



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

You have the right to refuse to allow DCF to visit your home. We understand how hard it is to have the privacy of your home open to someone you don't know. However, when a report of abuse or neglect is received, DCF is required by law to meet with parents and all children in the home.

Our concern is to be sure your child is safe. If a family prevents the social worker from visiting, DCF may have to seek help from the police or the court in order to check on the children's safety. We believe that by working together we can address safety concerns, building on the strengths of your family so that everyone is safe and healthy.

Who else can help me when I have questions or need support?

The Ombudsman Office is available to answer questions about DCF and respond to concerns you may have. The Ombudsman staff can provide information regarding the appropriate steps you can take to address a problem or direct you to additional sources of help or information. Please call **(617) 748-2444**.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR DCF

Name of Social Worker

Name of Supervisor

Area Office or Contracted Provider Agency

Street

City Zip

Telephone Number

E-mail

A PARENT'S VOICE ...

I know that a visit from a DCF worker to talk about your family can be difficult. Not having information can make you fearful, confused and sometimes, angry. I hope this guide will answer some of your questions and let you know there are people here who can help when you need it.

A PARENT'S VOICE ...

I am the parent. I want the agency worker to know that this means I have certain rights. I know that it means I have certain responsibilities also. My major piece of advice – hard as it is sometimes – is to try to make the worker's job easier, not harder, whenever you can. I thank her for special acts like buying my son his favorite candy bar. I give her information. I make calls to the school and others. Then I tell her what I find out. This helps my child and is a constant reminder that I am the parent.

A PARENT'S VOICE ...

I wasn't really involved in the beginning. I felt like they were talking over my head and I told my worker how I felt. We came up with help to get my kids back. I went to a parent support group and learned how to speak for myself. I found out that I could let others know that I needed help. I worked with a family advocate who was also an ex-addict and had been sober for 13 years. She told me that my kids needed to be with me and that I shouldn't give up. I had to learn how to bond with my baby, she was so young when she left me. I began to feel better about myself and have been clean and sober for 8 years. I've had a job all that time and now have my kids with me and I'm a volunteer advocate for other families.

Child Protection Information

For more information about reporting child abuse and/or neglect:

- www.mass.gov/dcf for general information or to find a DCF Area Office
- **Child-At-Risk-Hotline 800-792-5200**
- **DCF Ombudsman 617-748-2444** (9 – 5 pm, weekdays) for inquiries about DCF programs, policies or service delivery.

Contact Us

Massachusetts Department of Children and Families
Olga Roche, Acting Commissioner
600 Washington Street, 6th Floor
Boston, MA 02111

phone 617-748-2000
fax 617-261-7435
web www.mass.gov/dcf

DCF Area Office Directory

WEST

- Greenfield 413-775-5000
- Holyoke 413-493-2600
- Springfield 413-452-3200
- Van Wart Center, East Springfield 413-205-0500
- Worcester East, Worcester West 508-929-2000
- South Central, Whitinsville 508-929-1000
- North Central, Leominster 978-353-3600
- Pittsfield 413-236-1800

NORTHERN

- Lowell 978-275-6800
- Framingham 508-424-0100
- Haverhill 978-469-8800
- Lawrence 978-557-2500
- Cambridge/Somerville 617-520-8700
- Malden 781-388-7100
- Cape Ann, Salem 978-825-3800
- Lynn 781-477-1600

