

Tough Problems, Tough Choices: Guidelines for Needs-Based Service Planning in Child Welfare

Project Partners:

American Humane Association, Children's Services
American Bar Association, Center on Children and the Law
Annie E. Casey Foundation
Casey Family Programs
Casey Family Services
Institute for Human Services Management

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Guidelines in this set include:

Neglect:

Substance Abuse – Neglect / Minor Physical Abuse

Failure to thrive

Medical neglect

Abandonment, expulsion, and other custody issues

Inadequate supervision

Physical neglect

Educational neglect

Abuse:

Physical abuse—major injury

Physical abuse – minor injury

Domestic violence and abuse/neglect

Sexual abuse

Emotional abuse

Other:


Youth in conflict

Placement level of care

ISBN: 0-930915-38-0

Printed in the United States of America

Acknowledgements

 e gratefully acknowledge the support and guidance that we have received in the development of these Guidelines from Casey Family Programs, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Casey Family Services. The group of organizations that joined forces to carry out this project also included the American Humane Association's Children's Services, the Institute for Human Services Management, and the American Bar Association's Center on Children and the Law. An Advisory Committee composed of representatives from public and private child welfare agencies, a former foster child, a parent affected by the system, a juvenile court judge, and a legislator concerned with children's issues, helped us to ensure that these Guidelines considered the varied perspectives that should inform efforts to provide effective services to children and families touched by abuse and neglect. We are grateful for the participation of the individual members of that Committee and wish to acknowledge them as well. They included: Peter Pecora, Patrick McCarthy, Ira Barbell, Fred Chaffee, Lisa Conlan, Joy Duva, John Fluke, James Gannaway, Mark Hardin, Hildy Hjermstad, Mareasa Isaacs, John Mattingly, Ann Morison Murphy, Honorable Jean Shepherd, Elaine Szymoniak, Carl Valentine, and Jessica Watson-Crosby. Special thanks are due to Peter Pecora for his ongoing participation in an advisory capacity throughout the life of the project.

In addition, the Guidelines were developed based upon the insight and experience of many child welfare practitioners including staff from the Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Department of Children

and Family Services: Tina Willauer, Louis Kaszas, Chris Cabot, Marta Crespo, Kathleen Johnson, Latasha Brown, Jennifer Fow, Pam Cameron, John Lympany, Ken Komperda, Deb Forkas, and Jim Provost; staff from the Adams County (Colorado) Department of Human Services: Nancy Stowall, Susie Kimble, Pamela Boaz, Jody Perkins, Carrie McLoughton, and Sue Tripathi; staff from the Colorado Department of Human Services and private agencies responding to domestic violence in Colorado: Melissa Luzzi, Mary Ann Ganey, Shirley Mondragon, Maija Schiedel, and Cynthia McVeigh; the Alliance for Children's Services in Cuyahoga County, Ohio; and Pat Heinrichs, formerly of District 8, Florida Department of Children's Services.

We also wish to thank the following individuals for reviewing and commenting on an initial draft of the Guidelines: Cathy Bolton (Boulder County (Colorado) Department of Human Services), Robert Cosner (Bucks County (Pennsylvania) Department of Public Welfare), Betsey Rosenbaum (American Public Human Services Association), Dee Wilson (Washington Department of Social and Health Services), and Toni Witt, (Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Department of Children and Family Services). Project staff who contributed to the contents of the Guidelines included Peter J. Pecora, Hildy Hjermstad, Joy Duva, John D. Fluke, Hansine Fisher, and Mark Hardin

The Guidelines were reviewed by staff of the Philadelphia Department of Human Services including Joseph E. Kuna (whom we also wish to thank for his leadership and support of the

project), Fredericka B. Holland-Guy, Lester M. Goodman, Lucretia Njie, Freida Williams, and Edward Nowak; by staff of the Lancaster County (Pennsylvania) Department of Human Services including Kurt Miller and Karen Rice; by Deborah Esquibel Hunt of Denver Indian Family Resource Center; and by staff of the Colorado Department of Human Services including Carol Wahlgren, Carol Kelly, Pamela Hinich, Janet Motz, Shirley Mondragon, Susan Ludwig, Jean McAllister, and Meg Williams. We would also like to thank the following members of the Philadelphia Department of Human Services for their role in facilitating development of the Guidelines: Alba E. Martinez, Wanda Mial, Brenda Bennett, Trine Bech, June Cairns, John McGee, John C. Sahnner, Charles L. James, and David Cooperson, and the following members of the Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services: Judith Goodhand, Marsha Wickliffe, and Jan Flory.

