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We were extremely motivated to write this book because there has never been a greater need for smart, competent, and compassionate social workers than right now. There are many pressing social problems at home and around the world. In the past few years, we have witnessed the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the home mortgage crisis, rising income inequality, Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters around the world, and a heated political debate surrounding illegal immigration. We know that social workers will continue to be in demand as the aging population grows and as we grapple with the millions of Americans who are without healthcare and are struggling to adjust to the ever increasing cost of food and gasoline. Social workers will also be needed to aid returning American soldiers and their families, many of whom will need medical and mental health services for years to come.

However, despite these challenges, there is hope; many Americans have been galvanized by these issues and want to have their voices heard. There is talk of ending the war in Iraq, having national health care, and improving public education. These are exciting times—and especially for social workers!

After reading this book, we hope that readers will understand the mission and values of the social work profession and will use this book as a guide to help them assess which field(s) of social work practice might be a good fit for them. We hope they will be inspired by the real stories of social workers from all across the country who are doing exciting and interesting things (see the “Social Worker Spotlights” in each chapter).

Finally, we wrote this book because we are troubled by the idea that very few people “get” the social work profession. The general public has a fairly limited view of what social workers do across this country every day. Many people are familiar with the clinical or direct services work carried out by social workers, but have no idea that there is a “big picture” side to the social work profession and that the mission of the social work
profession includes a commitment to social justice. Most do not realize that social workers work with organizations, communities, and in the political and international arenas. They do not know that social workers are filmmakers and artists and politicians and community activists. We want to educate people about the countless array of options out there for social workers with an earned bachelor's, master's, or doctorate in social work and inspire them to be very creative in designing their career based on their own unique skills and passions. We hope that after reading this book, you will realize that there is no “typical social worker”—and no “typical” social work career.
When you ask social work students what they want to do after they graduate, one of the most popular replies is, “I want to work with children and families.” According to the U.S. Department of Labor, almost half of all social workers (47%) are child, family, and school social workers. Most of these social workers will choose to work in programs and agencies that are dedicated to ensuring that families have their basic needs met and that they have access to crucial medical and mental health services. Working in the field of child welfare also includes ensuring that children are safe and protected, helping them thrive at school and at home, and helping families through a crisis.

If you are interested in working with children and families, the good news is that you will have a wide range of options! You can work as a counselor or therapist, a case manager or caseworker, an advocate, as well as a program manager or administrator. One thing to keep in mind when working with families as a social worker is that there is no “typical” family structure—you will work with many types of families, including single parent homes; two-parent homes; homes with foster or adoptive children; families headed by parents who are gay or lesbian; children raised by grandparents or other family members; blended families (remarriages); immigrant families; and families of diverse racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds.
This chapter will highlight a number of popular fields of practice for social workers who want to work with children such as child protection, social work in private or nonprofit agencies, child welfare research, careers with the government, child advocacy, adoption, and foster care. However, many other chapters in this book include careers that involve working with children and families (e.g., mental health, medical social work, social work with older adults, criminal justice, school social work), so read on!

**CHILD PROTECTION CASEWORKER**

Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworkers usually come to mind when people think about various jobs performed by social workers. For obvious reasons, this job is not for everyone. CPS work has a reputation for high rates of burnout, due to the intensity of the job and the high caseloads carried by many caseworkers. Nonetheless, it is an extremely important and rewarding career for a social worker. Many dedicated child advocates spend their entire careers working in this system that assists families and protects vulnerable children.

CPS caseworkers, who are employed by the state or local government, are charged with protecting children and making decisions that are in the “best interest of the child.” It is important to note that CPS workers will not only work with children, but they may also work with parents or caregivers of the child who may be the source of abuse or neglect. CPS agencies have a dual mission: focusing on protecting children and child safety, while at the same time focusing on family preservation and reunifying children with their parents whenever possible. With the passage of the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, there is a much stronger focus on child safety and quickly finding safe, permanent homes for children to prevent them from languishing in the foster care system. As a result, parents have a much shorter timeframe (typically 12 to 18 months) to work toward having their child(ren) returned to their care and custody.

