



orange county social services agency  
children and family services  
juvenile dependency

# parent guide



MAPPING THE WAY



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*Throughout this guide, you will read stories of successfully reunited parents who have navigated through the Juvenile Dependency system. They have overcome great obstacles and wish to inspire and encourage you to persevere in your journey.*



**Then** - After many years of not being present in my children's lives, as a father, due to bad decisions and addictions, I found myself in a hopeless state.

**Now** - After finding a support group, Alcoholics Anonymous, and my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I've had custody of my children for about eight years. I am finally able to be the dad I always wanted to be.

## beginning the journey

You may be confused about what is happening and why Children and Family Services (CFS) and the Juvenile Dependency Court have become involved with your family. This guidebook may help answer some of your questions. CFS is here to partner with and offer support to your family to ensure your children are safe. If your child was removed from your care, our goal is to safely return your child to you at the earliest date possible. This will require a great deal of work on your part and the social workers' part. It is important that both mother and father, whenever possible, participate fully in the process to benefit the future of your family.

### What Happened?

Someone called the Child Abuse Registry because they were concerned about your child's safety or well-being. A social worker, called the Emergency Response worker, investigated whether your child was being abused or neglected (sometimes, it is just the police who investigate and social workers get involved later). The Emergency Response worker probably asked many questions about your family. They may have talked to you, your child and your relatives, and possibly with other people about these concerns.

As a result of the social worker's initial interviews, a petition was filed that brought your family to the attention of the Court. A **petition** is the document prepared by the social worker that describes the way CFS believes your child was abused or neglected. These descriptions are called **allegations**.

**Child abuse** means a child's body or mind is being injured.

**Neglect** means failing to give a child what he or she needs.

Some examples of abuse or neglect are:

- Excessive physical discipline
- Exposure to domestic violence
- Bullying or belittling of children
- Failing to provide food, shelter, supervision, or medical care
- Exposing child to parental substance abuse
- Sexual exploitation of a child
- Allowing someone else to abuse your child

**Then** - Our addiction was hurting our family. We couldn't see the impact it was having on our children until Social Services stepped in and removed our children from our custody.

**Now** - With the help of Social Services and the court-ordered programs, we are sober and reunified with our children. We are now able to give hope to other parents that are going through the system to let them know they can have a happy ending like we did.



*Daniel  
& Luz*

## juvenile dependency court: the process

The purpose of Juvenile Dependency Court is to protect children. The Dependency Court process can be difficult and overwhelming. When you attend the first court hearing, you will have the opportunity to participate in a Parent Orientation which provides an overview of this process. The Parent Orientation video is also available at the Orange County Juvenile Court webpage at [www.occourts.org/directory/juvenile/dependency.html](http://www.occourts.org/directory/juvenile/dependency.html)

If there are criminal charges pending, a separate case may be opened in Criminal Court. The decisions made in Criminal Court may impact your Juvenile Dependency case, especially if you are incarcerated.

### **Detention Hearings**

When your child is taken into protective custody, a court hearing is held within a few days. This is called the Detention Hearing, or sometimes an Initial Petition Hearing. Everyone will have their own attorney: each parent, your child and CFS. The Court will probably appoint an attorney for you that day or you may provide your own. Fathers have the same rights and responsibilities as mothers in court. It is important that both parents fully participate in this process for the benefit of your children.

Generally at the Detention Hearing, the Court will review a report written by the social worker. This report, along with a copy of the petition, will be provided to you on the day of the hearing. If the Court decides to be involved, the Court will order CFS to investigate further. The Court will not decide if abuse or neglect occurred at the Detention Hearing and it is unlikely that you will have the opportunity to explain what happened that day.

