

# Why Differential Response?

Historically, the Department of Children and Families has followed a traditional child protective services model of investigation that was designed to gather facts that would result in a determination as to whether a child had been abused or neglected and by whom. The approach is supported by statute and language that speaks to: “allegations”, “investigations”, “substantiations”, “victims”, and “perpetrators”. The gathering of facts to support a determination necessitates criminal background checks and collateral contacts and subjects, in most instances, the parent or guardian of a child to the risk of inclusion on the Central Registry as a perpetrator of child abuse.

It is evident that the historical conduct of investigations is predicated on the principle of assuring the fundamental safety of a child. However, roughly 2 out of 3 investigations are initiated due to an allegation of neglect in families in which members frequently are struggling with domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health issues, low cognition, poverty or some combination of those factors. That is, the issues of child and family well-being predominate in a system predicated on assuring safety. While the two are not mutually exclusive, a fundamental need in determining whether assistance is needed and the type of assistance that would best assist the family is information from the family about its own strengths, needs, history, hopes for the future of its members, and its commitment to the well-being of its members.

It is not surprising that family members are reluctant to fully disclose and engage with an agency that is charged with finding fault with one of its members, that may permanently place them on a list maintained by the State of those that have harmed children, that will potentially stigmatize the family by contacting others that know the family in the community, and may remove one or more of its members. The interactions between the parties are therefore often characterized by the mistrust engendered in a family seeking to maintain its integrity by withholding information that DCF is charged with discovering.

The historical conduct of an investigation is the front end of a system that makes a determination to provide services to a family in need based upon a substantiation of abuse or neglect. Such a system increases the likelihood that needs of families in which children are at risk of abuse or neglect will grow to the point that they come to the attention of the agency again and again until they ultimately cross the threshold in which a child member has been abused or neglected. Only then would the family be given access to services. It should be no surprise that in the typical year less than 20% of the investigations conducted by DCF involve families with no prior history with the Department.

Even in its traditional pursuit of child safety, the current process is incompatible with current research findings that demonstrate that the principle risk factor for future child maltreatment is previously coming to the attention of the child welfare agency, and it is unrelated to the presence or absence of a prior substantiation. Since a substantiation is predicated on meeting a burden of proof to support the finding, many families having come to the attention of the Department and known to be in need have their cases closed due to a lack of a substantiation, and it can be argued that such an approach increases the likelihood of future harm to a child.

Over time DCF has slowly moved in the direction of providing post-investigation services on a voluntary basis to families that seem to be at risk. The recent implementation of Structured Decision Making with the explicit policy decision to make case opening decisions based upon risk rather than an underlying substantiation, that informal practice has been formalized. Concurrently, two other factors lead the Department to question the applicability of its historical investigation approach to all cases. The first is the change in statute pertaining to the Central Registry and the limiting of inclusion to those that pose a future harm to children. The second is the commitment to family engagement in the development of treatment plans with “family conferencing” being the preferred best practice approach.

With a substantiation no longer being a necessity for accessing services, and the recognition that it was not a valid predictor of risk to children, it was necessary to consider how best to define the initial point of contact with families in ways that better met the needs of the children and families. The Department had an early interest in “Differential Response” and piloted a small program in part of one city several years ago. From the outset there had been an interest in the concept as a national best practice in child welfare and recent years have seen dramatic increases in research and evaluations of the practice.

The research supports the validity of a two-track system for initial contact with families following the receipt of reports of abuse or neglect. For a relatively small percentage of the cases that suggest acts of committed, emergent, or serious harm to a child; the traditional approach remains the gold standard. However, for the majority of cases, evidence now supports an alternative, i.e. Differential Response, that holds promise for increased engagement with families, greater client satisfaction, a more prompt access to services, reduced likelihood of families returning to the attention of child welfare, no increase in children being unsafe, and a decrease in the recurrence of child maltreatment.

Differential Response shares principles with traditional investigation response by focusing on the safety and well-being of the child; promoting permanency within the family whenever possible; recognizing the authority of CPS to make decisions about removal, out of home placement and court involvement, when necessary; and acknowledging that other community services may be more appropriate than CPS in some cases. Differential Response differs from traditional child protective investigations in that it allows more flexibility in the response to child abuse and neglect reports; recognizes that an adversarial focus is neither needed nor helpful in all cases; better understands the family issues that lie beneath maltreatment reports; and engages parents more effectively to use services that address their specific needs.

Connecticut’s drive to implement Differential Response is based on the success of other jurisdictions and research that has shown that not only do alternative responses to reports of child abuse and neglect improve the “system’s” ability to engage families, but also that the family itself becomes the driving force in services provided. The fundamentals of DRS are simple...a thorough family assessment incorporating all voices the family deems appropriate; identification of and building upon the family’s strengths; family and support system decision making; and timely access to community resources.