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Children and Family Services Division Differential Response (DR)

Differential Response (DR) is a strategy that allows a California child welfare services (CWS) agency 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, child welfare agencies 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 social worker based on information taken from the initial call or report, intake or hotline:

Path 1: Community Response

- Selected when a family is referred to CWS for child maltreatment but as a result of the hotline/pre-contact assessment indicates the allegations do not meet statutory definitions of abuse or neglect.
- Indications are present that the family is experiencing problems.
- Families are linked to voluntary services such as counseling, parenting classes or other supportive options to strengthen the family.

Path 2: Child Welfare Services and Agency Partners Response

- Involves families in which the allegations meet statutory definitions of abuse and neglect at low to moderate risk.
- Assessments indicate that with targeted services a family is likely to make needed progress to improve child safety and mitigate risk.
- Emphasizes teamwork between CWS and interagency or community partners, providing a multidisciplinary approach in working with families.

Path 3: Child Welfare Services Response

- Most similar to the child welfare system's traditional response.
- Initial assessment indicates the child is not safe.
- With the family's agreement whenever possible, actions must be taken to protect the child.
- Court orders and law enforcement may be involved.

A Differential Response Guidelines and Resources for Implementation Guide is available at www.childsworld.ca.gov under "Featured Links."