At the Detention Hearing, the Court will decide the following (among other things):

- Whether the Court will continue to be involved
- Who will care for your child temporarily
- How and when you will visit your child
- When the next hearing will be held



While you are at court, several people may approach you to gather information. This information is necessary to make sure your child is cared for properly. They may ask about:

- Your child's educational and medical history
- Your marital status
- Paternity
- Whereabouts of a missing parent
- Relatives or family friends
- Your financial status
- American-Indian heritage

### **Jurisdictional/Dispositional Hearings**

At the Detention Hearing, the Court will set future hearing dates to take place within a few weeks; these may be called pretrial, trial or Jurisdictional/Dispositional hearings. Several hearing dates may occur before the Court makes final decisions about your family. In the **Jurisdictional** part of the hearing, the Court will decide if the allegations made about your family are true. In the **Dispositional** part of the hearing, the Court will order a case plan (see page 6).

### **Case Plan Goals**

The Court may give you the opportunity to participate in **Voluntary Family Services (VFS)** under CFS supervision while allowing your child to remain in your care **without** court involvement.

Or

The Court may order **Family Maintenance Services (FM)** allowing your child to remain in your and/or the other parent's care with continued court involvement. Under an FM plan, the Court will monitor your child's safety and your compliance with a case plan by setting court hearings every six months to review your progress.

Or

The Court may order **Family Reunification Services (FR)** and temporarily place your child in out-of-home care (see page 7). Under an FR plan, the Court will monitor your compliance with a case plan by setting court hearings every six months to review your progress.

Sometimes, under very specific circumstances, the Court may order that you will not receive services to reunify with your child. Talk with your attorney about whether this applies to your family.



*Judy*

**Then** - After 33 years of drug use, I was arrested and my children were placed in protective custody. When I look back now, I wasn't just arrested, I was rescued.

**Now** - I have been sober for 13 years. I was a "dope fiend" now I'm a HOPE fiend. I put my hope in Jesus Christ. As a parent volunteer for Orange County, I give back what was given to me...HOPE.

# getting to know your social workers

After the Detention Hearing, several social workers will be involved with your family. They will recommend that you participate in specific services based on the needs of your family. These recommendations are listed in your case plan. It is important that you fully participate in these court-ordered services as soon as possible as this will help you to reunify your family.

A **Dependency Investigations (DI)** social worker will meet with you and give you an opportunity to tell your side of the story. The DI social worker will also speak with your child and may be in contact with people who have information about your family. The DI social worker will document what they have learned and write a report to the Court. The report will include recommendations from the social worker to resolve the safety concerns and what needs to happen so that you and your child can be together. A copy of this court report will also be provided to the parents and the attorneys involved.

You may also have a **Family Services worker (FSW)** assigned to your family after the Detention Hearing. The FSW will meet with you, and together, you will discuss what services may help you. The worker will then provide referrals to those services which may include counseling, parenting classes, drug testing and/or others. If your child is not in your care, arrangements will be made for you to visit with your child.

Other social workers may also be involved with your family at this point. A **Placement/Diversion** worker will be assigned to help find the best place for your child to stay, if they are not in your care. You may already have a **CalWORKS** worker. If so, give their contact information to your DI worker in order to maximize any possible assistance available to you.

If the social workers and the Court agree, you may be able to have your child returned to your care under very strict conditions. This is called the **CRISP program (Conditional Release with Intensive Supervision Program)**. A CRISP worker will come to your home several times each week to help you reduce the risks and to ensure your child's safety.

**Don't be afraid to ask questions and communicate your needs to your social worker and your attorney.** After the Court makes Dispositional orders, a continuing social worker will be assigned to you. They are responsible to document what is happening with you and your family and to report to the Court.

**Then** - Tim and I were long-time drug users. Neither of us knew how to live without substances, until the child welfare system intervened in our lives. Although it seemed like the worst day ever, it was a blessing in disguise. We wanted to change, but we did not know how.

**Now** - The services provided in our court-ordered case plan were exactly what we needed to begin to build a solid foundation; living without drugs or alcohol. We reunified with our daughter and then began working to help other parents find their way.





Promptly let your social worker and attorney know about any changes or needs you have related to where you live, your job, transportation, and/or if you change your telephone or message number.

