

Child Welfare Social Work

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Introductory Guide to Child Welfare Social Work

By Kaitlin Louie

Child welfare social workers protect vulnerable youth and help disadvantaged families in meeting the needs of their children. Some of their core responsibilities include responding to cases of child abuse and neglect; removing children from home settings that are dangerous or which do not meet certain standards; working with children and their families on a reunification plan in collaboration with child dependency courts; supporting parents in meeting the needs of their children (through resource connections and navigation services, therapy and advising, and other services); and arranging for the short and long-term care of children whose families are unable to take care of them.

Due to the complexity and emotionally charged nature of their work (separating families by necessity, sometimes permanently, and balancing the at times conflicting interests of the child, his/her parents, and the child dependency court), child welfare social workers may find their daily responsibilities to be challenging and at times draining. However, despite the demands and difficulties of their work, child welfare social workers often find their ability to provide compassionate support to parents while protecting children

in need to be rewarding due to its profound impact, both on an individual and a larger societal level.

While child welfare social workers can work entry level agency positions after receiving their BSW, many places of employment prefer individuals who wish to progress to higher level or more involved roles to have a Master's in Social Work (MSW) from a CSWE-accredited institution. Social workers who are interested in getting training at the graduate level for child welfare social work positions should explore state-funded scholarships for MSW students focusing on child welfare. During their MSW program, students interested in child welfare should seek internships in relevant settings (such as a family welfare agency), and also take courses in clinical social work methods, family dynamics, child development, poverty, and/or disadvantaged populations.

Types of Child Welfare Social Workers

Child welfare social workers typically work for Child Protective Services and/or child welfare agencies at the county and state levels. There are often several different types of child welfare social workers on a given team that collaborate to identify and respond to cases of child abuse and neglect. Some of these social workers are “front-end” social workers (also known as emergency response social workers), meaning that they go out to investigate incidents of child abuse and neglect at the site (often the child's

home), and will also return to these sites to remove children from abusive or insufficient care.

In contrast, “back-end” social workers (also known as continuing services social workers) work with children and their families after the child has been removed from his/her original home, in order to address the barriers that the parents (or caretakers) are experiencing to provide their child(ren) with a minimum standard of care at home. Back-end social workers interact with child dependency courts to arrange for alternative living situations (foster families, adoption, and/or living with family members) for children whose parents are unable to properly care for them, and also set goals, benchmarks, and deadlines for parents to meet before their children can be returned to them. Back-end social workers also work with foster families, adoptive parents, and community organizations and resources to try and create and maintain a support system for vulnerable children.

Due to limited resources and staffing, some child welfare social workers may move between emergency/first response duties and continuing services, or fulfill both types of responsibilities simultaneously, depending on their availability and the needs of the agency.

Emergency First Responder (“Front-End”) Social Workers

First responder social workers, as their title indicates, are often the first individuals to respond to cases of child abuse and/or neglect. Child welfare agencies will often receive notifications from concerned members of the public about households with children who may not be receiving sufficient care. Upon receiving these notifications, first responder social workers go to households to investigate these allegations of abuse or neglect, and to evaluate the situation of the child(ren) in question relative to a minimum standard of child care. If child maltreatment is discovered, emergency first responder social workers typically open a child welfare case, contact Child Protective Services to have a child removed and placed in the care of the Child Dependency Court, and document the evidence of maltreatment in reports for the Courts and for back-end social workers who take on the case after the child's removal from his/her home.

Sasha Chelsea McGowan, MSW, who works as a Continuing Services Social Worker in Contra Costa County, explained the general standards for adequate parental care in the context of child welfare services. "In the child welfare field, we are focused on one thing—minimum sufficient level of care," she explained, "This is the community based (and judicially supported) standard of care that we require families to provide for their children in regards to their physical, emotional, and developmental needs."

Ms. McGowan explained how “minimum sufficient” is distinct from “ideal” or even “good” parenting—the child welfare social worker’s main concern is to ensure that children are reasonably safe, provided for in all essential areas (food, hygiene, schooling, medical and dental care, emotional well-being, etc.). In addition, the definition of minimum sufficient level of care can differ from community to community, as different counties will have different regulations around child care and neglect, expectations for school attendance, etc.

