

building bridges

How Social Workers Support Children

contents

the state of child welfare in the US.....	4
The Role of a Social Worker in Children's Services	6
when social workers come into children's lives.....	7
adoption and how children are placed	9
importance of adult/child communication.....	11
How Social Workers Influence Children's Growth.....	12
support children by becoming a social worker	14

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How Social Workers Support Children

Before he was abandoned on a street corner in Dallas, Texas, at age 2, Joseph Head and his siblings had already experienced domestic violence in their home. Drugs and gang violence pervaded his early life and continued into his adolescence, even after he and his sister entered the child welfare system and relocated to Washington, D.C. His sister would eventually get adopted there, but Head would find himself back in a group home in Dallas. He was isolated from his family and his community.

Unfortunately, Head's situation is not that uncommon. But his story became exceptional when one person entered his life: Natalie Stolinsworth, a court-appointed child welfare advocate.

Because Stolinsworth gave him the stability and the space "to freely express his feelings and desires and share his dreams and visions," he realized his self-worth. He went on to graduate college and teach for a nonprofit organization in Dallas that supports at-risk youth.

Head's story is unique because of the role his child social worker played in his life. Child welfare professionals can deeply and positively affect the trajectory of the children they serve, which is why there is such a profound need for them across the country. In order to understand this more clearly, we need to examine the larger picture of the ways child welfare in the United States is changing.



the state of child welfare in the US

To understand the roles of child social workers, it's important to look at what they're expected to accomplish. While state and metropolitan agencies have unique requirements to better serve their communities, there are federal guidelines to make sure child social workers are fundamentally on the same page.

Objectives for the Child Welfare System

One organization that helps establish these guidelines is the Child Welfare Information Gateway, which is an extension of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). It [charts the roles and expectations](#) for the child welfare framework nationally, and many smaller communities have based their objectives on these guidelines. Centrally, they frame the role of the child welfare system to be a collaboration among public and private agencies, community and local organizations, and other related public entities “to ensure that families receive the services they need.” Those services can include childcare, parenting classes, mental health services, and substance abuse treatment, among others. The organizations work together to:

- ♥ **Facilitate the appropriate resources to prevent child abuse/neglect.**
- ♥ **Offer families support to keep their children protected.**

- ♥ Evaluate family and children needs.
- ♥ Examine cases of potential child abuse/neglect.
- ♥ Organize plans for children to live with extended family or in foster homes.
- ♥ Maintain support for children in foster homes or living with extended family.
- ♥ Provide opportunities for children to reunite with families, attain adoption, or secure other permanent living conditions with existing family.

These expectations exist to help focus the attention of different organizations and child social workers to best serve their communities. Outside of these objectives, it's important to understand what kinds of goals child social workers should have regarding their work.

According to the “Child Welfare Outcomes 2016: Report to Congress,” the Children’s Bureau within the HHS’s Administration for Children and Families has highlighted seven primary outcomes for “state and local child welfare agency administrators, child advocacy organizations, child welfare researchers, state legislators, and other experts in the child welfare field.” The goals for the people in these roles are to:

- 1. Decrease child abuse/neglect.**
- 2. Decrease child abuse/neglect in foster care settings.**
- 3. Build permanent homes for children in foster care settings.**
- 4. Decrease time for children in foster care to reunification with parents – and build better conditions to decrease reentry potential.**
- 5. Decrease the amount of time for children in foster care to adoption.**
- 6. Improve foster care assignment stability rates.**
- 7. Decrease the number of instances where children are assigned to group homes or institutions.**

These objectives were created because of some pretty startling data. The Children's Bureau's 2018 Administration for Children and Family's report stated that in 2017, of the 690,548 children that were served, there were only 59,430 adoptions through the foster care system. Several factors influence this stark contrast, like children moving in with blood relatives, returning to their birth parents, or aging out of their program. But the fact remains that there is an alarming abundance of children remaining in foster care with limited opportunity to become adopted.

As child social workers navigate their own expectations and goals, they must take into consideration the statistical challenges they will encounter. While the primary goal for child welfare professionals is to ensure a child's safety in their family lives, they are also centrally responsible for finding permanent living situations for those children that are safe, productive homes.

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The Role of a Social Worker in Children's Services

It's important to break down the roles of child social workers a little bit more to gain a greater understanding of where the state of child welfare is currently. According to Tracy R. Whitaker of the National Association of Social Workers, there has always been a distinction between child welfare professionals and social workers, but she noted that "the social work profession formed the professional base of the child welfare workforce and has continued to demonstrate an active commitment to the well-being of children and families." As for the current state of child welfare across the United States, she raised concerns about how under-professionalized the workforce has become. Specifically, she noted that only 15% of child welfare workers currently hold degrees, making the services they provide not as effective as they could be. As a result, Whitaker said, a massive staffing shortage has developed for governmental, nonprofit, and private child welfare agencies.