SOUTHERN

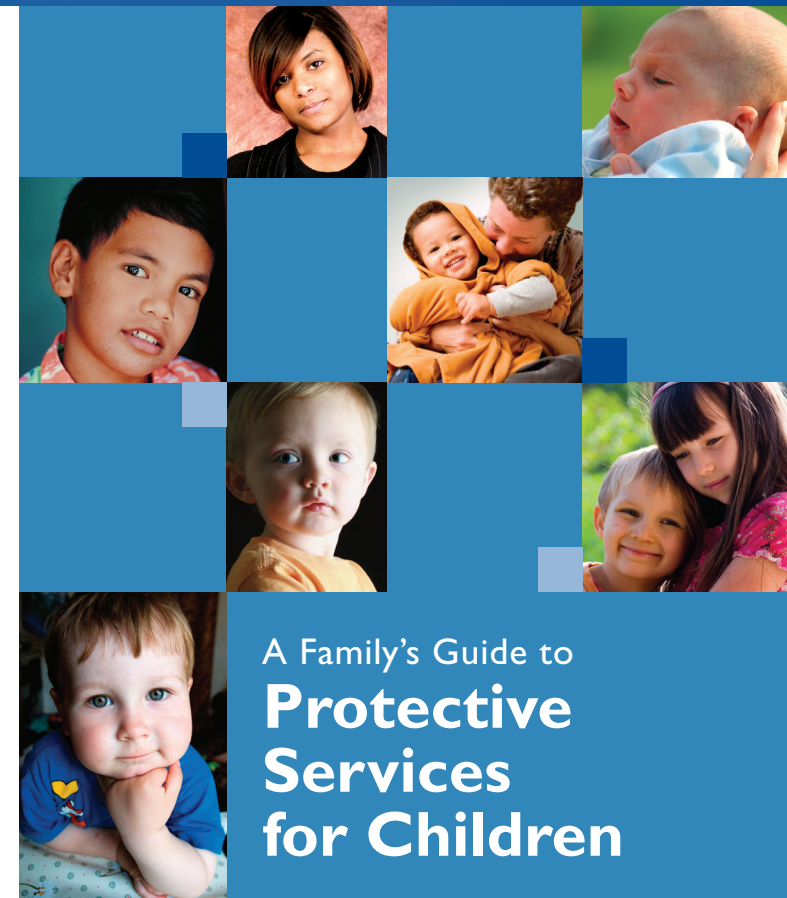
- Arlington 781-641-8500
- Coastal, South Weymouth 781-682-0800
- Cape Cod & Islands 508-760-0200
- Plymouth 508-732-6200
- Fall River 508-235-9800
- New Bedford 508-910-1000
- Brockton 508-894-3700
- Taunton/Attleboro 508-821-7000

BOSTON

- Dimock Street, Roxbury 617-989-2800
- Hyde Park 617-363-5000
- Harbor, Chelsea 617-660-3400
- Park Street, Dorchester 617-822-4700



A Family's Guide to Protective Services for Children





A Family's Guide

What is in this Guide?

When a DCF social worker contacts you, you may feel confused and worried about what might happen. We hope this guide will help you better understand:

- What to expect when DCF contacts you;
- How DCF can help you and your family;
- Your rights when DCF is involved with your family; and
- Where you can find support for your family.

What is DCF?

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is the state agency responsible for protecting children and ensuring that they are safe and well cared for. DCF is committed to supporting children and strengthening families.

DCF recognizes that parenting is probably the single most difficult job anyone ever takes on. Some parents do not have the support they need to parent effectively, and every parent sometimes needs the help of other caring adults. Some parents may be alone and without anyone to turn to when they are exhausted or don't know what to do. Sometimes parents work hard to feed and house their children and experience stresses that make taking care of their children a challenge.

Why would DCF contact me?

In Massachusetts, when anyone suspects that a child is abused and/or neglected, they can report the situation to DCF. Some people, like doctors, teachers, and child care workers, are required by law to report their concerns to the Department. The identity of the person making the report cannot be revealed. If DCF receives a report that someone believes your child has been abused and/or neglected, they are required by law to respond. When a report is received, a DCF social worker will contact you and may come to your home to learn more about your family and to decide if any help is needed.

How can I be sure the visitor is really a DCF employee?

Every DCF social worker carries a state identification. You are entitled to see this when they visit your home.

What happens when DCF visits my home?

DCF does an "Investigation" when the report is about serious abuse or neglect. DCF does an Initial Assessment when there has been a less serious allegation. An Investigation or an Initial Assessment is done to determine whether your child is safe and what services might be needed to help support you and your family to provide for his/her needs.

The social worker will want to see and speak with everyone in the family, including children. You can invite a supportive friend or relative to be with you. During the visit, you will learn what was reported and you can share your feelings and thoughts about the report. The social worker may ask for names of your child's teacher, pediatrician, school counselor, or other persons who know you and your children. You can also give the worker names of people you would like him or her to talk with. These visits and interviews must be completed within 5 – 15 work days.

Does DCF share my family information with anyone else?