“To determine if a family is meeting this minimum standard [of care], we ask three questions,” she said, “Is the family providing for their child’s basic needs? Is the parent’s parenting practice, such as with physical discipline, within our community standard or outside of it? Does the parent’s behavior fall within reasonable limits, as judged by that same community?” If the response to these questions is no, then first responder social workers typically begin the process of opening a case and seeking to remove the abused or neglected children from their parents’ care.

Continuing Services (“Back-End”) Social Worker

Once a child is placed in the care of the Child Dependency Court, back-end social workers take over the case. Ms. McGowan told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “[Continuing services social workers continue] to investigate to clarify the allegations of maltreatment and develop a case plan composed of services and

behavioral change necessary to return a child to the care of a parent.” Types of behavioral changes that social workers might include in a family’s case plan could include parents’ cessation of physical and/or verbal abuse; elimination of substance abuse behaviors; addressing of physical, medical/dental, emotional, or academic neglect, and proper supervision behaviors.

After the development of a case plan that incorporates behavioral changes for the parents and ways to support the parents in making these changes, continuing services social workers monitor the family’s case and provide emotional support, advising, and resource connections throughout the process. Services and support that continuing services social workers might recruit to assist children and their parents include counseling and psychotherapy; guidance on how to apply for health care benefits, food stamps, etc.; and connections to supportive groups within the community (substance abuse therapy groups, educational resources, etc.). Continuing services social workers also report on the family’s progress to the Dependency Court, and update families on the status of their case in relation to the Court.

Damoun Bozorgzadarbab, MSW, who worked as a Family Services Social Worker and an Emergency Response Children Social Worker at LA County Child Protective Services, explained that, while social workers are invested in parents’ progress, and in the reunification of the original family, their first and foremost

priority is the safety of children. “The roles and responsibilities of child welfare social workers is first to keep children safe, then to assure their well-being and do both of those things while making sure they have a chance at permanent families,” she said, “So while child welfare social workers link parents to all the providers who help address their issues to mitigate safety and risk (therapists, day care providers, substance use treatment programs...) they are also reporting to the courts on the progress of the parents.” If, after a period of time, parents are unable to meet the standards outlined in the case plan, continuing services social workers also start working on a plan for long-term foster care or adoption.

Due to the many responsibilities that back-end social workers have upon the opening of a child welfare case (i.e. in-depth investigation of child maltreatment allegations, development of case plan with behavioral changes for parents, continued monitoring of parents’ progress, and development of a long-term foster care or adoption plan if necessary), some child welfare agencies have different units of back-end social workers that focus on a specific area of continuing services. Ms. McGowan noted, “[There] are specialized units that address the needs of children who are not able to reunite with their family of origin. In continuing services, I work with children younger than the age of 16 who were not able to reunify with their parents, and at age 16 they transfer to ‘Transitions to Permanency’ where a social worker with special

training will work with them on skills for independence and transitioning to adulthood.”

What Child Welfare Social Workers Do

As mentioned previously, child welfare social workers’ specific responsibilities depend on whether they are working front-end or back-end roles at their agency. However, in general, the core responsibilities of child welfare social workers are:

Investigative Work (in Collaboration with CPS and Dependency Court)

Both first responder and continuing services social workers investigate instances of child maltreatment and evaluate children’s situations against an established minimum standard. The minimum sufficient level of care (MSLC) is typically determined through a combination of state, federal, and community standards, as well as each family’s unique circumstances. Specific items that child welfare social workers look at include whether children are safe; provided for in terms of food, clothing, and shelter; are able to attend school; are not being subjected to physical, emotional/verbal, or sexual abuse; and are not suffering from neglect.

