A Dictionary of Common Child Welfare Terms*
(*sources at end of document)

Abandonment
A situation in which the child has been left by the parent(s), the parent's identity or whereabouts are unknown, or the parent has failed to maintain contact with the child or to provide reasonable support for a specified period of time.

Abandoned Infant
A newborn child who is unlikely to leave the hospital in the custody of his or her legal (typically birth) parent(s). Abandoned infants can also refer to babies whose parents are unknown and who are abandoned in unsafe places, sometimes with fatal outcomes. Laws to avert these unsafe abandonments are almost exclusively State laws.

Acute Trauma
A single traumatic event that lasts for a limited period of time such as automobile accident, natural disaster, witnessing a shooting, or a single physical or sexual assault. (See Trauma) (Source: National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN))

Adjudicatory Hearing (also called Adjudication)
A hearing held by the court (may be called juvenile or family court) to determine if there is enough evidence to prove that a child was actually abused, neglected, or abandoned, or whether another legal basis exists for the State to intervene to protect the child. This is the “trial” stage of the court proceeding in which rules of evidence are maintained.

Administrative Review (also called Case Review or Permanency Review)
A status review of children in foster care that is required every 6 months by the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act.

Adoption
The social, emotional, and legal process through which children who will not be raised by their birth parents become full and permanent legal members of another family while maintaining genetic, psychological, and sometimes relationship connections to their birth family.

Adoption Assistance (also called Adoption Subsidy)
Federal (title IV-E of the Social Security Act) or State benefits granted to adoptive families to offset the short- and long-term costs of adopting eligible children who have special needs (defined differently in each State). Benefits vary by State but commonly include monthly cash payments, medical assistance, social services, and nonrecurring adoption expenses.

Adoption Disruption
An adoption that is terminated prior to finalization, often after the child is placed with the adoptive family, necessitating a new placement plan for the child.

Adoption Dissolution
Describes a situation in which the legal relationship between the adoptive parents and adopted child is severed, either voluntarily or involuntarily, after the adoption is legally finalized. This results in the child's return to (or entry into) foster care or placement with new adoptive parents.
Adoption Tax Credit
Federal and State credits that reduce taxes paid by and/or increase refunds to parents who adopt children. The amount may depend on family income, adoption situation, other adoption benefits, and the specific rules in effect for the year of adoption. Families with special needs adoptions (that is, adoptions from foster care with adoption assistance benefits) can take the Federal adoption tax credit even if they had no adoption expenses.

Adoption Triad (also called Adoption Triangle, Adoption Circle, or Adoption Constellation). The triad includes the birth parents, child, and adopting family; the constellation refers to the extended family and friends of any of the triad members.

Adoptive Search
A process by which adoptees, adoptive parents, or birth parents secure information about each other and the circumstances surrounding the adoption process. While some children and parents search for each other, searches for siblings are even more common.

Appeal
The legal process by which a party who has lost her or his case at trial (adjudication) level petitions a higher court for a review of the case, claiming that a lower court erred in its judgment.

Background Check
An investigation of prospective foster and adoptive parents and all adults residing in prospective foster and adoptive households. In most States, the background investigation includes a fingerprint check of Federal and State criminal records and child abuse and neglect registries. These records checks are also part of the family assessment (home study) process used to assess the suitability of these families for placement of foster or adoptive children.

Best Interests of the Child
The standard that courts use when deciding what type of services, actions, and orders will best serve a child as well as who is best suited to take care of a child. “Best interests” determinations are generally made by considering a number of factors related to the circumstances of the child and the circumstances and capacity of the child's potential caregiver(s), with the child’s ultimate safety and well-being as the paramount concern.

Birth Family
Individuals who are the biological parents of a child as well as other family members who are related by birth. The child welfare system has the legal duty to provide services to birth families to help them change the conditions or situations that made their children unsafe and to help them reunite with their children. This may include birth parents, extended family members, or others with whom the child has strong prior attachments. The child's family should help determine who is included in their “family,” and the child welfare system should respect this determination.

CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate)
A person, usually a volunteer appointed by the court, who serves to ensure that the needs and interests of a child in child protection judicial proceedings are fully protected.

Case Plan
A written document designed collaboratively by all parties—including the parent, the child (as is
age-appropriate), caseworker, supervisor, the CASA or guardian ad litem, and the kinship or foster
caregiver—that outlines the outcomes, goals, tasks, and timeframes necessary to ensure child safety,
permanency, and well-being.

**Child Abuse and Neglect**
Defined by the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) as, at a minimum, any
recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker that results in death, serious physical or
emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act that presents an imminent risk
of serious harm. While CAPTA sets Federal minimum standards for States that accept CAPTA funding,
each State provides its own definitions of maltreatment within civil and criminal statutes. (CAPTA
Reauthorization Act of 2010)

**Child Protective Services**
The social services agency designated (in most States) to receive reports, conduct investigations
and assessments, and provide intervention and treatment services to children and families in which
child maltreatment has occurred. Frequently, this agency is located within larger public social service
agencies, such as county or State departments of social services.

**Child Welfare Services**
An array of services, ranging from prevention to intervention to treatment, for the purpose of protecting
children and strengthening families to successfully care for their children, providing permanency when
children cannot remain with or return to their families, and promoting children's well-being. Services
should be family-centered, strengths-based, and respectful of the family’s culture, values, beliefs, and
needs.

**Chronic Trauma**
The reactions that typically occur when children experience many traumatic events, often over a long
period of time. This may include many episodes of the same type of traumatic event or several types
of traumatic events over a long period of time (See Trauma) (Source: National Child Traumatic Stress
Network (NCTSN)).

**Competencies**
Knowledge and skills needed by foster or adoptive (resource) parents, specifically the ability, resources,
and willingness to: protect and nurture children, meet their developmental needs and address their
developmental delays, support their relationships with their birth families, connect them to safe and
nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime, and work as members of a professional team.

**Complex Trauma**
The reactions that occur when children are exposed to chronic trauma from a young age (typically
under 5 years) due to the actions of parents or other adults who the children must depend upon to care
for and protect them, and the children experience lasting effects of the traumatic events. (See Trauma)
(Source: National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN))

**Concurrent Planning** (also called Supplemental Planning)
A case planning approach that involves considering all reasonable options for permanency at the
earliest possible point following a child’s entry into foster care and simultaneously pursuing those
that will best serve the child’s needs. Typically, the primary plan is reunification with the child’s family
of origin. This primary plan and an alternative permanency goal are pursued at the same time, with
full knowledge of all case participants. Concurrent planning seeks to eliminate delays in attaining permanency for children.

Confidentiality
The legally required process and ethical practice of not disclosing to the public or other unauthorized persons any private or identifying information regarding children, their parents, or other family members that may be collected while providing services in the family home or community, including child protection, foster care, and adoption services. As members of the child welfare team, resource parents receive sensitive personal information about children and their families. All members of the team have the obligation to maintain the confidentiality of this information.

Court (also called Juvenile Court and Family Court)
A court that specializes in areas such as child maltreatment, domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, divorce, child custody, and child support. These courts were established in most States to resolve conflict and to otherwise intervene in the lives of families in a manner that promotes the best interest of children.

Custody (In Child Welfare)
The legal right to make decisions about children, including where they live. Parents have legal custody of their children unless they voluntarily give custody to someone else or a court takes this right away and gives it to someone else such as a relative or a child welfare agency. Whoever has legal custody can enroll the children in school and consent to medical care and other legal consents.

Culture
A system of values, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, standards of behavior, and sometimes language that govern the organization of people into social groups and regulates both group and individual behavior. Culture is created by groups of individuals to assure the survival and well-being of group members. Culture is learned and is more complex than either ethnicity or race.

Dependency
A legal term which refers to the status of a child who is homeless, destitute, or without proper care or support through no fault of the parents, guardians, or custodians; who lacks proper care or support due to the mental or physical condition of the parents, guardians, or custodians; or whose condition or environment is such as to warrant the State assuming custody.