## the next few months

The continuing social worker will review your case plan with you to make sure you understand what the Court expects you to do. They will encourage you to fully participate in your services so that your child can remain with you or be returned to you as soon as possible. If your child is not in your care, the social worker will also make sure you can visit with your child and be involved in the decisions about your child's well-being. If you have any questions or problems, let your social worker know so that they can help you.

### **Court Time Limits/Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)**

The law has set strict time limits for reunification. You may have as little as six months to complete your court-ordered case plan. **Ask your attorney and social worker about your time limits.**

If you do not complete the case plan within a specified time frame, or fail to visit with your child, the Court may order your services be stopped and require that a permanent plan be made for your child.

Fathers, did you know...



Children whose fathers are absent are more likely to:

- ✓ Be poor
- ✓ Use drugs
- ✓ Experience educational problems
- ✓ Have emotional problems
- ✓ Have behavioral problems
- ✓ Be victims of child abuse
- ✓ Engage in criminal behavior

Children with involved, loving fathers are significantly more likely to:

- ✓ Do well in school
- ✓ Have healthy self-esteem
- ✓ Exhibit empathy and pro-social behavior
- ✓ Avoid high risk behaviors such as drug use
- ✓ Attend school regularly
- ✓ Not participate in criminal activity



A **Permanent Plan** could be adoption, legal guardianship or long-term foster care. If the Court orders adoption as the best plan for your child, your parental rights will be permanently terminated.

### **Status Review Hearings**

Following the Dispositional hearing, status review hearings will be held approximately every six months. At the Six Month Review hearing, the Court reviews the progress you have made and decides if it is safe for your child to be at home. Depending on the specific circumstances of your case, you may only have six months to show the Court your progress. Talk with your attorney to understand how this may apply to you and your family.

***It is critical that you complete your services and visit your child regularly to show the Court that you can safely and appropriately parent your child. If you do not show significant progress, the Court may decide not to offer any more services.***

### **Permanency Hearings**

If the Court decides that a child will not return home, you will not be given any more time to reunify and a Permanency Review hearing will occur. The Court's decision may include adoption, legal guardianship or having your child remain in foster care.

## **case plans and services**

Also included in the report submitted to the Court is the social worker's recommendation of what is needed to address the problems that brought your family to the attention of CFS. This part of the report is called the **case plan**, and it identifies the services and the activities you must complete as you work toward reunifying your family. These services may include counseling, parenting class, drug or alcohol treatment and/or others. You and your social worker will begin to create this plan within the first few weeks after the Detention Hearing and it will be updated regularly. As you collaborate with your social worker, be open about your needs so that appropriate services may be identified. Your social worker may use a tool called **My Action Plan (MAP)** to assist in this process and to help you keep track of what you need to be doing.

**Then** - I was in a violent relationship for five years. I was homeless and lived in abandoned houses when I was pregnant. I lost custody of my daughter because she was born drug exposed.

**Now** - I regained custody of my daughter and have been sober for three years. I am attending school and work as a parent volunteer for Social Services. I give support and hope to parents and help them understand the Juvenile Dependency System so they can make positive changes, too.



*Noemi*



*If more than one of your children are removed from your care, the social worker will make every effort to place your children together in out-of-home foster or relative care.*

*It is helpful if you and your child's foster parents build a positive, working relationship based on mutual respect.*

*Request medical, psychological and educational updates about your child from the social worker and foster parent.*

*Keep track of what you are asked to do and write down names and telephone numbers.*

You will be asked to sign the case plan. Signing the case plan means you participated in its development and you understand that you need to complete the court-ordered services; it is not an admission of guilt or make you lose your rights. By following the case plan and completing services, you are demonstrating your desire to reduce the risks and increase the safety of your child.

***Once the Court orders the case plan, you must do those things listed to reunify with your child.***

Your social worker can help you access resources to successfully complete your case plan. You will be able to complete some things quickly, but others will take longer. You may make some mistakes along the way, but your social worker and those who support your efforts can help you move forward. If you have any trouble, let your social worker know as soon as possible. Consistent communication is key to success.

