



A SOCIAL WORKER'S GUIDE TO
WORKING WITH CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL WORK FOR CHILD WELFARE

Social workers play integral roles in educating, counseling, and supporting individuals and families who are at risk of being marginalized for various reasons, including culture, income, location, and education. They can address many of their clients' challenges through careful ethical and strategic intervention. Professionals specializing in child welfare work for government agencies, nonprofits, private agencies and healthcare companies where their work takes them to private homes, schools, hospitals and clinics.

Because child welfare work is so sensitive, social workers need to be equipped with a solid educational background, as well as proper certification and state licenses. Such preparation and qualification imbues social workers with an ethical knowledge base and gives them the ability to diagnose a family's needs, create an intervention plan, help implement the plan and monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of it.

Who Are the Children and Families that Need Assistance?

The [CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010](#) defines abuse and neglect as:

- Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, and
- The act or failure to act results in death, serious physical harm, sexual abuse or exploitation;
- Or an act or failure to act that represents an imminent risk of serious harm.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identifies individual, family, and community [risk factors common among families](#) that are at risk for abuse and/or neglect. Neglect and abuse are more likely to occur in families with the following risk factors:

- Children under age four
- Special needs children (physical or mental)
- Parents who were abused as children
- Parents who are uneducated about child rearing
- Parents who are young, poorly educated, have low incomes, or who are responsible for a large number of children
- Single parents and/or households with a non-biological provider in the home such as a single parent's romantic partner
- Highly stressed parents
- Families that lack interaction skills and that have formed inadequate parent-child relationships
- Families that are socially alienated
- Families with violent tendencies or that live in violent communities
- Families living in impoverished areas with high unemployment

Despite these identified risk factors, it's important to note that families can be living in at-risk circumstances without engaging in child maltreatment, just as families with no at-risk factors can be abusing or neglecting children.

What are the Needs of These Children?

Professionals such as counselors, teachers, and caseworkers who work with children are trained to recognize signs of abuse and neglect. Neglect can be physical, medical, educational, or emotional; abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional, or substance-based.





WITHOUT PROPER
INTERVENTION, THE NEGATIVE
IMPACTS OF ABUSE AND
NEGLECT ON A CHILD CAN BE
LIFE LONG.

Aside from the potential for a victim to repeat the cycle of abusive or neglectful behavior with their own children, victims may suffer emotional, physical, and developmental delays. They are more prone to consequential, harmful behaviors like drug and alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, and obesity, according to the [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services](#).

The 2012 CDC study "[The Economic Burden of Child Maltreatment in the United States and the Implications for Prevention](#)," describes how these consequences extend beyond victims and into society with costs soaring around \$124 billion to address the estimated 3 million annually reported abuse and neglect cases. Among the hundreds of thousands of cases classified as maltreatment, 1,740 were cases in which the victim died. For this reason, the needs of children are a focal point in various areas of health and well-being, such as:

- Spiritual
- Cultural
- Medical
- Dental
- Social
- Educational
- Mental

How the NASW Code of Ethics Guide Social Workers

The [NASW Code of Ethics](#) is based on the values and primary functions of social work, which are to ensure that people's basic needs are met, improve their well being, empower those in undermined positions, and address factors that negatively impact daily living. The Code of Ethics is a guiding body of knowledge for cultural, communicative, personal, financial, social, religious, intellectual, and other conflicts

that social workers encounter in professional settings. It directs the core competencies essential for social work specializing in working with children. The core values and broad ethical principles are:

- **Service**
Helping those in need
- **Social Justice**
Advocating for reform
- **Dignity and Worth**
Respecting the worth of client
- **Human Relationships**
Recognizing the essence of human relationships
- **Integrity**
Engaging in trustworthy behavior
- **Competence**
Practicing within their realms of expertise and pursuing professional development

PLACES WHERE SOCIAL WORKERS WORK

Most social workers are employed by private, public and nonprofit agencies, and their work takes place in a variety of locations including schools, residential group homes, military agencies, federal facilities and hospitals and clinics.

