



Parents' Handbook



Division of Youth and Family Services



The Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) is New Jersey's child protection and child welfare agency within the Department of Children and Families. Its mission is to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of children and to support families. As mandated by state law (Title 9 and Title 30), DYFS is required to investigate all reports of child abuse and child neglect.

Parenting is rewarding, but it is not always easy. When problems arise in a family, it is often the children who are emotionally or physically affected. Unfortunately, some parents do not know where to turn to get help for their children or themselves. This handbook was written to explain the role of DYFS workers and other staff who work together to serve you and your family. DYFS recognizes that this can be a very difficult time for you and your family. You may have many questions along the way, so feel free to speak to your worker about your concerns at any time.

Please remember that our goal is to help you ensure the safety and well-being of your child.

Your Local Office Information:	
Worker's Name:	_____
Phone:	_____
Supervisor's Name:	_____
Phone:	_____
Local Office Address:	_____

Phone:	_____

Why has a worker from DYFS come to my home?

A worker has come to your home because DYFS received a report that your child may have been abused or neglected, or may be at risk of being abused or neglected. State law requires that any person having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been abused or neglected must report this to DYFS. A report is made on behalf of a child; it is not made against a parent or a family.

What is child abuse and neglect?

Child abuse or neglect is serious harm or a risk of serious harm to a child caused or allowed by a parent, caregiver, or any person responsible for the welfare of a child.

What if I don't want a worker to investigate my family?

In most cases, families cooperate with DYFS during the investigation process. However, there are times when a family is not willing to talk with a worker. Please understand that we came out of concern for your child and your family. During an investigation, DYFS is required to meet with parents and all children in the household. If a family refuses to allow a home visit or otherwise prevents the worker from seeing a child, DYFS may seek help from the police or court.

Who filed the report?

By law, DYFS cannot tell you who made the report. The worker will be as specific as possible in relating the details of the report. Remember, the worker has come to your home to ensure the safety and well-being of your child. Once the worker completes the investigation, you will receive a letter notifying you of the findings of the investigation.

Will my child be taken away?

In the vast majority of cases, NO. In fact, the majority of the children served by DYFS remain in their homes. Our goal is to ensure that children's health and safety needs are met and to help parents care for their children in their own home. Unless your child is at risk of harm, we will work with your family to make a plan that will keep your family together.

If your child must be removed from your home, DYFS may ask you to identify family members or friends who can care for your child. In the small number of cases in which DYFS determines a child is at immediate risk or harm, we will ask the court for permission to remove a child and provide an immediate placement either with family members or a foster home. In an emergency, DYFS can remove a child before getting the court's permission, but is required to appear in court to request approval within two court days of the child's removal. Remember, if your child is removed from your home to ensure his or her safety and well-being, our goal is to return your child as soon as it is safe to do so.

Does DYFS file criminal charges?

NO. DYFS does not file criminal charges and does not have the authority to arrest. However, in certain situations such as a report of sexual abuse, serious physical injury or death of a child, the law requires DYFS to notify the County Prosecutor's Office who has the authority to file criminal charges.

What happens during an investigation?

The worker gathers information about the report of abuse or neglect by speaking to you and members of your household. The worker must see all of the children who reside in your home, particularly the child on whose behalf the report was filed. The

worker may also want to speak to your child's school teacher, pediatrician, school counselor, or other persons who may have relevant information. You may also want to provide the worker with the names of other people who know you, such as a member of the clergy or a neighbor. These interviews with your family and other significant people form the basis of the worker's investigation.

During the first contact with you and throughout your involvement with DYFS, the worker will assess the safety of the child in your care. If any safety factors are identified, you will be asked to take steps to ensure the child's safety and be asked to sign a Safety Protection Plan.

All families have strengths. If DYFS becomes involved with your family, you and your worker will identify yours. Together, you will create a plan that builds upon your strengths by using available services and supports to ensure that your family is safe and stable.

Your family's active participation in developing the case plan helps you talk about the steps and solutions that will best meet your family's needs. The case plan is reviewed any time a family's needs have changed or every six months at a minimum.

What kind of services/help does DYFS provide to families?

DYFS offers a variety of services either directly or through other agencies. Your worker will explain these and other specific services available in your community, which may include:

- ▶ Case Management
- ▶ Family support services such as parenting skill training, counseling, child care and other therapeutic services
- ▶ Child behavioral health services
- ▶ Mental health services

- ▶ Domestic violence services
- ▶ Substance abuse treatment
- ▶ Information and referral to other state and community agencies
- ▶ Foster and residential care
- ▶ Adoption and kinship legal guardianship

Parents may be responsible for contributing towards the cost of services and will be asked to provide information about income. **Services needed will not be denied if parents cannot afford to pay for them.** Many families have been found to be eligible for free services.

What are my responsibilities and rights?