Developmental Disability (also called Being Differently Abled)
A diverse group of chronic conditions caused by mental and/or physical impairments. People with developmental disabilities may have problems with major life activities such as language, mobility, learning, self-help, and independent living. Developmental disabilities begin anytime during development up to 22 years of age and usually last throughout a person's lifetime.

Discipline
The method that parents use to teach children self-control, self-sufficiency, orderly conduct, and how to get their needs met without hurting themselves, other people, or property. Discipline is based on respect for a child's capability, and should be designed to support positive self-esteem. It should not be confused with punishment, which means to inflict pain.
Dispositional Hearing (also called Disposition)
Hearings held by the court (usually called juvenile or family court) to determine the legal resolution of cases after adjudication. Dispositional hearings may determine where the children will live for the time being, who will have legal custody of them, and what services the children and family will need to reduce risk and address the effects of maltreatment.

Educational Neglect
The failure of a parent or caregiver to enroll a child of mandatory school age in school or provide appropriate homeschooling or needed special education training, thus allowing the child or youth to engage in chronic truancy.

Emotional Neglect or Abuse
A pattern of behavior that impairs a child’s emotional development or sense of self-worth. This may include constant criticism, threats, or rejection, as well as withholding love, support, or guidance.

Emergency Shelter Care Hearing (also called Protective Custody Hearing or Emergency Detention Hearing)
Usually the first court hearing held in an abuse, neglect, or dependency case. Child Protective Services files a petition in court asking for emergency custody of a child who is alleged to be in imminent danger of physical or emotional harm if not separated from his or her home environment.

Evidence-Based Practice
Approaches to prevention or treatment that are validated by some form of documented scientific evidence. This includes findings established through controlled clinical studies, but other methods of establishing evidence are valid as well.

Evidence-Informed
The use of the best available research and practice knowledge to guide program design and implementation within the context of the child, family, and community characteristics, culture, and preferences. (Guidelines for Community-Based Grants for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect Programs - CBCAP)

Ex Parte Communications
Literally means “one side only.” This term refers to discussions held between a party (or interested individual) in a court proceeding and the judge or referee, when the other party is not present. Such communications are often considered unfair and, for this reason, judges and referees avoid discussing a pending case with any of the interested parties except in a court proceeding where all interested parties are present.

Family Assessment (also called Home Study)
The process of mutually assessing and preparing prospective foster, adoptive, or kinship families to determine their ability, resources, and willingness to have a child join their families, and how their strengths could best match the strengths and needs of children. The family assessment may include a range of evaluative activities (such as fingerprint, background, and reference checks, physical examination reports, and home safety audits), meetings with the individual or couple and children already in the family at their place of residence, and training/educational activities.
Family-Centered Practice
A way of working with families, both formally and informally, across service systems to enhance their capacity to care for and protect their children. It focuses on the needs and welfare of children within the context of their families and communities. Family-centered practice recognizes the strengths of family relationships and builds on these strengths to achieve optimal outcomes. Family is defined broadly to include birth, blended, kinship, and foster and adoptive families.

Family Group Conferencing (also called Family Group Decision Making, Family Team Conferencing, Family Team Decision-Making, Family Team Meetings, Family Unity Meetings, and Team Decision-Making)
A generic term that includes a number of approaches in which family members are brought together to make decisions about how to care for their children and develop a plan for services. Families are engaged and empowered by child welfare agencies to make decisions and develop plans that protect their children from experiencing further abuse and neglect. Approaches differ in various aspects, but most consist of several phases and employ a trained facilitator or coordinator.

Family Reunification
The process of reuniting children in foster care with their families and reinstating custody of the children to their parents/guardians. Reunification continues to be the preferred permanency option when it can be done in a safe and timely manner.

Family Time (also called Family Visits or Visitation)
Scheduled contact among a child in out-of-home care and his or her family members. The purpose of family time is to maintain family attachments, reduce the sense of abandonment that children may experience during placement, and prepare for permanency. It requires preparation of children, birth parents, resource parents, and agency staff.