Social Worker vs. Counselor

Social workers who work with children often spend time in schools, where counselors are also employed. While similar in many ways, social workers and counselors differ in a few important areas:



Similarities

- Both provide counseling services to individuals, families, and groups
- Both help clients actualize their problems and cope with them
- Master's degrees are generally preferred or required in both fields

Differences

- Social workers strive to improve society as a whole, while counselors focus on individuals and family units
- Social workers also help clients ensure their basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter are met
- Social workers advocate for clients in legal arenas

Social Workers' Roles Residential Group Homes, Hospitals and Clinics

For people who are not able to care for themselves and do not have family and friends to look out for their needs, social workers help them with day-to-day activities and ensure proper care.

- In residential group homes, social workers help clients develop life skills that allow them to live as independently as possible. They help patients overcome and cope with mental, behavioral, and physical limitations, and they ensure that their clients have access to services that can help them.
- In hospitals and clinics, social workers help patients with mental illnesses and medical issues and their families cope with and adapt to their circumstances. They direct them to other resources that will provide care, education and support.

In all settings, social workers have the additional important role of advocating – when

and if necessary – on behalf of the client.

SOCIAL WORKER'S CORE COMPETENCIES

Knowledge of Child Development, Parenting, and Family Dynamics: As children grow and mature, their needs and abilities to understand grow and mature. Social workers who work with children must understand the stages of childhood development.

Recognizing Signs of Child Endangerment

Social workers must understand behaviors and attitudes that signal abuse and neglect, such as increased anxiety, aggression, depression, not wanting to go home, or even fear of certain people.

Cultural Influences

Social workers need to understand how factors such as culture, location, living arrangements, and socioeconomic status affect the ethical development and implementation of a plan of action.

Community Systems for Assistance

Another aspect of social workers' roles with families and children is creating a helpful community that can provide legal, medical, mental health and financial support to families in need.

Knowledge of Laws and Regulations

The [NASW Standards for Social Work Practices in Child Welfare Standards 2012](#) say that social workers must maintain a robust knowledge of local, state, and federal regulations, politics, and legislations. This enables social workers to present cases in legal settings, to encourage policy change and advocate on behalf of victims and clients.





WHEN A CHILD MUST BE SEPARATED FROM HIS OR HER FAMILY, SOCIAL WORKERS OVERSEE THE TRANSITIONS IN AND OUT OF FOSTER CARE, INCLUDING WHEN CHILDREN MIGHT REUNIFY WITH THEIR FAMILIES.

A SOCIAL WORKER'S ROLE IN FOSTER AND KINSHIP CARE PROGRAMS

When a child must be separated from his or her family, social workers oversee the transitions in and out of foster care, including when children might reunify with their families.

Social Workers' Roles in Assistance and Placement

The first step in the foster care process is for the social worker to ensure that the match – child and caretakers or family – is a good one. To ensure the child's well-being, social workers will:

- Meet with the family to verify the match
- Ensure the child's needs can be met
- Make sure the foster family has information to care for the foster child

Counseling and Therapy Provided for Foster Children

Children in foster care have often suffered abuse or neglect, which can have lasting damages. To compound this trauma, neglectors and abusers are often the children's parents, which adds an additional layer of psychological and emotional stressors. Counseling and therapy are often needed, and social workers will help families with these professional services.

Essential Training for the Foster Parents

To facilitate the transition into foster care, social workers train foster parents on appropriate

attitudes and behaviors relative to the foster child. Foster parents might be trained in cultural sensitivity, behavior management, and developmental disabilities.