Your responsibilities are to:

- ▶ Provide a safe and loving home for your child
- ▶ Support your child financially. (If your child enters foster placement, a referral for child support will be made.)
- ▶ Tell your worker what you see as your family's strengths and also help to identify resources that may be sources of strength and support to your family
- ▶ Tell your worker what you see as your family's challenges and how you would like to solve them.
- ▶ Work in partnership with Division staff on the plans and tasks necessary to strengthen your family
- ▶ Tell your worker about major changes in your life (within seven days) such as changes of address, telephone number, people who live with your family, marital or civil union status, and any other changes that may affect your family or your case plan
- ▶ Provide necessary information to receive appropriate services, including financial information

Your rights include, but are not limited to, the following:

- ▶ Know why DYFS is involved with your family (full disclosure)
- ▶ Know what DYFS expects from you and your child
- ▶ Accept or refuse services which are not court ordered
- ▶ Know what services DYFS can and will provide to your family
- ▶ Request the services of a professional interpreter (if the DYFS worker speaks a language in which you are not fluent) at no cost to you
- ▶ Consult with a lawyer at your own expense at any time and to be represented by a lawyer who is either of your own choosing or appointed by the court when you appear in court on actions concerning your child or your parental rights
- ▶ Request dispute resolution when you are not satisfied with decisions made by DYFS (Court ordered decisions are not subject to dispute resolution.)

What happens after an investigation?

You will receive a written notice within 45 days of the report. DYFS will determine whether the report is “unfounded” or “substantiated.” “Unfounded” means DYFS did **not** find evidence that a child was harmed or placed at substantial risk of harm by a caregiver. DYFS will not have any further involvement with your family unless you already have an open case with DYFS or unless you voluntarily request services. If a new report is made, a new investigation will be initiated.

“Substantiated” means DYFS found evidence that a child was harmed or placed at substantial risk of harm by a caregiver. Your worker will continue to provide services to your family according to the case plan.

Your case will be closed when your children are safe and your family situation has improved. In other words, DYFS will close the case when your family’s goals are met and necessary changes have been made.

Is there an opportunity to disagree with a DYFS decision?

YES. If you disagree with a decision, you should first notify your worker and his or her supervisor of your disagreement. If your disagreement cannot be resolved, notify the Casework Supervisor, then the Local Office Manager. If you are still unable to resolve a problem you may contact the Division’s Action Line at :

1-800-331 DYFS (3937)

You may have a right to appeal certain decisions made by DYFS within 20 days of receiving written notification. (You would not have to go through the DYFS Local Office first.) Examples of such a decision would be a substantiated finding of abuse against you or a decision about services provided through DYFS. You can appeal and request an administrative hearing which is conducted by an Office of Administrative Law Judge.

To request a hearing contact, in writing:

***NJ Department of Children and Families
Administrative Hearings Unit
PO Box 729
Trenton, NJ 08625-0729***

If you believe that DYFS has discriminated against you because of a disability, please speak with DYFS supervisory staff. You may also file a grievance with:

NJ Department of Children and Families
Legal Affairs
Americans with Disabilities Act Coordinator
PO Box 729
Trenton, NJ 08625-0729

How can I get in touch with DYFS?

On the first page of this handbook your worker has provided the address and phone number of the local office that will be serving your family. Your local office is open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. each working day.

After 5:00 p.m. and on weekends and holidays, if you have concerns about a child's safety or other emergency, you can call the Child Abuse/Neglect Hotline at **1-877 NJ ABUSE**

Are there other agencies or hotlines that help families in need?

In addition to DYFS, there are other organizations that can provide assistance to your family. Your worker will help identify resources in your community.

The following page lists a few telephone numbers that can provide help.

Many thanks to the Massachusetts Department of Social Services for sharing ideas from their Parents Guide to Child Protective Services.

Child Abuse Hotline
1-877 NJ ABUSE
(1-877-652-2873)
TTY 1-800-835-5510

Any person having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been abused or neglected has a legal responsibility to report it to DYFS. Calls may be made anonymously.

Family Helpline
1-800- THE KIDS
(1-800-843-5437)

If you are feeling stressed out, call to speak to a trained volunteer of Parents Anonymous who can provide support and refer you to resources in your community.

Child Behavioral Health Services
1-877-652-7624

Call this number to find out about services for children and teens with emotional and behavioral health care challenges and their families.

Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800- 572 SAFE (7233)

Call this number for information about domestic violence services in your local area.

Addictions Hotline of NJ
1-800- 238-2333

Call this number for information and treatment referrals for substance abuse.

Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN)
1-800- 654-SPAN (7726)

This organization provides support to parents and caregivers and advocates for their rights.

NJ State Bar Association Automated Helpline
732-249-5000

If you need to find a lawyer, your County Bar Association can help. The State Bar Association can give you the phone number in your area.

Legal Services of New Jersey
1-888-LSNJ-LAW
(1-888-576-5529)

Contact this hotline for information, advice and referrals for low-income people with civil legal problems.

2-1-1 (www.nj211.org)

This phone number refers callers to various human services in their community.

NJ Helps (www.njhelps.org)

At this web site you can find out about programs for children, families and individuals. You can also prescreen for eligibility for Food Stamps, Medicaid and other programs.

If you are deaf or hard of hearing, please call 1-877-294-4356 TTY to access any hotline.

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DYFS 18-32
rev. 11/08