



ISSUE BRIEF

# SAFE STRONG SUPPORTIVE

February 2025

## How do investigation, removal, and placement cause trauma for families?

Safety is a child protection agency’s first responsibility. Protecting children from trauma, both physical and psychological, also is a primary consideration. Investigation, removal, and placement are sometimes necessary to protect children from imminent harm. However, these processes also create trauma for all involved. Trauma during childhood can interrupt healthy brain development and result in lifelong physical and mental health consequences,<sup>1</sup> whether it stems from child maltreatment or the actions of a child protection agency.

***Consideration of the likely impact of investigation, removal, and placement on the child and family must be weighed against the child’s risk of future harm at home*** when making decisions about the best course of action in each case. All decision-makers within the child welfare system need to understand that protective interventions are not inherently benign. Rather, they have potential to do more harm than good if not handled in ways that are safety-centered, developmentally appropriate, and [trauma-informed](#).

This brief provides an overview of the traumatic impacts that investigation, removal, and placement can have on children, parents, and caregivers, and offers considerations for child welfare leaders.<sup>2</sup>

“When my daughter was removed, I didn’t have any contact with her for over two weeks. When I called to try to talk to her, I was labeled aggressive and told not to call back. Every day without my child felt like 1,000 years. I can’t even imagine what my daughter felt. She is an adult now and I can see some of that trauma playing out to this day.”

—Roger DeLeon, Parent, California

## What makes investigation, removal, and placement traumatic for children?

Many elements of a child protection intervention may create or reinforce a child's belief that the world is unpredictable and unsafe. The degree of trauma that a child will experience depends on a number of factors, including the child's age and level of resilience.<sup>3</sup>

**Separation from primary caregivers can be traumatic at any age.** Family separations may be particularly detrimental for younger children. Even if a parent is abusive or neglectful, attachment, love, and bonding still can exist. Attachment disruptions affect children in ways that [can impact their brain development](#), resilience to stress, sleep patterns, and ability to fight off illness.<sup>4</sup> If substitute caregivers see their primary role as keeping the child physically safe, without attending to their need for healthy attachment, the child will have more difficulty adapting to new surroundings and may experience more long-term developmental consequences.<sup>5</sup> Ensuring [children's first and only placement](#) is with someone they already know, such as a relative (kin) or a trusted friend (fictive kin), can ease separation anxiety and any confusion the child may have about the temporary caregiver's role.

**Care should be taken to ensure that the circumstances of a family separation are less traumatic than the situation that threatens the child's safety at home.**

Elements of a child protection intervention that may increase trauma for children:

- **Surprise and shock.** Intervention is particularly traumatic when it happens suddenly or unexpectedly, combined with a high level of conflict. Children may be confused about cause and effect, not understanding why they have been removed from their home.
- **Community over-reporting and over-policing.** Many children whose families are investigated live in communities that experience [oversurveillance](#). Research shows that Black, Indigenous, and impoverished communities receive a disproportionate level of police and child protection surveillance when compared to white, middle class, or affluent communities.<sup>6 7</sup> Children may have witnessed removals among family members, friends, or neighbors, and may fear the police and the child protection agency. They also may have heard horror stories about foster care that exacerbate their own fears.
- **Betrayal and loss of trust.** Children may feel betrayed by the person who reported the family, and therefore may feel they are surrounded by people they cannot trust.
- **Loss of control, helplessness, and confusion.** Children experiencing removal face many unknowns. They may not know where they are going, what will happen to them, what is happening to their parents and siblings, and how long they will be away from home. They may feel unable to speak up on their own behalf or ask questions about the things that concern them. Other traumatic elements of the situation may make it difficult for children to absorb or retain information provided to them.
- **Worry about parents and siblings.** If children from the same family are separated, they may be overwhelmed with concern about their siblings. Older children may feel responsible for taking care of the family and feel guilty due to the believe that the disruption to the family is their fault, or that they have failed to protect parents or siblings. They may worry about how their parents (and siblings, if separated) are coping, especially in the absence of frequent contact and communication.
- **Repeated interviewing about traumatic events.** Having to tell the story of "what happened" multiple times to different professionals (school staff, caseworker, police) may exacerbate trauma and reinforce feelings of guilt and betrayal.
- **Loss of the familiar.** Children removed from their home face losses on multiple levels: family (including extended family members, pets, belongings, routines); neighborhood and school (familiar places, friends, teachers, extracurricular activities); and culture (language, race/ethnicity, religion).

It should be noted that some children — particularly older youth — may experience relief and a feeling of safety from an agency’s protective action. These youth nevertheless still deserve consideration of the physical and psychological traumatic effects associated with investigation, removal, and placement, as well as an opportunity to stay connected to their family, school, community, and culture.

## How might parents and caregivers experience investigation, removal, and placement?

Trauma to parents and caregivers impacts the well-being of the children in their care. The effects of trauma on parenting can include heightened reactivity or aggression, emotional numbing, and negative perceptions of children’s behavior.<sup>8</sup> Child protection agencies have an important responsibility to avoid or minimize trauma to parents and caregivers so that families do not experience greater stress than before they came to the agency’s attention.