If you are incarcerated, generally you can still make progress with your case plan. You may ask about services and classes in the jail/prison and your social worker can provide you with reading materials about parenting and other relevant topics. It is important that you maintain contact with your social worker while incarcerated via collect phone calls or letters.

***Your social worker will help you follow the case plan. Be sure to ask for help. Although you may feel discouraged, don't give up!***

## **out-of-home care**

### **Relative Homes and Foster Homes**

If the Court ordered an FR plan and your child is not living with you, CFS will inquire about relatives and Non-Related Extended Family Members (NREFM) who may be able to care for your child. The transition out of the parent's home may be easier for your child when placed with relatives or NREFMs. ***A NREFM is a person familiar to your child such as a friend, godparent, church member, teacher or coach who may be willing to support your family by offering a temporary home to your child.***

California law sets certain requirements for people who temporarily care for children. Relatives who are willing to care for your child will be evaluated by the Placement/Diversion worker to make sure

your child will be safe with them. Part of this evaluation includes reviewing a person's background, an inspection of their home and an assessment of their ability to provide temporary care for your child and support your efforts to reunify with your child.

If your child cannot be placed with a relative or NREFM, your child may be placed in a foster home. Foster parents must meet even stricter requirements than relatives and they are monitored to make sure they are caring for the children in their home appropriately. Generally, you may be invited to meet your child's foster parents and you can share with them your child's likes and dislikes, favorite foods and any other information to help your child be comfortable in their home. This meeting is called an **Ice-breaker** which the Placement/ Diversion worker will schedule for you. You may also ask about your child's day-to-day activities, and in some cases, participate in their school functions, medical appointments and extracurricular activities. **You are still the most important person in your child's life, even while they are out of your care.**

### Group Homes

Due to your child's needs, it may be necessary for your child to be placed in a group home. These group homes may be small, with a limited number of children, or they could be large and have many staff members who help to supervise your child and meet their needs.

**Orangewood Children and Family Center** is a licensed, temporary shelter home that cares for children until an appropriate placement option is identified.

If you have any concerns about the foster home in which your child is placed, speak with your social worker. You may also ask the social worker about scheduling a Team Decision Making meeting to discuss your concerns.

### Team Decision Making Meetings

You may have been invited to attend a Team Decision Making meeting (TDM). This meeting is usually held within 24 hours of CFS involvement. **The purpose of the TDM is to discuss where your child can be safe while you address the issues that brought your family to the attention of CFS.** You are entitled to bring family members, friends and other support persons with you, including people whom you would like CFS to consider as caregivers for your child. If over the age of 10, your child may also attend. Under the leadership of a trained facilitator, all placement ideas are discussed and then a decision is made.

TDMs are held at other occasions during the Juvenile Dependency Court process. A social worker may schedule a TDM meet-

Yvette



**Then** - I had a 27 year drug history, incarceration and gangs. When my youngest was born drug exposed, the county removed her from my care. I was hurting and felt lost in the world.

**Now** - I have been sober for six-and-a-half years. I am now a mother to my children, a productive citizen of society and I am dedicated to giving back. I use my life experience to help others in a positive way. God is the key to my success and He put people in my life to help me overcome my past.



ing to address concerns regarding the care of your child. For instance, maybe a caregiver is unable to continue to care for your child, or perhaps you have concerns about something that is happening with your child. The goal of the TDM is to stabilize the placement or discuss whether a different placement is better for your child.

### Visitation

If your child has been placed in temporary care, the Court will make orders about how often and under what conditions you can visit. Examples include:

- Monitored: this means that all of your interactions with your child need to be seen and heard by the social worker or another monitor approved by the social worker
- Supervised: this means your interactions are observed, but the person supervising can be somewhat apart from you and your child.
- Unmonitored: this means you do not need to have an outside person involved in your visits with your child.
- No visits: only in certain, rare circumstances is visitation not permitted

Restrictions may be placed on your visits, such as where you can go, if you are able to drive with your child and who is allowed to be around your child. The Court may give the social worker permission to change your visits. For example, if the Court ordered monitored visits, the social worker may be able to allow supervised visits if things are going well.

