

**What happens if a child is still being neglected or is abused again?**

If conditions do not improve, DFCS may go to court to seek temporary custody of the child. If custody is granted, DFCS places the child in a safe environment (for example, with a relative or foster family) while continuing to work with the parents to help them resolve their problems.

**If the family does not improve, what is the next step?**

DFCS petitions the court to terminate parental rights and make the child available for adoption.

**Does Georgia emphasize keeping the family unit together at all costs?**

No. The most important consideration is the safety and protection of the child. Both state and federal laws have set clear guidelines for quicker termination of parental rights in cases where families show no improvement and to ensure that children remain in foster care no longer than necessary. For example, when parents refuse or repeatedly fail to complete drug treatment successfully or do not follow improvement goals, DFCS is required to develop a permanency plan for their children and seek early termination and adoption.

**Where do children go who must be removed from their homes?**

If it is a crisis situation, the child may go to an emergency shelter. Then, about half of the children are placed with relatives and half with foster parents. DFCS evaluates all potential homes. Foster parents are screened and trained and receive financial aid to help with the cost of the child's care.

**Is there more child abuse and neglect now than in the past?**

After reaching all-time highs nationwide in the early 1990s, reports have decreased significantly. Many families whose problems are poverty-related (lack of adequate clothing, food or housing) are referred by DFCS to community resources for the help they need, so they do not enter the CPS system. This allows DFCS to address the cases where actual abuse and neglect have occurred and to concentrate its efforts on the most troubled families.

**What rights do children have?**

DFCS believes that children have the right to grow up in a stable home in a safe and healthy environment and not to be abused or neglected.



# PROTECTING CHILDREN

## The Division of Family and Children Services at Work

Every child needs to be treasured, protected and nurtured. Unfortunately, some parents can't — or won't — care for their children. When they neglect or abuse them, someone must step in to ensure the children's safety. The community, the police, the courts and state and local agencies share this responsibility.

In Georgia, the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) has a special role as the state agency designated to protect children and strengthen families.

Many people misunderstand, or do not know, how DFCS does its job. Here is the way Georgia's Child Protective Services system (CPS) works.

### **If you think a child is being hurt or neglected whom do you call?**

The Department of Family and Children Services is in every county. You simply call their local office and give them the name and location of the child. Your report is confidential. While you do not have to give your name to make a report, it can be more helpful for the child if you are willing to tell who you are and to testify in court if necessary. If you believe a child is in immediate danger, call the police. They will contact DFCS.

### **What is considered child abuse or neglect?**

- Physical abuse is injury to a child under age 18 by a parent or caretaker which results in bruises, welts, fractures, burns, cuts or internal injuries.
- Neglect is the failure of the parent or caretaker to see that a child is adequately supervised, fed, clothed or housed.
- Sexual abuse occurs when a parent or other adult uses a child under age 18 for sexual stimulation.

### **What type of maltreatment is most reported?**

Neglect makes up the bulk of the reports and the majority of substantiated cases. Lack of adult supervision is the most common type of neglect. Physical abuse is the next most reported and substantiated type of maltreatment, followed by sexual abuse.

### **What happens when you call DFCS to report suspected abuse or neglect?**

The worker first determines whether the call is about the maltreatment of a child under 18 by a parent or caretaker. Reports that fall within these guidelines are investigated by DFCS investigators, frequently along with the police.

The law requires DFCS to notify the police of every report. About 60 percent of the reports received require an investigation. The remainder are referred to other agencies, such as the local police, health department or school system for assistance.

### **How soon after a report is made does the worker begin the investigation?**

In-person response time ranges from within 24 hours to five days, depending on the nature of the allegation, the age of the child and the severity of the allegation.

### **What happens in an investigation?**

Generally, the CPS worker

- checks other DFCS offices to see if there have been previous reports on this child or on the alleged perpetrator.
- visits the child at home or school to observe and talk with him or her directly.
- meets with the family to discuss the allegations.
- talks with anyone who may have information about the child and the family situation, including relatives, neighbors, friends, school personnel, and physicians.

The main concern throughout the investigation is the safety of the child.

### **Once an investigation is completed, how does the worker make a decision?**

There are two possible outcomes of an investigation. The report is substantiated or unsubstantiated.

- **Substantiated** — means that more than half of the facts gathered indicate that the child has been abused or neglected.
- **Unsubstantiated** — means that there is not enough evidence to prove that the child has been mistreated.

### **If a report is substantiated, does DFCS automatically remove the child from the home?**

No. A child may be taken from home by the police if he or she is in immediate danger. If there appears to be an ongoing risk to the child, DFCS may petition the juvenile court to remove the child.

### **Under what conditions may DFCS remove children who are not in immediate danger?**

If the CPS staff determine that it is not safe for a child to remain at home (for example, when very young children are left home alone), then DFCS will file a petition with the juvenile court for a hearing to decide whether the agency will be granted temporary custody.

### **What happens to children who are left with their families after DFCS has confirmed abuse or neglect?**

Families are rated as low-, moderate- or high-risk based on the nature and extent of their problems (substance abuse, no social support, violence). The most intensive services (more in-person visits by the case manager) are provided to the high-risk families as this has been shown to reduce repeat abuse and neglect. Case managers visit the family regularly and link them with other services to strengthen the family and address the causes of maltreatment.

### **What kinds of services are offered to these families?**

- referral for alcohol and drug treatment
- referrals for employment and child support
- parenting education
- counseling
- in-home parent aides
- child care