Failure to Thrive Syndrome
A general term used to describe children who demonstrate slow physical growth. This is a serious medical condition usually seen in infants and young children. They fall away from the normal growth curve as measured by the rate of weight gain and linear growth.

Finalization (also called Legalization)
The final legal step in the adoption process by which an adoption becomes permanent and binding. Finalization involves a court hearing during which the judge orders that the adoptive parents become the child’s legal parents.

Foster Family
An individual or couple who is licensed, certified, or approved as meeting State standards by a qualified agency with specific qualifications or competencies to meet the safety, well-being, and permanency needs of children who are selected to join their families.

Guardian Ad Litem (GAL)
A lawyer or layperson who represents a child in court. Usually this person considers the best interest of the child and may perform a variety of roles, including those of independent investigator, advocate, advisor, and guardian for the child. A layperson who serves in this role is sometimes known as a court-appointed special advocate (CASA).
Guardianship
The transfer of parental responsibility and legal authority for a minor child to an adult caregiver or child welfare agency who intends to provide care for the child. This can be done without terminating the parental rights of the child’s parents.

Independent Living (also called Transition and Self-Sufficiency Services)
A program that provides older children and eligible youth in out-of-home care with services to help prepare them for self-sufficiency in adulthood. They can receive these services while they are living in any type of out-of-home care (such as kinship care, family foster care, or residential/group care). Youth 16 years of age or older may reside independently with agency supervision. Youth receiving independent living services can be working toward achieving any of the permanency goals (such as reunification, adoption, or guardianship), or they may be heading toward transitional living to adulthood. Independent living services generally include assistance with money management skills, educational assistance, household management skills, employment preparation, and other services.

Individual Education Plan
A federally mandated plan for educational support services and outcomes developed for students enrolled in special education programs.

Jurisdiction
The specific type and location of cases a court is designated to hear. For example, criminal courts hear criminal cases, and civil courts often hear adoption and child protection cases. Courts are authorized to hear cases from specific geographic areas such as a county or State.

Kinship Care
Kinship care is the full time care, nurturing, and protection of a child by relatives, members of their tribes or clans, godparents, stepparents, or any adult who has a kinship bond with the child. This definition is designed to be inclusive and respectful of cultural values and ties of affection. The term “kinship care” was coined by the National Commission on Family Foster Care, convened in 1990 by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and National Foster Parent Association (NFPA), and published in A Blueprint for Fostering Infants, Children, and Youths in the 1990s. It was inspired by the work of Carol Stack, All our Kin – Strategies for Survival in a Black Community. Kinship care emphasizes that it is not so much who the courts say should claim the child, but who the child claims as having the most important relationship—based on assessments with the child or projections.

Legal Risk Placement
Placement of a child with an approved pre-adoptive foster family who intends to adopt the child if reunification is not possible and adoption becomes necessary for the child. In legal risk placements, the rights of all of the child’s birth parents have not yet been voluntarily or involuntarily terminated.

Licensing Standards (also called Certification or Approval Standards)
Regulations in each State that ensure children are cared for in families that promote safety, well-being, and connections to safe and nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime.

Lifebook (also called Lifebox or Lifebag)
Often used to help a child in foster care understand his/her background and history, resolve feelings, and/or attach emotionally to a new family. The lifebook can be developed as a scrapbook, bag, or box—even online—with pictures of birth parents and relatives, drawings, and children’s own narratives. This is
recommended for children of all ages, to be created with the children or for the children with input from individuals who know and/or are important to the child (birth, foster or adoptive family members, social workers).

**Mandated Reporter**
Individuals required by State statutes to report suspected child abuse and neglect to the proper authorities (usually child protective services or law enforcement agencies). Mandated reporters typically include foster parents, educators and other school personnel, health-care and mental health professionals, social workers, child care providers, and law enforcement officers or others who have frequent contact with children and families. Some States identify all citizens as mandated reporters.

