The Crisis in Child Protection:  
How the System Developed, and How it Should Be Reformed

History of the Child Protection System
The Child Protection System (CPS) began in the 1960s with the passage of legislation in all states that required professionals who worked with children to report cases of “battered child syndrome.” Back then, professionals estimated that there would be fewer than 1,000 cases annually of physical child abuse in the United States. The scope of the problem proved to be extremely underestimated.

By 1974, about 60,000 cases of child maltreatment were reported. Children were being referred for reasons other than physical abuse. The reports included neglect, sexual abuse, emotional abuse as well as physical abuse. The bulk of the cases reported then, as is the case today, were for neglect or emotional abuse.

In 1974, the U.S. Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (Public Law 93-247) which established a National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) as the focal point within the federal government for this issue.

The increase in the number of cases reported during the 1970s “skyrocketed” during the 1980s to about 2.4 million reported cases.\(^1\) This enormous increase as well as the ineffectiveness of the child protection system to help these children caused the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect in 1990 to declare that child abuse and neglect in the United States represented a national emergency.

The board said that the government response “was and continues to be fragmented, often simplistic, ill-conceived, crisis oriented, symbolic, and driven by political expediency.”\(^2\) Insufficient resources nationwide prevented the child protection system from reducing child abuse and neglect significantly, the board said in its report, “Child Abuse and Neglect: Critical First Steps in Response to a National Emergency.”\(^3\) The report found that child protection service workers could not keep pace with the increased number of cases reported as well as the increasing complexity of the cases they had to handle. They were being asked to do too many things for too many people.

The board recommended 31 critical first steps to control the emergency and called for the nation to commit itself to replace the “existing child protection system with a new, national, child-centered, neighborhood-based child protection strategy.”\(^3\)

The Board continued to work for change in the child protection system for several years before its enabling legislation expired. In 1993 it issued a report called, “Neighbors Helping Neighbors: A New National Strategy for the Protection of Children.”

This report said that the existing child protection system was more punitive than rehabilitative. It focused more on investigating reports than on assisting at-risk families in order to prevent child maltreatment from occurring. The Board said the system was geared toward removing children from the family even in cases where proper treatment and support could keep the family intact.

“We will not reverse the current trends until, one, we recognize the inherent failures in a child protection system
driven by investigation; two, we engage in careful analysis and research to better understand the causes of child maltreatment; three, we acknowledge and begin to change the conditions that permit the occurrence of child abuse and neglect; and, four, we realize that this is a problem that affects society as a whole and, therefore, an effective solution must be broad-based in nature.”

**How to Reform the System**
The Board called for the same national strategy to prevent child abuse and neglect that it first identified in its 1990 report. The strategy has four components of equal importance.

1. A national strategy must be comprehensive and include efforts from professionals in social service, legal, law enforcement, health, mental health, education, and government policymakers. For the strategy to work, adequate resources are necessary not only for investigation and adjudication based on effective risk assessment, but also for prevention and treatment.

2. A national strategy must be neighborhood-based. High quality neighborhood environments are necessary to foster healthy families.

3. A national strategy must be child-centered, one in which children are taken seriously. Children of adequate age and development must be given an opportunity to be heard and to be represented on matters that concern their lives and futures.

4. A national strategy must be focused on the family. Children should only be removed from the family when faced with danger to their health and well-being. Otherwise, policies should be aimed at strengthening and supporting the families to minimize or eliminate the circumstances that can lead to child abuse and neglect. All reasonable efforts should be made to reunite families when abuse or neglect has led to removal of children.

The Board identified five elements to building a new national strategy to prevent child abuse and neglect once the foundation was in place.

- Strengthen neighborhoods.
- Reorient the delivery of human services.
- Improve government’s role in controlling child maltreatment.
- Reorient societal values that contribute to child maltreatment.
- Strengthen and broaden knowledge about child maltreatment.

**Conclusion**
The Board recognized that implementing its proposed strategy for reforming the child protection system would not be easy or quick. “It means altering long-held beliefs on how best to address the problem of child abuse and neglect. It means a wholesale reorientation of thinking, with less emphasis on after-the-fact investigation and more on treatment and prevention.”

*For More Information visit the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect (www.calib.com/nccanch)*

**Endnotes**


_April 2, 2001_