

**Child Welfare
Investigations in
Foster Homes:**
A Guide for Foster
Parents to
Understand Their
Rights and
Responsibilities



OKLAHOMA
Human Services

You Are Not Alone!

As a foster parent, you may experience a report of abuse or neglect regarding the children placed in your home. This can happen for numerous reasons. It is important to remember children in out-of-home care have experienced trauma and are particularly vulnerable. If you find yourself experiencing an investigation, remember:

- YOU ARE NOT ALONE!
- Just because an allegation has been made, Oklahoma Human Services DOES NOT assume that abuse/neglect occurred; a thorough assessment of child safety and investigation is completed before any decision is made about the allegations.
- This may be a difficult time for you and may cause disruption within your family.
- You may experience feelings of fear, embarrassment, shock or anger.
- You will have questions about the process. Ask them.
- Investigations seek to reveal facts and specifics around the circumstances of an incident. During this process, the incident is examined objectively, facts are documented and information is used to make a finding.
- Communication with your worker regarding the children placed in your home is critical.



Foster families are at higher risk for allegations because:

1. Foster families are more closely observed than families in the general public.
2. The addition of foster children may alter your current family dynamics.
3. Children who have experienced trauma may display behaviors as a result of the trauma experienced. These behaviors are a form of communication that can be supported with different parenting tools provided by community resources.
4. Children may display behaviors that require additional supports while placed in a foster home.
5. Children may develop a level of safety with you and disclose information that may require reporting.
6. Some children experience difficulty trusting adults due to their background and may experience challenges adjusting to a family setting.



Mandatory reporting laws

Children in state custody are more vulnerable and Oklahoma Human Services is required to protect them from subsequent abuse or neglect while they are in custody.

State law requires all people who believe that a child has been abused or neglected to make a report to the Oklahoma Human Services Statewide Abuse and Neglect Hotline at 1-800-522-3511. This law requires the agency to investigate the reports of child abuse or neglect for the primary purpose of protecting children.

Reporting and Assignment:

When a call is received at the Oklahoma Human Services Abuse and Neglect Hotline, the information is documented in a Referral Information Report. The report is carefully evaluated to determine if the referral meets criteria to be accepted for investigation. All decision-making is fully documented by the child welfare (CW) specialist. All accepted abuse/neglect referrals involving children in foster homes will be investigated. Screened out referrals are referred to your foster care specialist.

1. Reports can be screened-out and referred to CW permanency planning, foster care and adoption staff to address concerns regarding policy or rules violations.
2. An accepted report is fully investigated and a report documenting the interviews and findings is submitted to the appropriate district attorney. The findings of the investigation can be substantiated, unsubstantiated or ruled out. A finding of substantiated means that an incident in the home did occur that rose to the level of abuse and/or neglect.
3. When Oklahoma Human Services receives a report that a child has an unexplained injury in a foster home, the child's CW specialist immediately interviews and observes the child, caregiver and witnesses. If it is determined the injury was the result of an accident, the CW specialist documents the information and the report is screened out.

What information will be collected from me in an investigation?

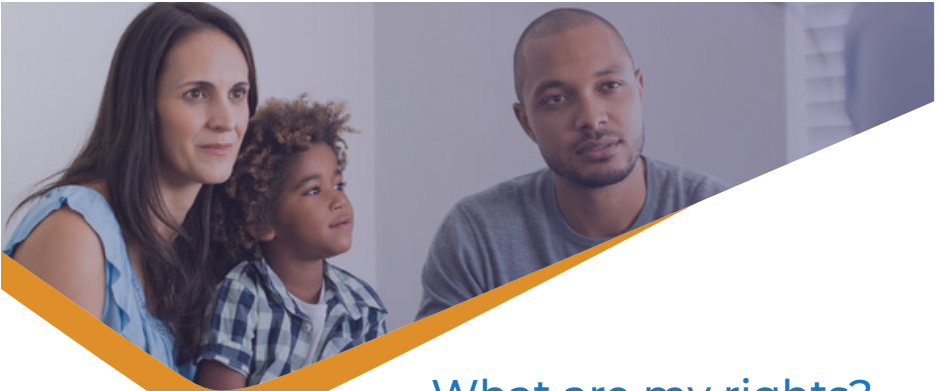
It is a CW specialist's responsibility to find out all she or he can about the situation. Law enforcement may conduct a joint investigation with the CW specialist.

The CW specialist collects the following types of information through private interviews with the persons in the home:

1. A description of the alleged incident that led to the report;
2. Identification of all residents/caregivers in the home;
3. A complete description of any injuries to the child, which may include asking a physician to help determine the severity of the injuries;
4. A description of the child and other children in the household;
5. A description of the home environment;
6. A description of the family dynamics social and environment; and
7. A description of the family's strengths and needs.