**Matching**
The process of identifying a prospective foster and adoptive family whose strengths and interests can best meet the developmental strengths and needs of a child; this includes, for example, age, cognitive ability, and emotional and social characteristics. Matching could also be essential for kinship care when the child and relatives (fictive or not) are not known to each other.

**Medical Neglect**
Failure to seek medical or dental treatment or to comply with medical advice for a health problem or condition that, if left untreated, could become severe enough to present a danger to the child.

**Open Adoption**
An adoption that involves initial and/or ongoing contact between birth and adoptive families, ranging from sending letters through the agency or intermediary (sometimes called semi-open adoption), to exchanging names and/or scheduling time together. The goals of openness in adoption are to minimize the child’s loss of relationships, maintain and celebrate the adopted child’s connection with all the important people in the child’s life, and to allow the adopted child to resolve losses with truth, rather than the fantasy that adopted children often create when no information or contact with their birth family is available.

**Party**
Those persons who are deemed necessary by law to be participants in a court action. In a dependency, neglect, or abuse case, the parties include the child, legal parents or guardians, and any other individual who appears to the court to be proper or necessary to the court proceedings. Typically, all parties are entitled to legal representation at all stages of the proceedings, and if indigent, are entitled to a court-appointed attorney.

**Permanency**
The connection that each child needs and deserves to at least one individual who is assessed to have the ability, resources, and willingness to provide a safe, nurturing relationship intended to last a lifetime. Permanency embodies continuity, commitment, and the legal and social status that comes from having a family of one’s own. As defined in the Federal Child and Family Services Reviews, a child in foster care is determined to have achieved permanency when any of the following occurs: 1) The child is discharged from foster care to reunification with his or her family, either a parent or other relative; 2) the child is discharged from foster care to a legally finalized adoption; or 3) the child is discharged from foster care to the care of a legal guardian.
Permanency Planning
A process through which planned and systematic efforts are made to ensure that children and youth are in safe and nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime. Permanency planning involves time-limited, goal-oriented activities to maintain children within their families of origin, including kin, or to place them with other families through adoption or guardianship.

Physical Abuse
These are actions inflicted on children that result in physical injury to a child. This may include, burning, hitting, punching, shaking, kicking, beating, or otherwise harming a child. Although an injury resulting from physical abuse is not accidental, the parent or caregiver may not have intended to hurt the child. The injury may have resulted from severe discipline, including injurious spanking, or physical punishment that is inappropriate to the child’s age or condition. The injury may be the result of a single episode or of repeated episodes and can range in severity from minor marks and bruising to death.

Physical Neglect
This is failure to provide for a child’s basic survival needs, such as nutrition, clothing, shelter, hygiene, and medical care. Physical neglect may also involve inadequate supervision of a child and other forms of reckless disregard of the child’s safety and welfare.

Post Permanency Services (also called Post Legal Services)
Services provided to birth families, kinship families, and adoptive families to support child safety, permanency, and well-being after the child has achieved his or her permanency goal. Services may include educational and informational services, clinical and treatment services, material services such as financial support, and support networks.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
These are conditions occurring as a result of exposure to a traumatic stressor, characterized by re-experiencing the traumatic event through the recollection of images, thoughts, and perceptions, accompanied by intense feelings of distress, lasting for at least 1 month. (NYU Child Study Center’s Mental Health Dictionary.)

Protective Custody
A form of custody required to separate children from their family and place in out-of-home care. State laws designate persons authorized to take children into protective custody. In most states, child protective services and law enforcement may place a child in protective custody based on the determination that the child’s health, safety, and welfare is jeopardized. A child can also be placed in protective custody via court order.

Protective/Promotive Factor
Strengths and resources that appear to mediate or serve as a buffer against risk factors that contribute to maltreatment. These factors may strengthen the parent-child relationships, ability to cope with stress, and capacity to provide for children. Protective factors include nurturing and attachment, knowledge of parenting and of child and youth development, parental resilience, social connections, and concrete supports for parents.

