

Family Policing:

Language and Terminology Guide

The government system that oversees reports, investigations, family separations, and foster system placement for alleged child maltreatment is generally referred to as the “child welfare” or “child protection” system.

Impacted families, advocates, practitioners, and scholars widely experience and observe the system as operating more to punish parents and families than to advance child well-being, mirroring the race, class, and power inequities embedded in the criminal legal system. For this reason, a growing movement has rejected the terms “child protection” and “child welfare” and instead refers to this system as the “family policing” or “family regulation” system. In these materials, we use the term “family policing” system.

Many of the words commonly used to describe this system may sound neutral, but they can actually conceal important power dynamics and harms inflicted by the system. Similarly, the way we describe people and families impacted by the system shapes how they are perceived and can play a role in determining how they are treated by the system and within their communities.

Below are some words or phrases that we recommend avoiding, alongside more accurate or neutral substitutes to use instead when reporting on the family policing system. This list is by no means comprehensive, but it does suggest alternatives for commonly used terms and offer key principles for language considerations. When you can't fully replace agency language (because of legal specificity, quotes, or audience expectations), you can acknowledge that alternative terms exist and define the term that you use.

Instead of this	Use this	Because
"Child welfare" system, "child protection" system	"Family policing," "family regulation" system OR The name of the agency itself, e.g. "the Administration of Children's Services (ACS)" or "the Department of Human Services (DHS)"	These alternatives reflect the system's policing functions and close partnership with law enforcement. Agency names are more precise than broad system labels.
"Foster care"	"Foster system," "state custody"	These alternatives avoid the implication that state custody is synonymous with "care" and don't conceal the harm children may experience in the foster system.
"Congregate care"	"Congregate placements" or "Congregate settings"	These alternatives avoid the implication that state custody is synonymous with "care" and don't conceal the harm children may experience in these settings.
"The child was removed." "The parents lost custody of the child."	"DCF officials removed the child from their parents and placed the child into state custody."	Active voice is preferable to passive voice when describing family separation or actions taken by state officials.
"Foster parent," "foster family," "foster home"	"Temporary custodian," "foster placement"	These phrases do not artificially impose familial relationships on temporary, state controlled arrangements.
"Bio family," "birth family"	"The child's family," "Jordan's family"	These choices humanize families and avoid system imposed language that devalues familial bonds.

"Foster youth," "foster kid," "ward of the state"	"Young person in the foster system," "young person impacted by the foster system"	Person first language avoids pathologizing individuals or reducing them to a single experience.
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