A pilot test of the utility of the Guidelines as a practice tool was supported by Peter Pecora, who helped to design the research methodology, and by Paul DiLorenzo, who facilitated the participation of child welfare staff from Pennsylvania and Iowa in the test. For facilitating testing on-site in Philadelphia and in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and in Iowa, we would like to thank Joseph Kuna, Jerri Brooks, Kurt Miller, Jill McVeigh, and Mary Ellison.

Others providing consultation and support to the project included Christine Race, Kirk Rainey, and David Hemsli who provided design work. Brenda Bellonger of North American Indian Legal Services provided information on

the Indian Child Welfare Act. Jesse Rainey, Kim Ribich, and Alyson Plummer provided project support and were instrumental in keeping project operations and communications on track at the American Humane Association. Joy Duva of Casey Family Services provided ongoing technical support and consultation to the project.

Candace Grossman was a central point of communication for the project at Casey Family Programs from its outset. Lisa Paine-Wells, Connie Dykstra, and Lindy Goff of The Annie E. Casey Foundation provided invaluable project consultation, and logistical, publications coordination, and accounting support. Special thanks also go to Gretchen Test,

whose support of this project has spanned her tenure at the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators and The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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December 2002

Introduction to the Casey Guidelines for Need-Based Service Planning in Child Welfare

Child welfare work is positioned at a complex intersection of conflicting interests and challenging decisions. Private lives and the public interest, the sanctity of family, and the protection of children converge in demanding, volatile, and often ambiguous situations.

Child welfare agencies, frequently the targets of public misperceptions, have difficult mandates. Central figures in meeting these mandates are front line child welfare staff who are faced daily with the daunting challenge of making decisions related to the most private aspects of community life – the family.

Few tools exist to assist agencies, program managers, supervisors, and front line workers in training for and carrying out their difficult yet crucial work in child welfare. These guidelines are intended to assist child welfare case-workers in making decisions about the development of service or case plans and the delivery of child welfare services. In addition, the guidelines can provide a best practice framework for supervisors and program managers as they train new and ongoing staff in how to develop case plans that effectively respond to child and family needs, with the goal of achieving better outcomes for children and families. Major developmental concepts in the construction of this tool have been:

- The need for consistency in service planning based on best practice knowledge in child welfare.
- The need for a framework that can focus training, encourage team-based decision making, and foster consistency in services offered in response to

specific family issues, while also bolstering staff and agency accountability.

- The need for effective tools to guide staff in constructing case plans to meet the specific needs of individual children and families.

These guidelines are intended as a tool for use after safety and risk decisions have been made in a case. They are not meant to replace safety or risk assessment tools that are used to determine the immediate safety of the child, or the risk of future injury. As a framework for decision making, they support case-workers in constructing case or service plans based on best practice concepts, the distilled collective knowledge of experienced child welfare staff, and knowledge about the effectiveness of specific interventions. Most importantly, the guidelines cannot substitute for the use of family-by-family, child-by-child professional judgment to ensure the paramount goal of child safety.

Occasionally the guidelines include specific recommendations for out-of-home care. This recommendation reflects the belief that the particular problem cannot be successfully addressed while the children remain in the home. A specific guideline on Placement Level of Care is aimed at helping workers to determine the most appropriate out-of-home care setting when such placement is needed for the child's safety and well being.

All of the other guidelines are divided into case types meant to reflect the range of predominant patterns of characteristics of child welfare cases and some specialized case types. The guidelines are aimed at providing a structured

format to help assure that those children and families with similar patterns of characteristics (i.e., needs and problems) receive a consistent array of supports and services from agency personnel. Through this consistency, the agency may be able to match service support levels with the achievement of specific positive outcomes for children and families.

Consistent and careful program evaluation of the effects of using these guidelines will enable you to measure key program results. For example, over time, this evaluation will allow the agency to determine the impact of services offered on the children's and family's needs and problems. From such analysis, answers to the following questions, historically problematic for child welfare agencies, will emerge:

- Did the services provided improve family functioning?
- Did the services provided improve functioning levels enough to prevent subsequent abuse or neglect?
- What are the most effective services for specific problems?
- Who are the most successful providers at serving specific types of clients?
- What problems and needs can the agency not effectively address within its current range of services?

These guidelines cannot substitute for knowledgeable and skilled staff.

Sound decision making within a public or private child welfare agency demands training in family dynamics and functioning, separation and loss, child abuse and neglect, and well-developed skills in

case management, child welfare services, and social work practice. These guidelines do not include all of the information that could and should be provided in pre-service and in-service training programs. They cannot and should not replace the richness and depth of understanding that can be taught in thorough pre-service caseworker training. Guidelines can only supplement and help to guide practice and training. They are neither definitive nor prescriptive.