Reasonable Efforts
Efforts made by State social services agencies to provide the assistance and services needed to preserve and reunify families.
Relinquishment (also called Voluntary Surrender)
Voluntary termination or release of all parental rights and duties that legally frees a child to be adopted. This is sometimes referred to as a surrender or as making an adoption plan for one’s child.

Resilience
The ability to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress. Parental resilience is considered a protective factor in child abuse and neglect prevention. Resilience in children enables them to thrive, mature, and increase competence in the midst of adverse circumstances. Resilience can be fostered and developed in children as it involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned over time and is impacted by positive and healthy relationships with parents, caregivers, and other adults.

Resource Family (see also Foster Family)
An individual or couple who is licensed, certified, or approved as meeting State standards by a qualified agency to foster or adopt children matched with them. These individuals and couples must have specific qualifications or competencies to meet the safety, well-being, and permanency needs of children.

Risk Factor
Behaviors and conditions present in the child, parent, or family that will likely contribute to child maltreatment occurring in the future. Major risk factors include substance abuse, domestic/family violence, and mental health problems.

Safety Plan
A casework document developed when it is determined that a child is in imminent or potential risk of serious harm. In the safety plan, the caseworker targets the factors that are causing or contributing to the risk of imminent serious harm to the child and identifies, along with the family, the interventions that will control the safety factors and assure the child’s protection.

Search (also called Adoptive Search)
Activities done by a birth parent, adopted person, or adoptive parent to learn the identity and location of another member of the adoption triad, often with the intent of initiating some form of contact.

Secondary Trauma
The stress or trauma symptoms that a professional may experience as a result of working with traumatized children and families. It is also called secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma.

Sexual Abuse
According to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), the employment, use, persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person to engage in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct; or the rape, and in cases of caretaker or interfamilial relationships, statutory rape, molestation, prostitution, or other form of sexual exploitation of children or incest with children.

Special Needs
There is no Federal definition of special needs, and the guidelines for classifying a child as special needs vary by State. The term is used in State law to indicate eligibility for Federal financial assistance, and most frequently refers to children who are school-aged, part of a sibling group, children of color, or
those with special physical, emotional, or developmental needs. The phrase “special needs” can apply to almost any child or youth in or adopted from foster care. It should be noted that children with special needs require foster and adoptive parents, and social work staff, who have special skills.

Termination of Parental Rights (TPR)
Voluntary or involuntary legal severance of the rights of a parent to the care, custody, and control of a child and to any benefits that, by law, would flow to the parent from the child, such as inheritance. The decision to terminate parental rights is permanent and can only be reversed when fraud or duress can be proven. When parental rights have been terminated the child is free to be adopted.

Therapeutic Foster Care (also called Treatment Foster Care)
Intensive care provided by foster parents who have received special training to care for a wide variety of children and adolescents, usually those with significant emotional, behavioral, or social problems or medical needs. Therapeutic foster parents typically receive additional supports and services.

Trauma
An event or situation in which a child’s fundamental needs for physical safety and emotional security are not met. Traumatic events or situations: 1) threaten the life or physical integrity of the child or someone critically important to the child, 2) cause an overwhelming sense of terror, helplessness, or horror, and 3) cause physical reactions such as increased heart rate, shaking, dizziness, rapid breathing, and loss of control of the bowel or bladder. (Grillo, C. A., Lott, D.A., Foster Care Subcommittee of the Child Welfare Committee, National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2010). Caring for children who have experienced trauma: A workshop for resource parents—Facilitator’s guide. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.)

Well-Being
The quality that children have when their parents meet their developmental needs and address any developmental delays, including emotional, social, cognitive and academic, and cultural. Child welfare services promote the well-being of infants, children, and youth by providing services to birth and kinship families, and supports to foster and adoptive families.

Youth Involvement/Engagement
A component of family-centered practice that centers on recognizing youth as experts in determining what is best for themselves and engaging youth in the development of policy, program, and service design and in decision-making, implementation, and evaluation.

The above definitions are adapted from:

