

# Policy shift improves outcomes for addressing cases of child neglect

December 10 2015, by Bert Gambini

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Child protection services personnel respond to some 3 million reports of maltreatment per year, including child neglect and physical or sexual abuse. Although families are dealing with a variety of issues, and pose different levels of risk to children and youth, many states respond identically to all incidents, regardless of their nature.

But instead of inevitably launching highly forensic investigations in response to all reports of child endangerment, many states now use differential response, an alternative approach that is giving social service agencies greater latitude when approaching low-risk cases.

Differential response is strength-based and often more comprehensive than a one-size-fits-all approach applied across the entire continuum of risk.

The goal of differential response is to better engage families to keep children safe in their homes when possible. Agencies that are able to integrate family-engaging, safety-focused strategies early may prevent repeated involvement with [child protective services](#), according to a new study from the University at Buffalo School of Social Work.

Differential response is, in fact, a significant policy shift in how child welfare systems approach families, says Annette Semanchin Jones, an assistant professor of [social work](#) at UB whose study was published online Dec. 8 in a special issue of the Journal of Public Child Welfare.

Instead of one standard investigation, it permits multiple responses to reported maltreatment, providing flexibility along multiple pathways rather than laying out a set of interventions or strategies defined by a standardized model.

"The practitioners who developed differential response call it an approach, not an intervention," Semanchin Jones says.

The comparative case study used focus groups and interviews with child welfare workers and supervisors in a county-administered child welfare system in Minnesota.

Minnesota has a county-administered system, and so the implementation of differential response varies across jurisdictions. There were different structures, organizational capacities, training techniques, supervision and on-going coaching.

The study compared the implementation of differential response across a sample of nine counties. Counties were grouped according to child safety and racial equity outcomes, with three counties in each of these categories: positive, mixed or poor outcomes.

Those counties with the best outcomes successfully integrated family-engaging, child-safety approaches, including family/group decision making, active support and follow-up, and a strong focus on identifying and engaging enduring support.

"One of the things this study helped indicate is that it takes a highly qualified and well-trained CPS staff to manage this effectively," Semanchin Jones says. "It involves comprehensive assessment and good social work skills.

"If implemented well, differential response can be an effective child-

protection strategy that keeps children safer."

Previous research has suggested that intense and punitive investigations for lower-risk child welfare cases rarely meet the needs of all families and fail to address unique challenges present in specific situations.

These shortcomings have driven states to adopt differential response, which searches for strengths, not fault, constructively engaging families and connecting them to resources.

Semanchin Jones says in the right hands, differential response has a lot of promise.

"It's a growing approach in [child welfare](#) that's still under-researched," she says. "Because it's not a specific model, the more information we have on which strategies can lead to better outcomes, the better informed we'll be about implementing differential response."

**More information:** Annette Semanchin Jones. Effective Implementation Strategies of Differential Response in Child Welfare: A Comparative Case Analysis, *Journal of Public Child Welfare* (2015). [DOI: 10.1080/15548732.2015.1090365](https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2015.1090365)

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