The CPS investigator, who comes knocking on the door and has the authority to intervene and take someone’s child away in very serious cases of abuse and neglect, is the most commonly cited type of CPS caseworker. However, in most CPS offices around the country (with the exception of rural areas), caseworker positions are very specialized, as there are a range
of responses that may take place before and after removing children from their home. Examples of CPS caseworker positions are as follows.

Social Worker Spotlight: Jessica A. Ritter, BSW, MSSW, PhD Children’s Protective Services, Austin, Texas

After graduating with my BSW from the University of Texas at Austin, I accepted a position as a caseworker at CPS. In my first position as a practicing social worker, I worked with the most severe cases of child abuse and neglect, since cases were transferred to me after a child was removed from the home by the CPS Investigator. It was my job to work with the family and to make attempts to reunify the family if possible. I would set up services for the parents such as parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, and individual counseling. It was also my job to find a temporary placement for the child, usually with a foster family or relative. I would also arrange therapeutic services, if they were needed, for children. I supervised visits between the child and the parents and would get to know everyone in the family very well. I went to court frequently to update the judge on how the case was progressing. When children were not able to be returned home to their parents, I was charged with finding another permanent home for them. The best option was that the child would be adopted by a relative or into a new loving family.

What I really loved about my job at CPS as a substitute care caseworker was spending time with the kids on my caseload—trips to McDonald’s for ice cream, driving them to appointments, and visiting them in their foster homes. I realized right away how important I was in their lives. I was their link to their families, and I would have major input into deciding where they would end up living permanently. This was a heavy responsibility, and I took it very seriously. I built special relationships with a number of children on my caseload, and I still think about them today and wonder how they are doing. This job was very stressful at times, but I will never regret starting my career at CPS. I learned and grew so much in those years. Not only did I learn about the dynamics of child abuse, I learned about domestic violence, severe mental illness, poverty, substance abuse, the challenges of parenting, and how the court system works. I could go on and on. What an amazing experience for a beginning social worker!
INTAKE WORKER

Intake workers are charged with taking reports of the abuse, neglect, and exploitation of children, as well as determining if a report meets the legal criteria for child abuse and whether it warrants investigation by a caseworker. In some areas, the intake department is set up in a large room, like a hotline, and caseworkers take calls from individuals around the state who are reporting the abuse, neglect, or exploitation of a child. Calls to report child abuse and neglect are typically routed through the state agency’s 1-800 telephone number.

CPS INVESTIGATOR

Investigators talk with the child, parents, and anyone else who may have information about the family in order to make an informed assessment about the family’s functioning, the risk to the child, and to determine whether the child was abused or neglected. It is important to note that children are only removed when there is a reasonable cause to believe there is an immediate danger to their physical health or safety and there is no other way to ensure their safety. CPS investigators often work with families, referring them to community services. They may also refer the case to the family preservation unit at CPS if they are eligible.

FAMILY PRESERVATION CASEWORKER

Family preservation caseworkers provide needed child abuse prevention services to a family to prevent a child from being removed from the home. The services may include counseling for parents and/or the children, parent education, home visits, financial planning, substance abuse treatment, and referrals to other community resources. The relationship with the family is less adversarial, and the family often views the family preservation caseworker as helpful and supportive, instead of “the bad guy” who wants to take their child away. Some critics of the CPS system believe that CPS should offer more prevention services to families in order to keep families together and prevent children from entering the custody of the state.
Chapter 4  Careers in Child Welfare

SUBSTITUTE CARE CASEWORKER

Substitute care caseworkers work with families when a child has been removed from the home. After the child is removed by the CPS investigator, the case is transferred to a substitute care caseworker. These caseworkers attempt to reunify the family by providing parents with needed services in the hope that they can be rehabilitated. They are also charged with finding a temporary placement for the child (e.g., foster home, relative, group home, residential treatment center) and ensuring that the educational, medical, recreational, and therapeutic needs of the child are met. If family reunification is not possible, the caseworker will find another permanent plan for the child. This plan for permanency may include permanent placement with a relative or family friend, or terminating parental rights and placing the child for adoption.

FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION CASEWORKER

Foster care and adoption caseworkers are charged with recruiting, training, and supporting individuals who foster and adopt children. Depending on how the responsibilities are defined, they may also be responsible for matching children with families and preparing children for adoption. A recent trend is that an increasing number of relatives are adopting children or becoming their legal guardian, thus new programs have been developed to serve these “kinship care” families. Witnessing a happy ending for a child to be wanted and placed in a home for adoption is certainly an upside of this work. These jobs are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

As you can see from these descriptions, career planning and development is possible as caseworkers are able to transition from one position to another utilizing their skills and knowledge base. Some common duties of all CPS caseworkers include case assessment and documentation, supervising visits between parents and children, arranging needed services for children and parents, examining children for abuse and neglect, making home visits, transporting children and parents to needed services and appointments, attending court hearings, working with other professionals on a case (e.g., service providers, psychologists, therapists, attorneys, community volunteers, foster parents), keeping
supervisors informed of case progress, and case planning for children and parents.

**CAREERS WITH PRIVATE OR NONPROFIT AGENCIES**

There are a number of child welfare related jobs that are located outside of the formal child welfare system. Many of these jobs are with private or nonprofit agencies that contract with CPS to provide services to children and families. Some social workers work in Children’s Advocacy Centers, which are charged with conducting forensic interviews of children who have been sexually or physically abused. Social workers are also employed by Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), a national organization (with many state and local chapters) that trains members of the community to be advocates for children in CPS custody. Furthermore, social workers are employed in emergency shelters, residential treatment centers, or private foster care agencies where children are placed after they have been taken into custody by CPS. Social workers can also be found in organizations that provide transitional housing or other independent living programs that serve youth who will be emancipated from the foster care system when they graduate from high school.

**CAREERS IN CHILD WELFARE RESEARCH**

Some social workers with a strong interest in child welfare choose to work at the macro level by conducting research. They enjoy doing research so that we can better understand the root causes of child abuse and the best way to intervene with children and families. This is how we ensure that the interventions that we use with clients are “evidence based.” A few of the many questions that can be answered through research include: Why do people abuse/neglect their children? What types of children and families are most vulnerable to experiencing child abuse? What types of interventions are most effective when treating abusive parents? Why are children of color overrepresented in the foster care system? How many children experience adoption disruptions? What are the long-term outcomes for youth who emancipate from the foster care system in the United States?

Social workers interested in conducting research typically work for universities, the government, or nonprofit research organizations.
Prominent organizations that conduct research in child welfare include the Children’s Bureau/Administration for Children and Families, the Child Welfare League of America, Casey Family Programs, Chapin Hall Center for Children (at the University of Chicago), Prevent Child Abuse America, and the American Humane Association.

CAREERS WITH THE GOVERNMENT

Some child welfare social workers who become recognized as experts in their field find themselves working for the government (city, county, state, or federal) after having many years of direct experience in the field. Many states have a Department of Children and Family Services that employs social workers to engage in the important administrative work required to run successful child protection programs. For those interested in working at the federal level, there is the Administration for Children and Families, the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, and the Children’s Bureau, all under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Most of these jobs include working in policy, program planning, or program evaluation. The upside of working in a high-level government job is that it includes good benefits, regular working hours, and often higher salaries because you are recognized as an expert in your field.

CHILD WELFARE ADVOCATE

After gaining a number of years of experience at the micro level, some child welfare social workers choose to move into an advocacy or policy making role. Social workers interested in advocacy are charged with educating the public about children’s issues and influencing legislators to pass legislation at the local and national level that would benefit children and families. In recent years, child welfare advocates have been successful in getting funding for grandparents raising grandchildren, children who emancipate from the child welfare system, and adoption subsidies for parents who adopt children with special needs. They also urge lawmakers to appropriate more funding to state child welfare systems that tend to be understaffed and underfunded. Social workers interested in this type of work might work for a legislator or an advocacy organization such as the National Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA),
the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), Every Child Matters, Prevent Child Abuse America, or the Children’s Defense Fund.

