



Ontario Association of  
Children's Aid Societies



CHILD WELFARE IN ONTARIO:

# A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

How Children's Aid Societies  
collaborate with communities to  
support children, youth, and families



Every child and youth in Ontario has a right to safety and well-being. The paramount purpose of Ontario's Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017 (CYFSA) is to promote the best interests, protection, and well-being of children. This provincial law gives Children's Aid Societies (CASs) the exclusive responsibility to investigate concerns about the safety and well-being of children and youth under 18 and to provide child protection services.

To carry out this mandate, CASs work closely in and with their communities. This brochure answers common questions about how CASs work with individuals like you to support families and keep children and youth safe and well.



## What are Children's Aid Societies?

Children's Aid Societies and Indigenous Child Well-Being Societies are independent, community-based organizations that provide protection services to children and youth up to age 18 across Ontario. In some communities they are known as Child and Family Services, and Family and Children's Services.

## What is the legal mandate of Children's Aid Societies?

The activities and purpose of a CAS are set out in the Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017 (CYFSA).

Children's Aid Societies are required to:

- Investigate allegations that children under 18 years of age may be in need of protection
- Provide guidance, counselling, and other services to families to protect children or to prevent circumstances requiring the protection of children
- Provide care for children assigned to its care
- Supervise children assigned to its supervision
- Place children for adoption

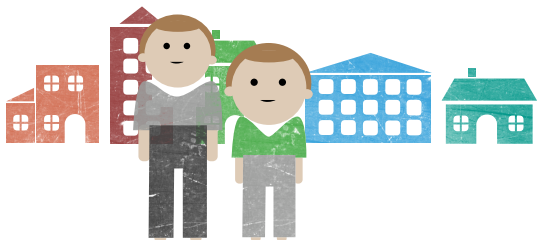


## **Who provides oversight of Children's Aid Societies?**

Each CAS has a local volunteer board of directors that is accountable for the functioning and financial well-being of their agency. The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, the Ontario Child Advocate, and the Child and Family Services Review Board are government bodies that provide oversight of CASs.

## **When do Children's Aid Societies intervene to protect children and youth?**

Children's Aid Societies investigate referrals from professionals and the public concerned about a caregiver's treatment of a child or youth. These concerns include that a child or youth is experiencing physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and/or that a child or youth is being neglected. CASs often work with children and youth where neglect is a key factor. Their families may be struggling with chronic challenges such as mental health issues, addiction, domestic violence, or extreme financial stress. Learn more about the signs of neglect and abuse at the end of this brochure.



## Who is a “caregiver”?

The word caregiver applies to a **primary caregiver**, such as a mother, father, a parent’s live-in partner, adult with a custody and control order for the child, and foster parent; an **assigned caregiver**, such as a child care worker, babysitter, family member providing temporary substitute care, and partner of the caregiver (with no legal relationship to the child); and an **assumed caregiver**, such as a teacher, recreational group leader, coach, religious leader, and school bus driver.

## How do Children’s Aid Societies support children, youth, and families?

Children’s Aid Societies work first and foremost to keep children and youth safe at home. In 97% of investigations, child protection services are provided while the child or youth lives with their family. CASs work closely with community partners to deliver services that support and strengthen the family. In rare instances (3%), CASs remove children from their home while their caregivers address their challenges. Most children (85%) return to their families within 36 months. CASs increasingly recognize the importance of keeping children within their extended families, communities, and culture.



## **How are communities involved in the safety and well-being of children and youth?**

Child safety and well-being is a shared community responsibility. Children's Aid Societies rely on community members to identify vulnerable children, youth, and families. CASs also rely on individuals in the community to become kin, foster, and adoptive families, to volunteer as tutors or drivers, or participate on their board of directors.

## **When should I contact a Children's Aid Society?**

When you have a concern about a child or youth under the age of 16, you need to contact a CAS immediately and directly. You also need to remember to report any ongoing concerns or new information. This obligation is described in section 125 of the CYFSA and is known as the "duty to report". In 2018, the age of protection was raised to include youth up to 18 years old. While reporting for 16 and 17-year-olds is not mandatory, it is recommended you contact a CAS if you have concerns.

