



Florida's child protection system is here to keep children safe from abuse, neglect, and abandonment. We understand that being contacted by child protection can be scary, confusing, and stressful for parents and caregivers. Our approach focuses on strengthening families, and helping children remain safely in their homes. You will be treated with dignity, have rights throughout the process, and are encouraged to engage, provide information, ask questions, and seek support.

Process

- ▶ When someone contacts the Florida Abuse Hotline with concerns about a child's safety, a trained counselor carefully reviews the information to determine whether it meets the legal requirements for further review. If it does, the report is assigned to a Child Protective Investigator (CPI), who will then make contact with the child and family to assess the child's safety and well-being.
- ▶ Under Florida law, Child Protective Investigators (CPIs) must talk with families when there are concerns about possible abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Their role is to understand what is happening and determine whether any steps, actions, or supportive services are needed to help keep the child safe and well. As part of this process, the CPI will speak with you and may also gather information including records from others who know your child, such as relatives, friends, teachers, medical providers, or other adults involved in your child's life. Looking at the whole picture helps ensure decisions made by a CPI are thoughtful and informed. It also helps identify supports or resources that may strengthen and stabilize your family whenever it is safe to do so.
- ▶ These investigations follow Chapter 39 of the Florida Statutes, which is the state law that governs how Florida protects children and supports families.
- ▶ If it appears that your family could benefit from additional support to ensure your child's safety and well-being, services may be offered to you. These services are designed to strengthen and support your family, and being offered support does not necessarily mean you have abused, neglected, or abandoned your child.

Your Rights During a Child Protective Investigation

- ▶ **Right to the Presence of an Attorney:** You may have your attorney with you at any time during the investigation. If you choose to wait for your attorney before speaking with the CPI, the CPI may still speak with others to determine the immediate safety of the child.
- ▶ **Opportunity to Record the Interview:** You may request an opportunity to record by audio or video your interview with the CPI using your own equipment, as long as the equipment is immediately available and everyone knows that the interview is being recorded. Some parents choose this to help them remember what was discussed.
- ▶ **Choosing Whether to Accept Services:** A CPI may offer services during an investigation to help support you and your child. You may choose to accept or decline these services. A CPI must still assess whether your child can remain safe where they are.
- ▶ **Internal Review of Verified Findings:** If an investigation is closed with a verified finding of abuse, neglect, or abandonment and you do not agree with that finding, you may request an internal review if:
 - You are named as the caregiver responsible in the investigation;
 - You are not currently involved in a Chapter 39, F.S., dependency proceeding, prior to the adjudicatory hearing;
 - You are not the subject of an ongoing criminal investigation or pending charges related to the same incident; and
 - The case file is still within DCF's required record retention timeframe, which requires child abuse and neglect records to be maintained until the child who is the subject of the record reaches age 30, regardless of outcome.
- ▶ **If Your Child Is Removed:** A court hearing will occur within 24 hours of your child's removal. You have the right to retain an attorney or have the court appoint an attorney. You also have the right to speak in court and share your side of the situation. You may provide documents or the names of individuals who support you, and your attorney can ask the court to hear from them.
- ▶ **Access to Records:** After the investigation is closed, parents and the person accused of abuse, neglect, or abandonment can request a copy of the investigation.
 - **Request online at:** www.myflfamilies.com/public-records
 - **Call:** 850-488-2381
 - **Email:** dcf.recordscustodian@myflfamilies.com
 - You can also see the investigation results and the names of the CPI and Supervisor assigned to your investigation by visiting www.flparentportal.com/s/

Commonly Asked Questions

? How do I know the person at my door is really a child protective investigator?

The investigator should present an official DCF badge. You may check that the person is an employee by contacting the Florida Abuse Hotline's toll-free number at 1-800-962-2873 and selecting Option 3 for CPI verification.

? Who called in the report, how was a DCF report made on my family, and what if it's a false report?

There are several ways to make a DCF report, which includes completing a web report online at <https://reportabuse.myflfamilies.com/s/>, calling 1-800-96-ABUSE or by faxing it to 1-800-914-0004.

Section 39.202, F.S., makes the name of the reporter confidential. The CPI cannot provide any information regarding the person or entity who initiated the call.

