

Child Protective Services Six-Stage Process

Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies operate under authority assigned to them by individual state legislatures, and generally perform a series of functions that can be identified as the following six-stage process:

1. **Intake:** The receipt of an allegation of maltreatment or abuse is handled by an intake caseworker. This is usually in the form of a phone call from a mandatory reporter. In most states, almost everyone is a mandatory reporter:

- public safety personnel (fire, police, etc.)
- public social service workers
- school and day care staff

The primary sources of referrals are individuals, state and local hotlines, and schools.

2. **Screening the Report:** The report received during intake is processed to determine if the allegations meet statutory definitions for child maltreatment. The report may be screened-out or screened-in:
 - Screened-out: If the screening process determines that the allegation of abuse does not meet the definition of maltreatment as outlined in state law, then the report is screened-out. In this event, supportive services to prevent child maltreatment may be offered to the family, and the case may be referred to the police, or to a local community-based agency for follow up. The case may also be recorded with no further action taken.
 - Screened-in: If statutory definitions of maltreatment are met, then the report is accepted for investigation/assessment (screened-in), a case is opened and an investigation is begun.
3. **Investigation/Assessment:** CPS workers investigate allegations of maltreatment and assess the immediate needs of the child and the family. The investigation includes a records review, interview of the child and of professionals known to the family. Home visits are usually included although this varies depending on state regulations. The investigative team also assesses the child's danger of harm and determines if the risk of maltreatment. A petition may be filed with the Court to take action. If the allegations are unsubstantiated (found not true) the case is closed.

4. **Case Decision and Disposition:** The CPS investigation might lead to one of several conclusions. If the determination is made that the child can be safely maintained in the home without Court supervision, and the family is in need of supportive services to prevent future maltreatment, then referrals to local community-based agencies for support and training are generally provided. If the CPS investigation and assessment determines there may be reasonable grounds to believe the child's welfare cannot be safeguarded under the current conditions, a petition is filed with the Court outlining the facts of the case.
 - If the Court believes the child is in need of care and emergency removal is necessary to insure the child's protection, the petition is approved and the Court makes findings of jurisdiction (who has authority) and disposition (settlement of the case). The child is then considered to be a ward of the Court, and is placed under the custody and care of the CPS agency, with supervision by the Court. The child remains under the custody of the Court until proof is provided that the child can safely return to the care and custody of the parents or guardian from which he was removed.
 - If CPS determines that emergency removal is not necessary to insure the child's protection, but a substantial or potential risk of maltreatment is still present, the Court can be petitioned to retain the child in his own home under the supervision of the Court. CPS will supervise the child and begin family services designed to strengthen the family and protect the child.

5. **Treatment/Case Management:** CPS case management and treatment services are provided to the child and family to address the reasons for CPS involvement and to prevent further child maltreatment. If the child has been removed from the home, family reunification services are provided. This may include:
 - individual counseling
 - family counseling
 - anger management
 - substance abuse treatment
 - parenting education, and more.

If the child remains in the home, then services will be provided that focus on child safety and maltreatment prevention.

6. **Case Closure:** A case can be closed for several reasons:
 - The Court's decision found no need for follow-up services by CPS
 - The family and/or community has addressed all risk factors that led to the provision of CPS case-management services
 - Parental rights were terminated and the child has been adopted

Resources

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (2003, May). *National study of child protective services systems and reform efforts: Findings on local CPS practices*. Retrieved September 14, 2010, from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/cps-status03/cps-practices03>