There's a particular problem with turnover as child welfare administrators have a difficult time holding onto the workers that comprise their firms. However, Whitaker is more hopeful about the future and stated that as administrators work to address the concerns of the workforce, "social workers and child welfare practice can again realign to ensure professional service delivery to America's most vulnerable children and families."



when social workers come into children's lives

Social workers enter children's lives for a variety of reasons in order to advocate for the child's best interests. Regardless of the situation, child social workers engage with children and families to help make challenging times less difficult.

Child Protective Services (CPS) are typically local or state governmental bodies that intervene to protect the welfare of children. In instances where child abuse or neglect has been reported, CPS investigators will be notified to unpack what's going on. Child social workers then are brought in to help determine the best courses of action. Typically, according to the comprehensive framework through the Child Information Gateway titled "Child Protective Services: A Guide for Caseworkers," investigators and case workers follow a nine-step model:

- 1. Recognition:** A third-party or someone intimate with the situation witnesses abuse or neglect.
- 2. Filing a report:** The third-party informs either CPS or the police of abusive behavior.
- 3. Report assessment:** The filed report gets analyzed by CPS to make sure it meets agency guidelines and that an investigation is warranted.
- 4. Investigation:** CPS approaches the child and the family to evaluate the child's safety and to develop appropriate safety plans.

- 5. Thorough family evaluation:** After determining the family's needs, CPS will identify the different aspects that contribute to abuse or neglect.
- 6. Planning:** CPS works with the child and the parents to draft objectives to eliminate risk of abuse or neglect with clear time frames.
- 7. Additional resources:** Depending on the severity and validity of the abuse allegation, CPS will offer children in-home harm reduction tactics or out-of-home services such as foster care.
- 8. Assessment of progress:** After CPS conducts more investigative work, child social workers will evaluate how effective the family has been at reducing risk of abuse or neglect.
- 9. Conclusion of services:** Once CPS has determined that the family can keep the child safe without the intervention of CPS, the agency will end its services.

While CPS agencies in different areas have different organizational objectives, this framework largely dictates how child social workers should act when abuse is suspected within a family. As advocates of children from all communities, social workers strive for three essential goals for keeping children safe, according to the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. They are to provide protected and safe living conditions, a permanent home, and child welfare services through “cognitive, psychological, and behavioral development.”

These guidelines make more sense when positioned in the real world. The National Association of Social Workers' policy stance includes statistical evidence about why “a qualified and stable child welfare workforce is the foundation of child welfare service delivery.” As CPS professionals work to investigate allegations of child abuse or maltreatment, they should know what they're confronting. According to the Child Maltreatment 2017 report compiled by the United States HHS, there were 674,000 victims of child abuse that year. In other words, for every 1,000 children, 9 experienced some kind of abuse or neglect. This rate varied based on age and state, but the most vulnerable children tended to be the youngest. Children aged 2 to 3, for example, experienced victimization rates of 11 and 10.4 victims per 1,000 children of those respective ages in the population.

These figures are certainly disturbing, but social workers use them as a motivating force to best support the children in their communities to eventually eliminate the risk of child abuse.



adoption and how children are placed

The nuances of adoption requirements change from state to state, but there are some foundational consistencies that persist across the country. In the child welfare system, children are only able to be adopted after their birth parents revoke their parenting rights or are lawfully stripped of their legal statuses as parental guardians.

As of 2019, there are three primary tracks prospective parents can take to adopt a child, according to the New York Times. They can go through the foster care system, a private adoption agency or attorney, or independent international means. Going through a private agency or attorney can prove incredibly costly – averaging around \$50,000 in adoption fees – and securing an adoption overseas can be overwhelming because of rapidly changing international laws, but adopting through the foster care system has several benefits.

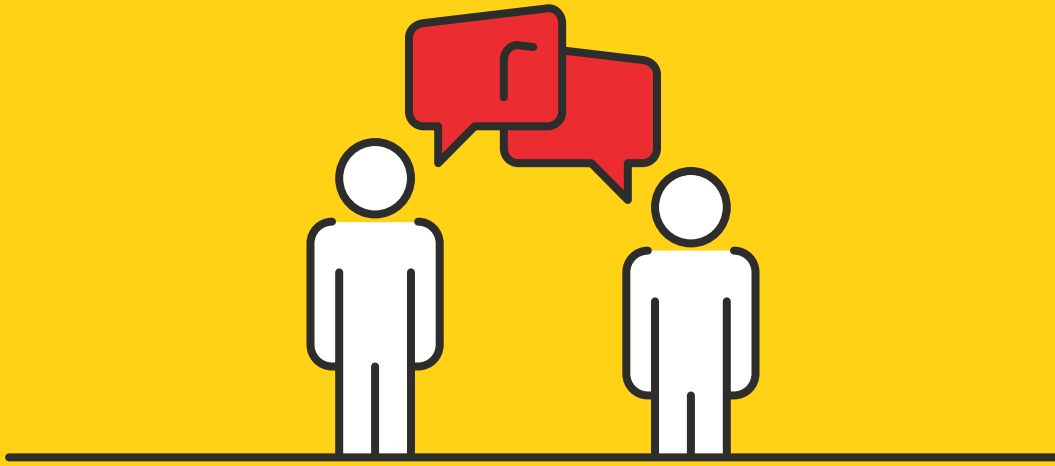
Child social workers equip potential adoptive parents with 20-30 hours of free training, because according to the Child Welfare Information Gateway, many children entering foster care have directly experienced some kind of trauma, abuse, or neglect.

