

Understanding the Language of Child Welfare: A Resource for Parents

Stages of the Child Welfare Process

Wisconsin's child welfare system is divided into three stages: Access, Initial Assessment, and Ongoing.

- The **Access** stage is where a local agency receives information about suspected child maltreatment from community members and mandated reporters.
- **Initial Assessment** is the second stage of the process where the agency performs interviews with the child, parent (s), Indian custodian, and other adults who are in contact with the child. Utilizing the information collected, child welfare professionals determine whether maltreatment has occurred, if the child can safely remain in the home, and whether additional services may be needed.
- **Ongoing** is the third and final stage during which the child welfare professional continuously assesses the unsafe condition, what is making your child and/or home unsafe, then works with you to determine what services and supports will help you manage the condition and maintain a safe home environment. If your child has been removed from your home, the ongoing child welfare professional will develop a permanency plan and support your family as you participate in services and work towards timely permanence and safe case closure.

For more information: **Wisconsin's Child Welfare Process Explained:** [Access](#) and [Initial Assessment](#).

Purpose of Child Welfare

The State of Wisconsin Child Welfare System works with families to ensure the safety, permanence and well-being of children. Wisconsin's child welfare system is county-operated and state-supervised, except for Milwaukee County, which is administered by the state through the Division of Milwaukee Child Protective Services. Counties and tribes work in partnership with many community-based organizations to provide resources to families in crisis to keep children safely in their homes.

Understanding the Child Welfare Process

When your local agency engages with you and your child/children, it may be because the child welfare agency received information that your child may have been abused, neglected, or is at risk of being abused or neglected. Wisconsin law requires the child welfare agency to review each referral and decide if the agency needs additional information to determine your family's need for services and your child's need for safety. Child welfare professionals look for danger threats, safety concerns, protective capacities, and any signs of an unsafe child or children who may be at risk.

Terms You May Hear or See¹

Physical Abuse: Causing serious physical harm and injury by other than accidental means.²

Sexual Abuse: Sexual intercourse or sexual touching of a child; forced viewing of sexual activity, child sex trafficking, child prostitution, sexual exploitation.³

Emotional Abuse/Damage: Serious harm to a child's psychological or intellectual functioning when parents do not provide the needed treatment.⁴

Neglect: Seriously endangering the physical health of the child by not providing needed food, clothing, shelter, medical or dental care or supervision.⁵

CHIPS: Child in need of Protective Services

TPC: Temporary Physical Custody

OHC: Out-of-Home Care is when a child is physically in the care of someone other than their primary parent or caregiver

Permanency Plan: “Permanency plan” means a plan designed to ensure that a child is reunified with his or her family whenever appropriate, or that the child quickly attains a placement in a home providing long-term stability.⁶

Mandated Reporter: Individuals required by law to report child abuse and or neglect to a county agency or law enforcement.⁷

ICWA: Indian Child Welfare Act

WICWA: Wisconsin Indian Child Welfare Act

Tribal Child Welfare Professional: Represents the tribes’ interest in its children under the ICWA and WICWA

¹ The definitions included below are simplified summaries. The full statutory definition of some terms are included in a footnote after each term.

² Under s. 48.02(1)(a), abuse is defined as “[p]hysical injury inflicted on a child by other than accidental means.” Under s. 48.02 (14g), “physical injury” is defined as “includes but is not limited to lacerations, fractured bones, burns, internal injuries, severe or frequent bruising or great bodily harm, as defined in s. 939.22 (14).”

³ Under s. 48.02(1)(b)-(f), sexual abuse is defined as “sexual intercourse or sexual contact under s. 940.225, 948.02, 948.025, or 948.085,” a violation of s. 948.05 [sexual exploitation of a child], a violation of s. 948.051 [trafficking of a child], “[p]ermitt[ing], allow[ing] or encourag[ing] a child to violate s. 944.30(1m)” [prostitution], a violation of s. 948.055 [causing a child to view or listen to sexual activity], or a violation of s. 948.10 [exposing genitals, pubic area, or intimate parts].

⁴ Under s. 48.02(1)(gm), emotional abuse is defined as “[e]motional damage for which the child’s parent, guardian or legal custodian has neglected, refused or been unable for reasons other than poverty to obtain the necessary treatment or to take steps to ameliorate the symptoms.” Under s. 48.02(5j), emotional damage is defined as “harm to a child’s psychological or intellectual functioning” that is “evidenced by one or more of the following characteristics exhibited to a severe degree: anxiety; depression; withdrawal; outward aggressive behavior; or a substantial and observable change in behavior, emotional response or cognition that is not within the normal range for the child’s age and stage of development.”

⁵ Under s. 48.02(12g), neglect is defined as “failure, refusal or inability on the part of a caregiver, for reasons other than poverty, to provide necessary care, food, clothing, medical or dental care or shelter so as to seriously endanger the physical health of the child.”

⁶ Under s. 48.38(1)(b), a permanency plan is defined as “a plan designed to ensure that a child is reunified with his or her family whenever appropriate, or that the child quickly attains a placement or home providing long-term stability.”

⁷ Any of the following persons who has reasonable cause to suspect that a child seen by the person in the course of professional duties has been abused or neglected or who has reason to believe that a child seen by the person in the course of professional duties has been threatened with abuse or neglect and that abuse or neglect of the child will occur shall, except as provided under subs. (2m) and (2r), report as provided in sub.(3).

The Department of Children and Families is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. If you have a disability and need to access services, receive information in an alternate format, or need information translated to another language, please call the Division of Safety and Permanence at (608) 266-8787. Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind or speech disabled can use the free Wisconsin Relay Service (WRS) – 711 to contact the department.