



## Connecting With Your Community Partners: Child Welfare Workers

### What is a child welfare agency?

Child welfare agencies have the responsibility to: a) investigate reports of actual (or possible) harm to a child by his/her caregiver, b) protect children who have been, who are, or who might be at risk of child abuse and neglect, c) provide out of home care to children when needed, and d) work to support and strengthen the families of the children served. The names of these agencies vary among provinces and territories. Examples are: Children's Aid Society, Regional Health and Social Service Agency, and Department of Family and Community Services. The age of child protection varies from birth to 16 or 19 years, depending upon provincial/territorial legislation.

### What does a child welfare worker do?

Child welfare workers are professionals who promote the well-being and development of children, and who protect children from harm. They have specialized training in child abuse and neglect. Child welfare workers assess situations that have, or may, endanger the physical or emotional health and safety of a child. Harm can include physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence and emotional maltreatment.

### Why and when would you call a child welfare agency?

Every child care provider has a legal duty to report suspected or known child maltreatment. If you believe on reasonable grounds that a child has been or may be, harmed, you are obliged to immediately report that information to a child welfare agency. Confidentiality is respected. The safety and well-being of children is everyone's responsibility. If you are not sure about whether you should be reporting a situation or not, you should call and discuss the situation.

### What are the signs of child maltreatment?

The signs of child maltreatment can be very apparent or sometimes unclear and difficult to assess. There are some common signs.

The child:

- has unexplained or non-accidental marks such as bruises, welts, cuts or burns
- has inappropriate clothing or is inadequately protected from the weather
- consistently has poor hygiene, is unkempt, or fails to thrive

- shows sudden changes in behaviour such as frequent absences from school
- discloses information that indicates abuse
- has age-inappropriate sexual knowledge or age inappropriate play with toys, self or others
- has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parents' attention
- is always watchful, extremely compliant, passive or withdrawn
- comes to places early, stays late, does not want to go home or has a consistent lack of supervision

The caregiver:

- shows a lack of concern for the child
- takes a dismissive approach to the child's problems
- uses, or asks caretakers to use, harsh punishment if the child misbehaves
- sees the child as worthless, entirely bad, or burdensome
- has inappropriate expectations in relation to the developmental stage of the child
- looks primarily to the child for care, attention, and satisfaction of emotional needs

You can get more information on the signs of child maltreatment and how to recognize it from the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, operated by the Public Health Agency of Canada. Tel.: 1 800 267-1291 or (613) 957-2938; [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nc-cn](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nc-cn). Your local child welfare agency is also a good information source.

### What happens after you call a child welfare agency?

The referral is given to a child welfare worker who acts on the basis of a commitment to the healthy development of children within the protective structures of the family and the community. The child welfare worker will

assess the situation and ensure that the child lives in a safe environment while the problems are being solved. Although there are times that the risk factors of the home environment may be such that the child may have to be removed from home on a temporary basis and placed in a safe place, in most cases, investigations do not result in the child being removed from the family.

### Child welfare agencies: Supports to families

Child welfare agencies offer a range of services to help families care for their children in safe and healthy environments. This includes assessments, crisis intervention, counseling, and services to prevent child abuse and neglect. Many prevention programs (e.g., parenting skills, housing support, mental health, family violence and substance abuse) are offered in partnership with other community agencies.

### How do you locate a child welfare worker?

- Check the telephone directory for the child welfare agency closest to you. Most telephone directories have the number to call in the emergency pages.
- Child welfare services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Another way to find a child welfare worker is by calling the police or Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868.

### How many suspected child maltreatment cases are reported in Canada?

The 1998 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect showed that about 135,000 reports were made to child welfare agencies. This figure is considered to be a significant under reporting. Half of the cases reported involved children from birth to 7 years of age.



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