When investigating cases of child maltreatment, child welfare social workers collaborate with Child Protective Services and the Juvenile Dependency Court, which is a specialized court that handles solely child welfare cases. “Child welfare has its own court

system, the juvenile dependency court,” Katie Krause, MSW, who works for Contra Costa County Children and Family Services in California, told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “This is completely separate from criminal court. [...] Social workers in all units will interact with dependency court judges as we frequently write reports. Social workers can be called to testify when parents contest the allegations or judge’s decision. Each party (parents, kids, social worker) is represented by an attorney in court. Our attorneys are called county counsel and they represent all social workers in the county.”

Case Plan Development

Once a child maltreatment has been confirmed, child welfare social workers collaborate with Child Protective Services, behavioral therapists, case managers, agency staff, school administrators and teachers, and other relevant members of the community to develop an individualized case plan for the child and his/her parents. The case plan mainly focuses on the changes that parents need to make in order to regain custody of their children, and can have several different elements.

“A case plan could include things such as: anger management, domestic violence support group and education, counseling, couple’s counseling, family counseling, parenting classes, drug testing, and in patient or out patient drug programs,” Ms. Krause noted, “I refer parents to all of these services. I [also] really try to

explain to families what is going on as best as I can since the attorneys don't really do that. I try to encourage them and draw on their strengths rather than only seeing the problems. I like to see the big picture and really get to know the family.”

Case plans usually have certain deadlines for behavioral changes that parents must meet, and these deadlines can be stringent. “A huge barrier for our families is the court timelines. If your child is under three years old, parents have only six months to address the issues leading to CPS involvement before we move towards an alternative permanency option for the child such as adoption—this is also why we concurrently plan, and place infants primarily with family members or potentially adoptive parents,” Ms. McGowan explained, “This is based on the negative outcomes of children spending years in foster care without consistent caregivers in early childhood. With children over three, parents have twelve months.”

Counseling and Psychotherapy

Child welfare social workers can provide emotional counseling and, in some cases, targeted but often short-term psychotherapy to children and their parents. The separation of a family is a traumatic experience for both child and parent, and child welfare social workers help both parties manage the difficult emotions around the separation, and to move forward towards a plan of action for reunification. For children in foster homes or

adopted children who experience mental, emotional, and behavioral issues as a result of their separation from their family, child welfare social workers can offer emotional support and therapy. They might also try to help parents address the mental and emotional reasons behind the behavioral problems that lead to the maltreatment of their child (ex. substance abuse, neglect, domestic abuse, etc.).

“Every child that comes into contact with our system is assessed for therapy and additional mental health services,” Ms. Krause noted, “Almost all of the children who are removed from their parents participate in some sort of therapy. We also have a number of children with diagnoses that range from PTSD and depression to more complex diagnoses such as schizophrenia and bipolar.”

Coordination of Support Services for Child and Parents

In addition to providing individualized advising and therapy to children and their parents, child welfare social workers communicate with other parties that are concerned about and/or involved in a child’s well-being, including but not limited to school administrators and teachers, behavioral therapists, doctors and nurses, and staff at community centers. Maggie Olivares, ASW, who works as an Agency Social Worker at EMQFamiliesFirst in Stockton, CA, explained to OnlineMSWPrograms.com the many different people and organizations she collaborates with to help

clients. “[Agency social workers at EMQFF] work with other individuals such as Child Protective Services Social Workers, Probation Officers, Teachers, Therapists, Mental Health Resources Specialists, Family Specialists, TBS and WRAP, and Mental Health Workers,” she said.

The aforementioned service providers meet periodically with the family and independent of the family in order to create, evaluate, and modify the reunification plan. “When a client has various services from different agencies, we hold meetings to discuss the services and treatment goals and objectives,” Ms. Olivares explained, “These meetings included Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), Child and Family Team (CFT) meetings, WRAP meetings, and/or Team Decision Meetings (TDMs). During these meeting we discuss each person’s role and task. Each individual meets the needs of the client and family in different ways depending on what role they have.” Below is a more detailed description of some of the collaborative services, programs, and meetings that child welfare social workers participate in with other human service providers.