Consider the following:

- **Parents may experience many of the same feelings as their children**, including surprise and shock, betrayal and distrust, fear, loss of control and helplessness, and worry about their children. These feelings will add to — and possibly compound — any stressors and traumas that led to the system involvement, which may include the [effects of poverty](#), [behavioral health concerns](#), [domestic violence](#), or [substance use disorder](#).
- At the time of removal and during a family separation, the degree of trauma for the child will depend somewhat on the tone of the interactions between the parent and the professionals, and how much stress the parent experiences and demonstrates to the child. **Taking steps to prepare parents in advance** when possible, encouraging them to play a role in identifying potential placements, and providing as much information as possible about how their children are being cared for during the separation may help reduce trauma for both parents and children.
- **When family members step in as caregivers**, they often have little or no time to adapt their homes, lives, and routines to accommodate the children. They may feel ill-prepared, both for their new caregiving responsibilities and any negative behaviors the children may display as a result of their trauma. Caregivers are vulnerable to secondary or vicarious trauma from being exposed to these experiences and the children’s pain. A lack of practical, financial, or emotional support from the child welfare system or their community may exacerbate these difficulties.
- Families affected by the child welfare system are more likely to have experienced higher levels of [generational and community trauma](#), including structural racism and community violence. They may have past experience with the child welfare system as adults or children. A new investigation or removal may trigger past trauma for parents and kinship caregivers.

“Sometimes it’s hard to identify and handle our own trauma as caregivers. We were so busy focusing on the kids’ needs — feeding them, holding them, driving them to appointments — that we could barely handle the trauma, let alone manage the day-to-day care for our kids.”

—Bernadine Atchison, Kinship Caregiver, Alaska

## Questions to consider

The traumatic effects of investigation, removal, and placement on children, parents, and caregivers must be considered in determining a best course of action in each child protection case. Read more about trauma-sensitive casework strategies and systems-level approaches in [How can investigation, removal, and placement processes be more trauma-informed?](#) and [How are child protection agencies implementing trauma-informed, healing-centered policies and practices?](#)

Some questions for child protection agencies to consider:

- What steps does our agency take to ensure that investigations of suspected child maltreatment do not cause unnecessary trauma or add to the stressors a family already may be navigating?
- What strategies can our agency implement to acknowledge the harmful impact of investigations and mitigate the trauma experienced by children and families in over-surveilled communities?
- How does our jurisdiction consider and weigh potential trauma to the child, parent, and caregiver when making removal and placement decisions?
- How does our agency ensure that children stay with their families whenever safely possible, including supports to address a family's economic circumstances?
- How does our agency engage family members in removal and placement decisions, prepare kinship caregivers, and support them in their roles?
- How does our agency assess and treat trauma-related symptoms for all children and their families before, during, and after placement?
- How does our agency educate caregivers (kin and non-kin) about how the trauma of family separation might affect children's behavior?
- Who in our agency, or connected to our agency, might need additional education about the traumatic effects of investigation, removal, and placement?

“Caregivers need to learn to empathize with families that have been separated. Parents may not initially be interested in warm conversations. They will likely be angry. If our children were removed suddenly, I don't think we would be thankful, grateful, and open to conversations right away.”

—Katie Biron, Adoptive Parent, Washington

<sup>1</sup> Eck, A. (2018, June 20). [The psychological effects of forced parent-child separation](#). PBS.

<sup>2</sup> Content of this brief was informed through ongoing consultation with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Board. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience of the child welfare system who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Members who contributed to this brief include: Bernadine Atchison, Katie Biron, Roger DeLeon, Rowan Grae, Jarrod Hummer, Samaris Rose, and Melissa Zimmerman.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Portland State University, Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services. (2009). [Reducing the trauma of investigation, removal, & initial out-of-home placement in child abuse cases](#).

<sup>4</sup> Troutman, B. (2011). [The effects of foster care placement on young children's mental health](#). American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. (January 2017). Attachment disorders. [[Facts for Families No.85](#)]

<sup>5</sup> West, D., Vanderfaeillie, J., Van Hove, L., Gypen, L., and Van Holen, F. (2020). [Attachment in family foster care: Literature review of associated characteristics](#). *Developmental Child Welfare*, 2(2), 132-150.

<sup>6</sup> Fong, K. (2020). [Getting eyes in the home: Child protective services investigations and state surveillance of family life](#). *American Sociological Review*, 85(4), 610-638.

<sup>7</sup> Grinnell Davis, C., Dunnigan, A., & Stevens, B. B. (2022). [Indigenous-centered racial disproportionality in American foster care: a national population study](#). *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 17(2), 280-304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2021.2022565>

<sup>8</sup> Christie, H., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., McGuire, R. et al. (2023). [Exploring the perceived impact of parental PTSD on parents and parenting behaviours—A qualitative study](#). *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 32, 3378-3388.



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### Casey Family Programs

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