While these guidelines can be used by individual workers to develop service plans, the preferred decision-making method in child welfare is a team approach. The desired team includes the family, the caseworker, allied agency staff, and at least one other child welfare agency representative in the process. This team offers the best opportunity to:

1. Remove personal bias from case decision-making and provide a solid foundation for decision-making.
2. Allow family members to participate in planning their future.

3. Assure a plan that reflects agency values and is defensible by the agency.

The advantage of a team approach is its ability to identify and isolate personal value judgments that can cloud and misdirect individually made casework decisions. Child rearing requirements established for parents by a third party or agency, no matter how well intended or necessary, are intrusive and value laden. A system that undertakes this task, even under the mandate of law, has a special responsibility to assure that decisions are made as objectively as possible. These decisions will reflect the values imposed by state law (hence reflecting the electorate's values) but must be free from personal judgments.

The child welfare profession is also encumbered with a high staff turnover rate. New casework staff is a constant factor in child welfare agencies. These staff members may have little experience or training in making the difficult decisions, under stressful circumstances, that characterize child welfare work.

The guidelines can help to provide these staff with a systematic framework for service planning that is distilled from the recommendations of experienced staff who participated in the development of the guidelines.

Child welfare work is intrusive in nature. Even thoughtful decisions based on sound casework practice sometimes can appear as capricious, arbitrary, or vindictive. If not handled skillfully and with sensitivity to the consumer's feelings, this can damage the agency and its reputation. Steps that support consistency, inclusivity, and are based on good practice, will enhance the ability of an agency to successfully carry out its difficult and complex mandate. Guidelines, which support consistency and best practice in training and decision-making, combined with a team approach, promote clear outcomes and accountability in this most challenging area of work.

How to Use the Guidelines

Purpose

The Casey Decision Making Guidelines are intended to assist child protection caseworkers and others who work with abused, neglected, and foster children and youth in making thoughtful professional decisions about the care, services, and supports they provide to children and their families. The guidelines provide, in a structured decision tree format, a checklist of factors affecting abused and neglected children in specific types of cases, and alternatives for services and supports that may be provided to the child and the parents or caregivers to help remediate abuse and neglect and the factors precipitating child maltreatment. Research has shown that following a formal protocol or checklist of factors can help to increase the consistency of decisions and produce improved decision making results by child protection workers.

In the course of their practice, workers encounter many different children and families. Factors such as the family's environment, culture, and the availability of community supports also affect family interactions and the family's ability to protect and nurture its children. These guidelines are not meant to substitute for a worker's professional training and judgment in determining how to best respond to specific children and family situations. No chart can replace common sense and educated judgment applied to

a family and community that the worker knows well. The guidelines are, however, intended to aid workers in using good professional judgment and to bolster their confidence that there is support in good practice for the critical decisions that they often must make. Since workers often make decisions in tense and stressful family situations, the guidelines are also an aid to assuring themselves and the families whom they serve that all relevant factors have been covered and not overlooked in a process that may move swiftly and intensely.

How to Use the Guidelines

These *Guidelines* cover the fourteen most common situations that a worker may encounter in working with maltreated children and their families. Each of these situations is discussed separately, followed by a decision making chart which is intended to offer a structured checklist approach to responding to a specific situation. Here is how to use the *Guidelines*:

- Find the topic that most closely describes the situation you are dealing with listed in the table of contents, which follows this introduction, or in the index tabs at side of the *Guidelines*.
- Read about the issue and the factors that are typically encountered in responding to children and families who are experiencing this type of child

maltreatment. (Each decision-making guideline includes a narrative discussion of the maltreatment type, the research background, and the considerations that go into making a decision on how to respond.)

- Look at the decision tree chart for the issue and follow through the decision points to determine the services that are needed and a recommended approach to a good practice response. To use each decision tree chart, start with the first box and answer the questions inside. Depending on your answer, follow the arrow to the next box or next relevant step, following the instructions inside each box until you have determined the action steps that you will take in your own case. Then work with the family to construct a detailed individualized step-by-step written case plan.
- The decision tree portion of each guideline begins with an assessment of case issues. In order to effectively plan for a child and family, you must review all relevant case issues. A review of family, cultural, and community issues, and a reminder of permanency planning issues follow this step. Next, case goals for service delivery are provided. (Your agency may refer to these goals as "objectives," "tasks," "steps," or another similar terminology.) The last step in each guideline is to plan for child permanency and family stability.