- **Wraparound Services (WRAP):** Wraparound services are defined as community based, individualized, and comprehensive mental, emotional, behavioral, and social services and support for people in need, such as vulnerable children and their parents. Wraparound services encompass an individual’s social, emotional,

health, academic, and (where relevant) occupational needs, and recruit multiple providers from within the community (teachers, behavioral therapists, social workers, medical professionals, etc.).

- **Child and Family Team (CFT) Meetings:** CFT meetings are between children, parents, and human service providers, during which both parents and their children set goals for making the necessary changes to successfully reunify, and providers work with the family to construct a plan for meeting these goals. Providers also offer resources and support to assist the family in meeting their goals by established deadlines.

- **Individualized Education Programs (IEPs):** IEPs are developed primarily by school personnel (such as teachers, counselors, and school social workers) in response to the needs of specific children who are not performing well at school for mental, emotional, behavioral, familial, and/or social reasons. Child welfare social workers may participate in the development or maintenance of these plans in cases when child abuse or neglect are factors in a child not meeting certain academic standards.

- **Team Decision Meetings (TDMs):** These meetings are held between different social service providers before every key decision in a child's case (placing a child in a foster home or with an adopted family, reuniting children with their families, etc.). During these meetings, providers develop an appropriate course of action given the family's circumstances and progress (if

applicable), evaluate the benefits and risks of this course of action, and update one another on the progress of a family.

Resource Connections and Navigation Services

While child welfare social workers can provide mental health counseling and therapy, their main role is as a care coordinator and an evaluator of children's mental, emotional, academic, and social needs. Furthermore, though they work closely with families in need, child welfare social workers' interactions with their clients is necessarily limited, and thus part of their job is creating as comprehensive a support system as possible for children and parents by coordinating services from various community resources.

In her interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com, Ms. Krause explained how one of her core responsibilities is assessing and then meeting the needs of children and families through resource coordination. "As a social worker, I assess each child [in the areas of emotional, mental, developmental, and social well-being]. We refer for mental health services, behavior support services, tutoring, extracurricular activities to work on social skills, and developmental assessments through the regional center," she said, "I also act as the 'broker' and make sure that all service providers are communicating,"

Examples of such resources include but are not limited to afterschool programs and tutoring, parent support groups, centers

that provide subsidized food and clothing, individual counseling, community health clinics, emotional regulation and stress reduction groups, and substance abuse support groups.

The Challenges of Child Welfare Social Work

Child welfare social work is a very challenging field that can be physically draining and emotionally taxing. Child welfare social workers cite limited resources, grueling schedules, the emotional ramifications of witnessing and supporting people through trauma, and the pressure of families' well-being resting on their shoulders as being definite challenges in their line of work.

As simultaneous investigators, counselors, child and parent advocates, and care coordinators, child welfare social workers may find themselves being pulled in many different directions. Ms. Olivares described the varied and intensive responsibilities that child welfare social workers must balance on a daily basis. "This job is not an 8am-5pm type of job and many times we work after hours and need to be flexible with our schedule. As a social worker there are a lot of responsibilities from completing reports and progress notes, transporting clients, coordinating and supervising visits, and collecting and filing all paperwork. We are responsible for keeping family and client files up to date, and completing walk-throughs and home visits," she explained, "We also have to respond to crises, and attend & coordinate meetings and assure services are being completed."

Managing the interests and feelings of both child(ren) and parents, and connecting emotionally with both parties can also prove difficult for social workers when children are unable to return to their parents. “It is heartbreaking to have to recommend that a child not be returned to their parent. I hate having to tell parents that they are not making enough changes and that I do not feel their child is safe with them. It is also tough to see what being torn apart does to families,” Ms. Krause said, “I firmly believe that most children belong with their parents in the long run. We regularly deal with challenges related to complicated court timelines, large case loads, having to communicate with many service providers, and traveling out of county/state to see kids who are placed elsewhere.”