- Cultural sensitivity training applies when the child is of a different race, ethnicity, or culture than the foster parent(s)
- Behavior management training is necessary when the foster child has behavioral issues that require special handling or treatment
- Developmental disabilities training occurs when the foster child has physical or mental disabilities that require special care

This type of training and cultural understanding can ensure that the child receives the developmental skills, treatment or special care that is needed to live a happy and healthy life.

Family Reunification & Coordination of Services

A social worker's goal for separated families is familial reunification. When evaluation results verify that reunification is safe, the process can begin. During reunification, families are strongly supported so they avoid re-entry into the foster system.

To ensure success in the family reunification process, social workers carefully coordinate these steps:

- Place children with extended family
- Place children near parents for a more successful reunification
- Engage teachers, friends, and mentors, to ensure foster care is successful and to support reunification

When reunification is not a viable option, social workers assist in finding the child permanent arrangements in the form of adoption.





LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS ARE CENTRAL FIGURES IN ADOPTIONS; NEARLY ALL PARTIES INVOLVED IN THE ADOPTION WILL INTERACT WITH THE SOCIAL WORKER THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS.

HOW SOCIAL WORKERS SUPPORT THE ADOPTION PROCESS

Licensed social workers are central figures in adoptions; nearly all parties involved in the adoption will interact with the social worker throughout the process.

Initial Steps the of Adoption Process

Adoptions begin with home visits in which the social worker determines the environment's appropriateness for the adoptee. For example, a social worker might check for:

- Working first aid kit
- Carbon monoxide detectors
- Smoke alarms on every floor or near the child's room
- Toxic substances are out of child's reach
- Protective barrier from fireplace or wood stove
- Fire extinguishers near cooking area
- Gates near the stairs to prevent injuries
- Operational locks on windows
- Fencing around swimming pool or large bodies of water

Following the evaluation, adoption attorneys may or may not involve the social workers as they validate the match.

Support Birth and Adoptive Families

Perhaps the most important thing social workers do in adoptions is to counsel the adoptive and birth families to prepare them for the transition. They do this by:

- Using neutral language that does not place emotional burden on birth or adoptive families. For example, [PhD. Deborah H. Siegel from Social Work Today](#) says the phrase "giving the baby up for adoption" implies the child is unwanted; rather, "decided to make an adoption plan" is a non-blaming statement.
- Treating everyone, including abusive or neglectful birth parents, respectfully
- Considering the child's desires
- Establishing a support system among birth parents, adoptive parents, and children

Help to Establish Permanency

Finalizing the adoption in court after placement can take six months to two years, depending on circumstances. Social workers write up requisite court documents, provide assistance, and attend hearings to finalize the adoption. They also take final rights-relinquishing paperwork from the birth parents or current legal caregiver.

Family Counseling & Coordination of Services

Following the process to establish permanency, social workers conduct post-placement supervision and prepare adoptive parents to listen, be empathetic, and answer difficult questions that adopted children tend to ask as they develop.

Given that issues arise throughout a child's adolescence, regardless of the length of time that has passed following the adoption, social workers can continue providing coordinated services by providing references, resources, and support to adoptive families as needed.



POLICY CREATION, PROGRAM EVALUATION, AND RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

Social Worker Administrator Policy Creation and Implementation

Social workers specializing in working with children can also make a difference in society and in the lives of neglected or abused children by getting involved with social policy creation and implementation. According to the [NASW](#), some of the ways social workers can make a difference in terms of child welfare policy include:

- Conducting research to determine social issues
- Culling and analyzing research results
- Raising funds or writing grants
- Making recommendations for change

Implementation necessitates robust campaigning via communication with media, policymakers, public officials, and others to enact change. Although the implementation is possible, it may take more time for this change to occur.

Program Evaluation

Following implementation, social service agencies assess the effectiveness of change through qualitative and quantitative studies. In [an example provided by the NASW](#), a social worker advocated for a group of women suspected to be highly susceptible to HIV; subsequent evaluation revealed that the population's increase of HIV cases slowed.