Making a false report or advising someone to make a false report of abuse, neglect, or abandonment is a third-degree felony and subject to an administrative fine of up to \$10,000.00 (F.S. 39.205(9) and 39.206(1)).

- ▶ **Criteria for Determining a False Report:** A false report is different from an investigation that is closed with no indicators of abuse, neglect, or abandonment. A false report means it was determined that the report was made knowingly and intentionally untrue. If the Department has determined during its investigation that a report is a false report, the Department:
- May discontinue all investigative activities.
 - Shall refer the report to local law enforcement for them to investigate if sufficient evidence exists to refer the investigation for prosecution, with the consent of the reported alleged perpetrator.

- ▶ If law enforcement finds sufficient evidence of false reporting, they must refer the investigation to the State Attorney.

? How will information be gathered?

You and the CPI will work together to understand your family's situation. Sharing information and asking questions helps guide decisions focused on safety and the response to the reported concerns. During an investigation, a CPI will talk with you, your child, and others who know your family, such as relatives, teachers, and other professionals who may already be working with your family, or who can offer insight as to your situation. The CPI may also review records related to your child and family, including prior child welfare history, criminal history, medical records, or police records, to better understand the concerns that were reported. By law, CPIs must meet with you and your child in person. These visits may be unannounced, which can feel unexpected, but they help the CPI understand the home as it normally is. In order to document the information and observations, the CPI may take photographs of injuries or the home for investigation purposes.

? What is important to know?

During an investigation, it is important to let the CPI know within two business days if you move or if your child's living situation changes. Keeping your contact information current helps the Department stay in contact with your family and confirm your child's safety.

Florida law states that if the Department is unable to locate a child for two business days during an investigation, the child may be considered missing and reported to law enforcement.

? What can happen because of the investigation?

During and after an investigation, there are different possible outcomes based on each family's situation. Sometimes, the investigation confirms that the child is safe and no further action is needed. In other circumstances, the family may be connected to services or supports to help strengthen the family and keep the child safely at home.

If safety concerns cannot be resolved right away, the Department may take steps to protect the child. This may include working with parents and caregivers to develop a safety plan.

Commonly Asked Questions

? What is a Safety Plan?

A Safety Plan should be developed with your input. It is a written plan that clearly describes what will be done, by whom, and for how long to keep the child safe, either in the home or temporarily with relatives or another safe caregiver.

? What will happen if my child is removed from my home?

If the investigation shows that court action is needed and your child cannot safely stay at home, the CPI will work closely with you to find the best temporary placement for your child. You or your child may be asked to suggest a relative, family friend, or someone your child knows and feels comfortable with who could care for them for a short time. If no one is available or approved, your child will be placed in licensed care which means a foster home or group home.

A court hearing, called a shelter hearing, will take place within 24 hours after your child is removed from the home. This allows you an opportunity to present your situation to a judge, and the judge will decide whether your child can return home or needs to remain in temporary care. You have the right to hire an attorney, and if you cannot afford one, the court may appoint an attorney for you. If your child remains out of the home and it is in their best interest, the judge may allow you to visit with them so you can stay connected.

Resources

These community resources are voluntary supports designed to help families meet basic needs, reduce stress, and promote stability. Accessing services does not mean you have done anything wrong, and using these resources is not a punishment. Many families use them at different times for extra support.

- **For services in your community**, contact 1-833-GET-HOPE (438-4673) or visit HopeFlorida.com. You may also ask your investigator or case manager for local service providers.
- **For Healthy Families**, which is a home visiting program for expectant parents and parents of newborns experiencing stressful life situations, contact 1-850-488-1752 or visit HealthyFamiliesFla.org.
- **For KidCare health insurance**, contact 1-888-540-5437 or visit FloridaKidCare.org.
- **Information on food assistance, temporary cash assistance or Medicaid** is available at ACCESS Florida by contacting 1-866-762-2237; 1-850-300-4323 or apply online at MyFlorida.com/AccessFlorida/.

Contact Information

Intake Number: _____

Investigator's Name: _____

Cell Phone Number: _____ Email Address: _____@myflfamilies.com

Supervisor's Name: _____

Cell Phone Number: _____ Email Address: _____@myflfamilies.com