Ms. Bozorgzadabab explained how the child welfare system’s prioritization of children’s safety and well-being is important, but also means that parents’ interests and background do not take precedence when deciding where their child is ultimately placed. “Parents who already have trauma in their history, mental illness and/or substance use and feel disempowered/marginalized, will now have to prove their ability to safely parent to a seemingly impersonal and all-powerful system,” she explained, “The failures of the parents may be clinically understandable given the complex issues they have to face, but in a system where children have to be protected above all, these failures are not easily forgiven. Children

could be well on their way to adoption before their parents can successfully remove safety concerns.”

Maggie Olivares, ASW told OnlineMSWPrograms.com how her clients’ past and present hardships can be challenging to witness. “As a social worker we work with clients who come from unfortunate and sad circumstances. All the clients have been taken away from their birth families and most have a lot of needs. Learning about their stories is always difficult to hear,” she said. Ms. Olivares also noted that placing children in foster homes and/or with adopted families can lead to complicated and at times emotionally difficult situations for all parties involved. “The hardest part of this job is when clients sabotage good homes because they test limits and can’t trust,” she said, “It is also hard to see young children build bonds and healthy attachments with foster families and then they are reunified with their birth family. Even though reunification is a positive thing, it’s also hard.”

To manage the aforementioned challenges, child welfare social workers urge social work students and professionals interested in this field to commit to self-care early and consistently. “[You] HAVE TO respect your limitations and engage in self-care,” Ms. Bozorgzadabab said, “I can’t emphasize enough that you need ways to increase your emotional capacity for your own sake, for the sake of your loved ones and even for the sake of your clients. If your emotional and empathic abilities are depleted,

unhappiness and isolation is a likely result and eventually making poor decisions at work follows—which in the case of CPS work can be devastatingly costly to a child.”

Ms. Bozorgzadabab also explained how professionals in this field should work to build and maintain a strong support system of colleagues across the different disciplines that collaborate on a given family’s case (i.e. school staff, health care professionals, behavioral therapists, attorneys, etc.). “An attitude of appreciation for teamwork and respect for other professionals outside child welfare can go a long way,” she advised, “The stressed out nurse at the hospital who’s short with you will also be your savior when the time comes. The police officer you may have just offended is the person you’ll need to rely on another day to safely transport your suicidal minor client. [...] I can give countless examples of why teamwork can save your career, but bottom line is you can’t do good work by yourself so cultivate relationships to help positively impact the outcome for your minor clients and help your own sanity too.”

Ms. McGowan similarly emphasized the importance of a positive outlook and building a strong community of colleagues in staying motivated and fulfilled at work. “We set our own tone for our work, and with a supportive supervisor and a county aimed towards the future, we have the ability to do an enormous amount of good for our community.”

Why People Become Child Welfare Social Workers

Though their work is often stressful, demanding, and fast-paced, many child welfare social workers feel that the challenges are equally balanced with the rewards, and that the gratification they receive from their daily work is in fact inseparable from the difficulties of their work.

“Overall, my work is incredibly rewarding, Ms. Krause said, “Although it is an uphill battle, I develop pretty good relationships with my families. I get to see the progress they make and see how their lives change for the better. [...] I also try to be timely, responsive, and compassionate, as I understand that my job is incredibly important. We are dealing with real people and make important recommendations about whether or not children can safely be with their parents. That is huge.”

Maggie Olivares, ASW explained to OnlineMSWPrograms.com how seeing the positive progress her clients make has helped her maintain energy in her role. “I’ve been in my position for over 15 years and although I have had other job opportunities to move up in my position and leave foster care, I’ve chosen to remain in foster care and stay in my current position,” she said, “Although the job has many challenges, I overall enjoy doing what I do. This job does not get boring and every day I am doing something different. My favorite part has been seeing the potential of the clients with whom I work. It is also rewarding to

see them thrive and overcome challenges. I have emancipated several youths from foster care and it is very exciting to see them leave the system, go on to college and become successful. I especially enjoy working closely with the clients; assisting them in life long goals and helping them meet their goals.”