Some of the information-gathering, especially the descriptions, can be very in-depth. Be prepared for a lot of questions! Detailed information is collected to understand how well the foster parent can protect the child(ren) in their care. This information is used to assist in determining if abuse or neglect occurred and may include:

1. Disciplinary techniques and strategies;
2. Ability and understanding of the supervision needs of the child;
3. Interest in protecting child from danger;
4. Physical and behavioral health;
5. Criminal history;
6. Motivation for caring for children;
7. Knowledge of social, emotional and behavioral development and trauma history;
8. Intellectual functioning;
9. Recognition of strengths and needs; and
10. Financial status and work history.



What are my rights?

1. You have the right to be informed of the allegation made against you. Oklahoma Human Services is not authorized to disclose who made the allegation.
2. You have the right to provide your information about the incident being investigated.
3. You have a right to have an attorney represent you at your cost.
4. You DO NOT have the right to deny the CW specialist access to the child in state custody.
5. The agency will determine if the child in foster care should remain in your home during the investigation or if there is a need to move the child. Should there be a need to place the child(ren) outside of the home, you will have the ability to have input on an alternative caregiver the child may already know. You can also provide names of other adults who are aware of the situation.
6. Any allegation that is substantiated automatically receives a program review by the Child Protective Services (CPS) Programs Unit.
7. Oklahoma law requires foster parents who are found to have abused or neglected a child in their care to be subject to placement on the Restricted Registry maintained by Oklahoma Human Services Child Care Services (CCS).

How to prepare for the placement of children into your home

Prior to placement of a child in state custody into your home:

1. Get as much information about the child as possible before you accept a placement. Ask about the child's trauma history and potential triggers.
2. Understand how trauma can impact brain development.
3. Understand normal child development.
4. Don't be afraid to say no to a placement if you feel you may not be able to meet the child's needs.
5. Communicate with the child's CW specialist and your resource specialist often and honestly. If your specialist knows there are problems, the specialist can assist you before things get out of control.
6. Seek outside resources and assistance immediately if behaviors or issues arise that are becoming out of control.
7. Attend trainings available to you.
8. Keep logs/notebooks on each child to document visitation with family members, medical appointments, school progress/problems, medical needs, behavioral patterns or changes and efforts to teach acceptable behavior.
9. Document any changes in behavior in children including type, severity and duration of these changes, especially after parental visitation. Include any action taken to deal with inappropriate behavior. Also document any unusual behavior the child has regarding social workers, police or medical personnel.
10. Report injuries to the head, face, neck, stomach, and back promptly, but no more than 24 hours from when the injury occurred.

11. Always document any serious conflicts with parents, children, social workers, counselors, teachers, etc.
12. Always inform your resource specialist if you intend to have new adults around the children placed in your home on a consistent basis or have anyone moving into your home or onto your property.

If you accept a child who is considered high-risk and/or who has had numerous placements:

1. Talk with the CW specialist about the child's trauma.
2. Allow the child to discuss his or her history of abuse/ neglect at the child's pace and when the child wants to discuss it.
3. Tell the child that you plan to protect him or her and yourself.
4. Enlist the help of a competent professional who is experienced in working with survivors of trauma, such as a therapist or other professional. You and the child will need ongoing therapeutic support from a person who knows you well. Your CW specialist can assist you in initiating therapy.
5. Discuss with your CW specialist the level of supervision the child needs and make a plan for supervision and safety issues, especially for younger children. Children who are in state custody often have fewer boundaries than other children.
6. Closely supervise children at all times.
7. Be aware of places in your home where children might hide and monitor them frequently.
8. Leave nap room doors open and periodically check on children during these times.



9. Conduct frequent safety checks and make sure all hazardous materials are securely put away. Safety guidelines cannot be compromised.
10. Never use, or threaten to use, corporal punishment as a means of discipline. This form of discipline is not authorized for foster parents and is a policy violation, but can also initiate an investigation when used on children 5 and under.
11. Carefully screen relatives and friends who come into your home. Make sure they understand licensing regulations, house rules and any specific restrictions about individual children because of previous abuse, court orders, etc.
12. Do not be alone with a child who is sexually reactive, acts out sexually, or has provocative behavior. Advise adults and older children in the household to have another adult nearby or in the same room for the protection of both the adult and the child.
13. Children who have previously experienced sexual victimization are more vulnerable to repeat victimization. Always take new allegations seriously and make a report, even if a child has a history of making false allegations. It is the duty of the foster parent, working together with professionals, to protect the child and give the child functional boundaries and self-protective strategies.



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