The Department of Children and Families

(DCF) is a state agency that provides many services to help Connecticut's young people and their parents. 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.

The most 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. DCF's legal responsibility is to determine if a child has been abused or neglected. An investigation is the first step. It is also important to know that an investigation in 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 investigation is to identify any safety concerns that present a risk factor to the minor children in the household. The 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 abused or neglected, or may be at risk of being abused. State law (Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 17a-101) requires DCF to 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. Some professionals are required by law to report suspected abuse or neglect and are called "mandated reporters." Mandated reporters include teachers, physicians, nurses, social workers, police officers, mental health counselors, clergy, daycare workers, and other professionals.

Why would a report be made?

Children are reported 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 an explanation of the injuries;
- has a condition resulting from maltreatment, such as malnutrition, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, deprivation of necessities like food, clothing, shelter, and emotional maltreatment or cruel punishment; and
- is placed at imminent risk of serious harm.

Children have a right to be safe from these conditions.

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 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 the parent's consent. The police must be contacted if the report indicates sexual abuse or serious physical abuse or neglect.

Does the social worker have to talk to my child?

Yes. The social worker must see and talk with your child, and will need to see and talk with other children in the home. In certain circumstances, the social worker may talk with your child before contacting you. He or she may talk with your child at school or at daycare.

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

DCF encourages parents to cooperate with an 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 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 to see your child.

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 should receive in writing the reason for the Department's actions and the legal basis for the removal. Within 96 hours after such removal, the Department must seek an Order of Temporary Custody (OTC) from the Court if it is necessary to maintain the child in out-of-home placement. 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?

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.

If a child has been seriously abused or neglected, or sexually abused, DCF is required to refer the case to the police. At times, DCF's involvement begins after a call from a police department to help investigate a situation involving children.

Can I disagree with the Department's finding?

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

- Request in writing a review of the finding addressed to the area director. If you disagree with the results of the review, you can request an administrative hearing.
- You are not required by law to talk to the social worker during the investigation. But if you choose not to say anything, the hearing officer may not be able to consider your side of the story at the 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.

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:

- Information and Referral
- Individual and Family Therapy
- Intensive Family Preservation Services
- Parent Education and Support Centers
- Family Support Centers
- Parent Aide
- Parenting Classes
- Parent Support Groups
- Sexual Abuse Treatment
- Substance Abuse Services
- Children's Mental Health Services
- Voluntary Services For Children With Mental Health Needs

If you do not agree with the case plan or the services provided to your family, 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 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 of your case.
- You have the right to request all of the documents related to your case 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 social workers, unless a court restraining or protective 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 a written notification of and reasons for any action regarding the placement of your child(ren), if removal is determined to be necessary.
- 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 an attorney with you at any time. If DCF files a court petition for temporary custody of your child, you should consult an attorney. If you are unable to pay for an attorney, you may ask the court to appoint one for you. A separate attorney will be appointed to represent your child(ren) in the proceedings.
- You have the right **not** to work or talk with us.
- 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. In the best interest of children, the purpose of this office is to resolve disputes between clients, foster and adoptive parents, providers, citizens, and the Department. 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?

The Hotline is a centralized referral system. All calls concerning allegations of abuse or neglect or calls requesting information go through the Hotline. The Hotline can also respond to emergency situations when the DCF area offices are closed. Our area offices are open from 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. weekdays. After 5:00 P.M. and on weekends and holidays, you may call the **DCF HOTLINE** at **1-800-842-2288**, especially if you feel your child(ren) may be at risk. You can find area office telephone numbers and other information on our website www.state.ct.us/dcf.

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, 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. Most parents exchange first names and phone numbers to help them reach out for support. To locate a Parents Anonymous group near you: **Call INFOLINE at 211**

COMMUNITY COUNSELING SERVICES - many Connecticut communities have child guidance clinics, youth service bureaus, and child and family services. These programs provide individual, group and family counseling, and related services to help parents and children. Most programs have a sliding fee scale according to family income. Religious institutions in your community may also offer counseling and family services. Your local school system is another good source of information and assistance.

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A Parent's RIGHT to KNOW

DCF CONNECTICUT

Child Protective Services and Your Family

CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT *of* CHILDREN *and* FAMILIES (DCF)
DCF Hotline: 1-800-842-2288
DCF Website: www.state.ct.us/dcf