**Visitation** is your chance to spend time with your child. It is important that you make visits as comfortable as possible for your child and do not make promises about when the child will be returning to you. You may play a game or read a book together. You may help your child with homework. Talk with your social worker about what you can do during your visits, and how to make them special for you and your child. Also, talk about whether or not you may bring food, toys, presents, diapers, clothing, etc.

Make every effort to be on time for your visits. If you are going to be late or unable to attend, make attempts to notify your social worker and the caregiver. Document your efforts. During visits, do not discuss your court case with your children. If they ask questions, talk to your social worker about what information can be shared with the children.

**Reassure your child that you love them. Be sensitive to their feelings. Be extra patient and tolerant of unusual or new behavior.**



*Arrive on time to visits. If you cannot attend your visit, inform the social worker and the child's caregiver. Keep records of all visits, even cancelled visits.*

*Encourage a positive relationship between your child and their caregiver.*

*Failure to show or repeated tardiness will be seen unfavorably by the Court.*





George

**Then** - I was a drug user and on parole when my daughter was taken into protective custody. As a father in the system, I felt lost, without direction or guidance. I was afraid of the future and how I would be able to support my family.

**Now** - I reunified with my daughter over 22 years ago and I have been sober for over 24 years. It was rewarding being reunified not only with my daughter, but with myself.

If you are incarcerated, generally you can still have contact with your child. Sometimes, your child can visit you at the jail or prison depending on how visits may affect the child's safety and well-being. Visitation can also be through telephone or letters. ***Consistent and positive visits are the best way to work towards reunifying with your child.***

#### **What can I do if I have a complaint?**

Whenever you have a complaint or a problem, the first person to talk to is your social worker. An open discussion will often settle the matter. If you and your social worker cannot resolve the problem, ask to speak to your social worker's supervisor. If the problem still cannot be resolved, ask to speak with a program manager, deputy director or agency director. You may also contact the CFS Quality Support Team at (714) 541-7405 or (714) 704-8000. If your concerns are related to the care, services or placement of children or youth in foster care, you may also call the Sacramento Office of the Foster Care Ombudsman at (877) 846-1602 or file a written complaint to Sacramento using the complaint form at [www.fosteryouthhelp.ca.gov/complaints1.html](http://www.fosteryouthhelp.ca.gov/complaints1.html)

If the disagreement you are having with CFS is about your child's return home or CFS' refusal to let you visit, you may request the court to resolve it. You may need your attorney to help you. The judge may listen to both you and the agency and may make a decision based on your legal rights and what is best for your child. Both you and CFS must follow the judge's order.

We hope the information provided in this guidebook is helpful in understanding the Juvenile Dependency process and the role of CFS. Also, we encourage you to know that you can be successful in reunifying with your children and/or maintaining custody after risks are resolved or removed.



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Guide design and layout:

**Roylyn Burton**, Community Program Specialist, Orange County Social Services Agency, Children and Family Services

Parent photographs:

**Abel Esquivel**, Social Worker II, Orange County Social Services Agency, Children and Family Services



**My Social Worker:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**My Child's Caregiver:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**My Attorney:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Other Important Phone Numbers:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Helpful Numbers:**

Children and Family Services  
(714) 704-8000 / (800) 403-7313

Orangewood Children and Family Center  
(714) 935-7584

Family Support Network Parent Warmline  
(714) 447-3303

Alcoholics Anonymous Hotline  
(714) 556-4555

Narcotics Anonymous Hotline  
(888) 593-3108 / (714) 590-2388

OC Crisis and Suicide Prevention Hotline  
(877) 727-4747

OC Department of Education  
(714) 966-4000

OC Office of the Public Defender  
(714) 834-2144

OC Transit Authority  
(714) 636-7433

OC Resource Links  
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