## **How does a Children's Aid Society respond to my concern?**

We understand that you may be hesitant to contact a CAS with concerns. Your call or referral is answered by an experienced child protection worker who will use provincial guidelines to gather as much information as possible and to make an assessment to determine if help is needed and how to respond. If a child or youth is assessed to be in imminent danger, there will be an immediate response.

## Can I speak confidentially with a Children's Aid Society?

It is in the best interests of the child or youth that you give as much information as possible. While confidentiality cannot be assured when making a referral, concerns about being identified should be shared with the Children's Aid Society. Professionals who work with children have an enhanced responsibility to children and youth and must provide full information when making a referral.

## How do I tell the difference between alternative parenting practices and signs of harm?

Child-rearing practices vary across families and cultures. Ontario child welfare acknowledges that Indigenous and African Canadian children and youth are overrepresented in child welfare due to colonization and systemic racism. Overrepresentation begins at the referral stage based on racial and ethnic stereotypes. We all need to be aware of personal and systemic biases that may impact a decision to call a CAS. To check your biases, you are encouraged to "flip it." Would you call if the individual was a white, affluent child?



## How do I contact my local Children's Aid Society?

Contact information for Children's Aid Societies and Indigenous Well-being Societies across Ontario is available on the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies' website, [www.oacas.org](http://www.oacas.org). You can also find your local CAS online, or where available, by dialing 411.



### Possible signs of neglect and abuse

You do not need to be certain that a child or youth is, or may be, in need of protection to contact a CAS. Children's Aid Societies have the expertise to assess your concerns and determine whether there is a need for intervention.

#### Signs of neglect may include (but are not limited to):

- Missing key articles of clothing
- Over- or under-dressed for weather conditions
- Height and weight significantly below age level
- Consistent school absenteeism



- Persistent hunger
- Trouble concentrating
- Low self-esteem
- Body odour
- Child assumes adult responsibilities
- Always being dirty and severely unkempt
- Sleepiness/always tired
- Child steals food/lunch money from others

**Signs of physical abuse may include (but are not limited to):**

- Child wears long sleeves/long pants even in warm weather
- Excessive crying
- Child seems anxious when other children cry
- Avoidance of physical contact with others
- Recurrent nightmares or disturbed sleep patterns
- Behaviour extremes—aggressiveness or withdrawal
- Poor self-concept
- Whispered speech
- Loss of appetite for no apparent reason, or excessive appetite
- Child is wary of adults
- Re-enactment of abuse using dolls, drawings, or friends
- Clinging
- Delinquent behaviour
- Abrupt decline in school performance

**Signs of emotional abuse may include (but are not limited to):**

- Sudden change in self-confidence
- Headaches or stomach aches with no medical cause
- Destructive behaviour
- Abnormal fears, increased nightmares
- Failure to gain weight (especially in infants)
- Desperately affectionate behaviour
- Speech disorders (stuttering, stammering)
- Habit disorders (biting, rocking, head-banging)
- Argumentative or consistent temper tantrums
- Bullying tactics
- Being easily frustrated
- Behaviour extremes—disobedient or overly compliant

**Signs of sexual abuse may include (but are not limited to):**

- Frequent sore throats or urinary infections
- Constant sadness
- Re-enactment of abuse using dolls, drawings, or friends
- Clinging
- Thumb-sucking
- Sudden fear of the dark
- Behaviour extremism—aggressiveness or withdrawal
- Recurrent nightmares or disturbed sleep patterns

- Loss of appetite for no apparent reason, or excessive appetite
- Bedwetting
- Avoidance of undressing or wearing extra layers of clothes
- Abrupt decline in school performance



**WATCH OUR VIDEO**

**UNDERSTANDING  
CHILD WELFARE:  
IT MIGHT SURPRISE YOU**

at **[www.oacas.org](http://www.oacas.org)**

## **About the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS)**

For over 100 years, OACAS has been enhancing and promoting the welfare and well-being of children, youth, and families in Ontario. OACAS works to create a highly effective system of services for children which has the confidence of Ontario families and communities.



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