DCF is required to keep the information on your family confidential. Information is shared only for a few reasons. For example, DCF is required to notify the District Attorney and police if the report about your family concerns sexual abuse or exploitation, serious physical injury, or death of a child. If a court hearing were to take place about this incident or about custody of your child, the information about your family could and might be used in court. Employers recruiting for positions that have direct contact with children can request a background check with DCF. Information about an Initial Assessment will not generally be shared with future employers who may conduct background checks.

What happens at the end of an Investigation or Initial Assessment?

DCF will write a report that summarizes what the social worker learned from you or the other people he or she talked with. DCF will also send you a letter stating one of two things:

1. The Investigation is "Unsupported" or the Initial Assessment showed "Minimal or No Concern." A case will not be opened and DCF visits will stop. You do not have to do anything else. However, if you do want services for your family, you can ask DCF to open a "voluntary case."

OR

2. The Investigation is "Supported," or the Initial Assessment shows "Substantiated Concern." DCF may open a case to be sure that your child's needs are met and that your family gets the services you need to keep your children safe.

What if DCF opens a case for my family?

When a DCF case is opened for your family, a social worker will talk with you to learn more about your strengths and needs and what support might be helpful to you and your children. This may be the same social worker you have met with before or it may be a new social worker. Together, you and the social worker will decide on a "Service Plan" for your family. This plan will list the services DCF will provide to you and your children. It will also describe the things you, your children and DCF need to do to help your family. The purpose of this plan is to strengthen your family and keep your children safe and secure. You should be involved in developing the Service Plan and should make sure you know what is included before you sign it.

How can a Service Plan with DCF help my family?

The DCF social worker will help you plan the things you need to make your family stronger. Sometimes the support of friends and relatives and other community resources, like food pantries and child care, may be all that's needed to help you through this difficult time. Depending on what your family needs, DCF can connect you to people in your community who offer supportive services. Some examples are parent aides, family advocates, family nurturing programs, English classes, counseling, programs for pregnant teens, and many other services. Families who are new to this country can be linked to people who share their cultural background and language. If you have a child younger than three years old, your plan will include a referral to an "early intervention program." These programs help children and their families determine any special needs the child may have and provide services to see that the needs are met.

Will my children be taken from my home?

The answer to this question is usually NO.

DCF's goal is to keep children at home and to support families so that everyone is safe and healthy. However, if a child is in immediate danger DCF has the authority to remove him or her from their home. A child might be removed if he or she has been sexually assaulted, seriously physically abused or severely neglected by someone in the home. If a child must be removed from home to be protected, DCF must seek court approval for the removal right away or on the following business day. If this were to happen, DCF will work with parents to find a "kinship" placement. This is a family member or friend who can provide a safe home while concerns are addressed. If kinship placement is not possible, every effort will be made to find a foster home in the same community. The next goal is to make the family home safe, and then to return the child as soon as possible to their own home.

What are my rights as a parent involved with DCF?

You have the right to:

- Speak with an attorney or have one with you at any time. If DCF takes the case to court and you aren't able to pay for an attorney, the judge will appoint one for you.
- Invite a supportive friend or relative to be with you when DCF visits.
- Ask and have answered any question you might have about what is happening from the time of the report through the end of DCF involvement. If you are a parent living outside the home your rights may be different. Call the DCF Area Office to find out.
- Be notified in writing of the Department's decision at the end of the Investigation or Initial Assessment.

What if I disagree with DCF decisions?

First, tell your social worker and that person's supervisor that you disagree with the decision. Next, write a letter stating your disagreement and the facts as you see them. Send the letter to the worker and supervisor, and ask that it be added to your file.

If you believe that DCF didn't follow its rules in deciding that a report of abuse and/or neglect was "Supported" after an Investigation, you can request a "Fair Hearing." This request must be submitted within 30 days after you receive the notice of the DCF decision. For detailed information or help in completing a fair hearing request, please call **(617) 748-2030**.

If there are other decisions or actions you disagree with, including the decisions after an Initial Assessment or Service Plan, you can initiate a "Grievance Process" by sending a written complaint within 30 days to the area office. You will need to describe the decision or conduct and the reason you are complaining, the date it happened, and add other information that supports your complaint. For detailed information or help in completing a grievance, please call **(617) 748-2030**.