Child welfare social workers may also find deep rewards in being advocates for parents, regardless of whether or not they succeed in their goal of reunification. Ms. Bozorgzadabab explained how her job has given her many opportunities to empower parents and provide them with support, dignity, and compassion during a very difficult time. “There are too many examples to list when I felt honored and humbled, be it by my co-workers or my clients. Two that stand out are: when a mother who had originally fought me on the removal of her five children thanked me for ‘saving’ them and told every social worker who came after me about the respect and dignity that I had shown her family,” she recalled, “I also felt rewarded when I stood up for cultural differences in an immigrant family and advocated hard for them to receive the agency’s educational resources instead of having to experience the removal of their child from their care.”

Advice on How to Become a Child Welfare Social Worker

Students who are interested in child welfare social work should prepare through a combination of a strong academic background and relevant field internships. Ms. Olivares told

OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “I would recommend that students who are interested in this field take classes in Child Development, Cultural Diversity and Competence, any Drug and Substance Abuse Classes, and Psychology and Sociology classes.”

Ms. McGowan also advised social work students to take classes that help them understand the populations involved in the child welfare system and how to address their specific needs. “I highly recommend that MSW students take an elective class on the history of social work in the United States, as the history of racial and socioeconomic oppression still runs strong in many of our impoverished and marginalized communities,” she said, “I also recommend taking any Child Welfare specific classes offered that will go over safety planning, risk assessment, and the convoluted Court system. A good basis in risk assessment, defining harm and danger to children, and how to make impartial decisions on extremely inflammatory subjects is key. We hire many individuals without specific child welfare training if they are able to master these tools.”

Field internships in settings that serve vulnerable children and families are also important. “I do recommend that student do an internship at a Foster Family Agency if they are considering this field, because this job is not for everyone. [...] If it is not possible to get an internship in the field I would recommend getting experience at a group home, and/or shelter. A person interested in

the position also needs to understand that they might have to wear different hats at times. The responsibilities of this job vary from sometimes being an admin (answering phones and filing paper work), to being a transporter, supervising visits, counseling clients and families, and writing reports and progress notes.”

For MSW students who are not placed in child welfare agencies during their internships, or for social work professionals who want to transition to this field of work, volunteer work can be very helpful in gaining skills and experience for the job. “There are many opportunities to volunteer with foster youth, and many job opportunities at lower levels enable people to work with these youth directly,” Ms. McGowan said, “Group homes are a good look into the intensity of trauma and reactivity that foster children can experience when deprived of stability. Additionally, there are critical county programs that are often looking for volunteers—the most significant of which is the CASA program (Court Appointed Special Advocate).”

An important benefit of pursuing child welfare social work during one’s MSW program is the opportunity to apply for government scholarships specifically for people wishing to enter the helping professions. For example, the Title IV E Stipend Program is a federally funded program comprised of a national consortium of social work and public service schools that offer financial support to students and working professionals who pursue

degrees or training in public child welfare. The amount that students can receive through this program depends on the degree they are pursuing (BSW vs. MSW vs. professional training or continuing education) and their state of residence, but several of the social work students we interviewed highly recommend applying for benefits through this program.

“I would recommend that people be admitted under Title IVE concentration,” Ms. Krause noted, “This concentration specifically prepares you for work in child welfare. I felt very prepared for my job as a result of my classes and internships. My 2nd year internship was basically like a trial job. A lot of things are the same in each county so it is pretty easy to transition between counties and units. In the title IVE concentration you are required to intern in child welfare.”

Through solid academic preparation, internships, and volunteer work, prospective child welfare social workers can build a rewarding career devoted to protecting the safety and well-being of children while also giving their parents the support and compassion they need to make positive changes. Furthermore, by building strong social and collegial support systems at the beginning of their profession, practicing self-care on a regular basis, and maintaining an appreciation for the positive impact they have on families at the individual and larger systemic level, child

welfare social workers can sustain energy and derive deep gratification from their daily accomplishments.

About the Author: Kaitlin Louie is a content writer and editor who writes articles for OnlineMSWPrograms.com. She received her bachelor's and master's degrees in English from Stanford University, and aspires to be an author of fiction and creative non-fiction.

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