SOCIAL WORKER EDUCATION AND CREDENTIALS

Education Requirements

Social workers who want to be the most effective in making a difference in their clients' lives earn [Master of Social Work degrees](#). An advanced degree prepares social workers to address psychological, biological, and emotional issues that clients deal with. An MSW enables social workers to perform important counseling functions that those with BSWs are not qualified to perform.

Additionally, not only do those with MSWs have the potential to earn higher salaries than those with BSWs, but they are also more sought out by entities hiring social workers in varying areas of specialization such as case managers and social worker administrators.

Credentials & State Licensure Requirements

In addition to having an MSW degree, social workers might be required to have [NASW Professional Social Work Credentials](#) and/or Advanced Practice Specialty Credentials. Typically, credentials are renewed biannually, and:

- Communicate that a social worker has expertise, competence, and dedication
- Indicate a social worker's adherence to The NASW Code of Ethics and The NASW Standards for Continuing Education
- Are often sought out by employers looking for social work leaders



States require that social workers are licensed, and those requirements vary by state. Generally speaking, becoming and staying licensed involves:

- Board-supervised work for at least two years (depending on the level of the license)
- Fulfilling a minimum of documented direct supervision hours
- Successful completion of an Association of Social Work Boards ([ASWB](#)) licensing examination on the appropriate level (bachelor's, master's clinical, advanced generalist)
- Professional fitness check

SOCIAL WORKER CAREERS

How Can a Social Worker Move Upward in their Career Paths

Organizations that seek social workers for leadership positions prefer those who have earned a master's degree. An NASW [a salary survey](#) shows

that social workers with an MSW earn \$15,000 more than their colleagues with bachelor degrees. The study, which was published in 2010, shows that child and family social workers with an MSW earn upwards of \$72,000 per year. More recent studies (2014) published by the U.S. Department of Labor's [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) reveal that the median salary for social work community service managers was \$62,740, and go as high as \$104,540 per year.

If you are interested in social work and in making a meaningful difference in the lives of children and families who are marginalized, underserved, abused, or neglected, then take the next step about pursuing a fulfilling Master of Social Work degree.

Explore the possibilities and imagine the difference **you** can make in the lives of many.

Learn More Now!

Resources

[riskprotectivefactors.html](#)

- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, "Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect in Federal Law," <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/defining/federal/>
- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, "Long-Term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect," <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/long-term-consequences/>
- CDC, "Cost of Child Abuse and Neglect Rival Other Major Public Health Problems," <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/economiccost.html>
- Child Welfare League of America, <http://www.cwla.org/>
- National Association of Social Workers, "Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers," <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp>
- National Association of Social Workers, "School Social Work," <https://www.socialworkers.org/pressroom/features/issue/school.asp>
- National Association of Social Workers, "NASW Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Welfare," <https://www.socialworkers.org/practice/standards/childwelfarestandards2012.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, "Reunifying Families," <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/reunification/>
- Deborah H. Siegel, PhD, LICSW, DCSW, ACSW, Social Work Today, "Adoption Competency in Clinical Social Work," Nov/Dec 2013, <http://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/111113p16.shtml>
- National Association of Social Workers, "Social Work Profession – Overview," <http://www.socialworkers.org/profession/factsheet.htm>
- National Association of Social Workers, "Careers in Social Work, Part 2," <https://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/choices/choices2.asp#Policy>
- Our Lady of the Lake University, "Online Master of Social Work Overview," <http://onlineprograms.ollusa.edu/msw/masters-in-social-work-online-overview>
- National Association of Social Workers, "NASW Professional Social Work Credentials and Advanced Practice Specialty Credentials," <http://www.naswdc.org/credentials/default.asp>
- Association of Social Work Boards, <https://www.aswb.org/>
- Center for Workforce Studies, "Summary of Key Compensation Findings," May 2010, pp. 6 & 11, <http://workforce.socialworkers.org/8-SalarySurvey.pdf>