everything you need to do you should be able to show the court that you can safely keep your child at home. In most cases the court and your worker will make every effort to return your child to your home.

My child has mental health challenges, how can I make sure their needs are met while they are in foster care?

Having your children removed can be an incredibly stressful experience and having your child with mental health challenges removed can add to your worries. Will the stress of being removed aggravate their mental issues? Will the people whose home they are in know how to help them? Will they continue to give them their medication and monitor any possible side effects? Will they be able to continue with therapy and other needed services and supports and can you be involved?

Even if your children are removed from your home, you have a right to continue to be involved in the regular care of your children. So, if your child who has been removed from home has mental health challenges or other health care needs you would still be able to participate in decisions about their care and most often in their care.

You also have the right to continue to be involved in meetings regarding your child

Including school conferences and other meetings that concern your child whenever possible.

If your child has mental health challenges, it can also be really helpful if you can provide any information about your child that will help the people caring for them know how to best make them comfortable and meet their needs until they are returned to you. You should also share information about your child's medical history including mental health disorders and any medications they are currently taking, including information about possible side effects. You can also include information about your child preferences like what they like to do, their bedtime and morning routines, what to do to calm them if they are upset, information about what they like to eat and when and what types of toys, games, or music they like. You could also try to make arrangements to get your child some of their own things that might help them to feel more secure.

Tips for Success in Getting Through the Process:

- Show up for all meetings and appointments and be on time!
- Prepare for any meetings by being ready to clearly explain how your home is a safe home for your children.
- Try to stay actively involved in meetings about your child.
- Even though this is an incredibly stressful time try not to lose your temper in meetings.
- Complete every step of the process and be mindful of timelines.

What about Visitation with My Kids?

The foster care system is required to allow you at least a minimum number of visits each week. The minimum number is determined by the age of your child or children.

The minimum number of visits per week for children aged birth to age two is a three times per week; Ages three to five twice a week and ages six and older a minimum of once a week. If you have more than one child, the number of visits are based on your youngest child's age.

There are additional rules about visitation including that Parenting Time should take place in a family friendly, comfortable place and last long enough for you and children to continue your bond. You can also communicate with your child between visits by calling, e-mailing, or writing to them.

Frequent visitation should be encouraged as research has shown that one of the best predictors of successful reunification is the frequency and quality of visits between a child and their parents.

What Should I Do if I Have an Issue with the Foster Care Worker?

If you have a problem with the foster care worker, you should try to work it out by talking openly and honestly and trying to work through your differences.

If you cannot work out your concerns one on one you may want to consider requesting that your worker's supervisor, get involved.

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