This method of adoption requires a little bit of further unpacking. While it's true that over 440,000 children are in the foster care system daily, according to the Administration for Children and Families Report as part of the HHS, only about a quarter of those children are eligible to be adopted. Because

one of the primary goals for child social workers and the organizations that they work under is to reunite children in foster homes with their birth parents, children must be “freed” legally. Only after children meet those specifications can they go forward with a prospective adoption process.

At this stage, it’s important for a child social worker to step in to help facilitate a relationship between a child and prospective adoptive parents. It’s hugely important to note here that this is a process. Like the case with Joseph Head and countless others, children will likely enter more than one foster home before getting adopted. Child social workers can make this transitional process a lot easier for both the children involved and the adoptive parents. Moreover, children can look to their social worker as a confidant if conditions begin to sour.

Additionally, child social workers can be advocates for these children going through the foster care and adoption processes by making sure their fundamental needs are being met, that they’re proceeding successfully with their education, and that they’re comfortable in their new homes. To further provide children with a safe home, social workers can assist parents through classes and other necessary resources to make the transition process as smooth as possible.



importance of adult/child communication

Children entering the foster system are, for the most part, especially vulnerable. And it makes sense after the data is considered. According to a National Conference of State Legislatures report on the topic, 72% of the children entering foster care are victims of neglect. While the ultimate goal is to reunify these children with their birth parents, these initial conditions can have immensely negative effects on their psychology as well as the overall health that can follow these victims into adulthood. Statistically speaking, children are at much greater risk of developing the following psychological and physiological problems as they progress into adulthood:

- ♥ **Substance abuse**
- ♥ **Obesity**
- ♥ **Complications from unintended or adolescent pregnancy**
- ♥ **Depression**
- ♥ **Heart disease**

It's vitally important, then, that child welfare professionals advocate for children's best interests. In the unfortunate event of a child entering a CPS program, a child social worker can provide stability and support as they assist throughout the process.



To give more context to the importance of a child social worker facilitating a more stable environment for a victim of abuse or neglect, it's helpful to look at the skills children develop socially and emotionally. Joe Magliano of Psychology Today highlights five major skills that children need to attain as they grow. They include:

- 1. A heightened awareness of feelings, actions, and consequences.**
- 2. The ability to manage these feelings, actions, and consequences.**
- 3. A capability of expressing empathy.**
- 4. Relationship-building behaviors.**
- 5. Making more deliberate choices that affect others.**

While these skills may seem like a lot of responsibility at first, it's common that children begin moving toward these behaviors as they continue in their social and emotional development. When children experience trauma that results in CPS having to intervene, they are at much greater risk of hindering these skills. Child welfare advocates can help steer this progress back on track, though, as they strive to provide children and families with the necessary tools and resources to ensure a child's success.

How Social Workers Influence Children's Growth

This significant relationship between children and their social workers has been given academic attention, too. According to the article "Children's and young people's participation within child welfare and child protection services: a state of the art review," child social workers are uniquely equipped to dramatically improve the lives of the children they service.

In fact, the study found that a positive relationship between the social worker and the child would improve the overall experience of navigating the child welfare system. One important caveat, though, is the demotivation and alienation children feel if their social workers are either absent or replaced often. Social workers themselves often have little control over their fluctuating

case load, but child welfare professionals and children both find that greater stability and more control over decision-making would improve the general process immensely.

Outside of CPS, social workers can enter children's lives through school, another significant avenue. According to the School Social Work Association of America, a number of schools across the country are looking to bring in social workers to support at-risk students. The organization stated that "school social workers are the link between the home, school, and community in providing direct as well as indirect services to students, families, and school personnel to promote and support students' academic and social success."

To this end, school social workers provide educators, families, and children appropriate intervention tactics to help improve the lives of children in and out of school. Additionally, as trained mental health and social work professionals, they provide opportunities for one-on-one communication where children can safely open up about their family and school lives.



support children by becoming a social worker

Social workers are granted the unique responsibility to effect change directly in local communities. Across the board, social workers are hugely important in empowering and supporting marginalized people. In a number of ways, social workers can support vulnerable children to ensure their success emotionally, socially, and academically through the resources they provide at every stage of the process.

Arguably the most effective way to enter this field is through learning from professionals with extensive experience in servicing vulnerable populations of children. An [online Bachelor of Social Work](#) is one of the best options for a person considering changing their career or looking to give back to their community.

King University's fully online BSW offers students hands-on training in advocacy and intervention strategies in a flexible, accommodating format. In as little as 16 months, students will gain the knowledge necessary to graduate into a life-changing career in social work. In order to complete the requirements of this program, students will be expected to perform 400 hours of field practicum education, which gives tangible experience in the field.

Because this is an online degree, you'll be able to maintain your life commitments outside of school all while putting in the work to mold your own career path. Further, King's online BSW prepares students to enter enriching and fulfilling careers in child welfare advocacy, protection, foster care, and adoption.