

Differential Response

Differential Response (DR) is a strategy that allows Child Welfare Services (CWS) to respond in a more flexible manner to reports of child abuse or neglect. DR affords a customized approach based on an assessment of safety, risk and protective capacity that recognizes each family's unique strengths and needs, and addresses these in an individualized manner rather than with a "one size fits all" approach.

The hallmark of DR is both its flexibility and family engagement, which act as an umbrella for the various responses and services. As DR provides earlier and more meaningful responses to emerging signs of family problems, CWS can utilize resources to help families before difficulties escalate and child removal is required. Under the DR approach, child safety is the highest priority as more children and families can receive the support they need to keep children safely in their homes.

DR has three referral paths, which are assigned by the Intake Team based on information taken from the initial call or report:

Path 1: Community Response

This pathway is used when a family is experiencing problems, but the situation does not meet statutory definitions of abuse or neglect. Instead of being turned away without any assistance, families are linked to services in the community through partnerships with local organizations.

Path 2: Child Welfare Services and Community Response

This pathway is chosen when the report meets statutory definitions of abuse and neglect. The Intake Team assesses the child as safe and at low-to moderate risk of future harm and the family as likely to make changes and mitigate risk voluntarily. CWS teams with interagency and/or community partners to respond with a multidisciplinary approach. If the family is unwilling to make needed improvements or the situation deteriorates, endangering the child, the case is re-referred to the child welfare agency.

Path 3: Child Welfare Services Response

In this pathway, the child is assessed as unsafe and at moderate-to-high risk of continued abuse or neglect. Actions may be taken with or without the family's consent, court orders may be sought, and criminal charges may be filed. CWS seeks to engage families more fully and work with other county agencies and community organizations to provide focused services. This pathway is most similar to the child welfare system's traditional response.