**Core Competencies and Skills**

- Excellent risk assessment and decision-making skills.
- Sensitive to parents as well as children.
- Strong interviewing skills and ability to ask sensitive questions.
- Assertiveness/firmness/ability to confront others when necessary.
- Strong writing skills (e.g., court reports, case documentation, case plans).
- Comfortable dealing with conflict and working in an adversarial environment.
- Strong rapport with youth of all ages.
- Ability to prioritize and multitask.
- Strong crisis management and problem-solving skills.
- Ability to maintain a balance of objectivity and empathic understanding in dealing with families living in stressful and crisis situations.
- Self-care, as this job can be emotionally draining.
- Strong verbal communication skills (e.g., meetings with clients, court testimony).
- High degree of cultural sensitivity; can respect various cultural practices of diverse families.

**Educational and Licensing Requirements**

Social workers can be employed at CPS with a bachelor’s degree in social work (BSW) or a master’s degree in social work (MSW). Many social work education programs across the country receive federal funding to place BSW and MSW students in CPS field placements. This varies by university, but students are usually provided with a generous stipend as well as reimbursement for tuition and fees. In return, students sign an agreement to work at CPS for a certain time period after graduation (at full pay). Likewise, some social work programs receive federal funding that allows current CPS employees to earn their MSW while being employed full-time. Again, they will sign an agreement to return to work at CPS for a certain time period after graduation (at full pay).

Unfortunately, because CPS workers around the country are in such high demand, many caseworkers are hired without social work degrees.
Because this job requires a high degree of knowledge, skill, and training, candidates with a social work degree or related degree are preferred, and many efforts are being made to increase the number of caseworkers with social work degrees. Having a professional degree ensures that you will be well qualified upon graduation for the demands of such work.

**Best Aspects of this Job**

- Working with children of all ages from infants to young adults.
- Learning about the dynamics of child abuse and neglect as well as a range of other social problems that often contribute to the abuse/neglect of a child (e.g., poverty and homelessness, domestic violence, juvenile justice, substance abuse, mental health issues, severe mental illness).
- Opportunity to work with many types of professionals (e.g., judges, attorneys, therapists, psychologists) and the community resources available to help solve problems.
- Extensive learning about children and families; a wonderful job to launch a career in social work. One can do anything after this job!
- Playing an important role in the lives of the children on your caseload.
- Being a significant influence on the outcomes of your cases and working in the area of prevention.
- Being a witness to many happy endings, (e.g., seeing parents make enough progress so that reunification can occur or watching a child get adopted into a wonderful new family).
- Every single day is different; never a boring moment in this job!

**Challenging Aspects of this Job**

- Seeing the effects of abuse and neglect on children is not easy.
- Being caught in a catch 22—CPS divisions are often criticized in the media for either intruding into the lives of families too much or for not intervening promptly enough.
- Dealing with criticism and conflict every day can be stressful.
- The heavy burden of being responsible for making decisions that affect the safety of children.
- Working with involuntary clients can be challenging.
- Because CPS cases often involve volatile or crisis-driven situations in which the child may be taken away, caseworkers must be careful
to assess and guard their own safety. Safety precautions include bringing another caseworker or a police officer with you when you visit someone’s home and having your cell phone with you at all times.

- Some CPS agencies are understaffed (though this varies by location). Because CPS agencies are funded by the government, they are at the mercy of legislators who decide how much funding they will receive.
- Working in a system that often does not operate from a strengths perspective and does not allow clients much in the way of self-determination.
- The work is stressful and can be emotionally draining. Self-care and having a balanced life is imperative.

**Compensation and Employment Outlook**

Because CPS workers are employed by local or state governments, they tend to earn higher starting salaries than many other social workers (though this certainly varies by region) and typically receive good benefits. Social workers who have a master’s degree usually start at a higher level on the pay scale. Because child abuse and neglect will unfortunately continue to be a problem in this country, there will always be a demand for social workers to work in child protection. As shown in Table 4.1, there are a wide range of salaries depending on the state or region of the country in which a social worker resides, years of previous experience, and type of degree (undergraduate or graduate degree). Moving into a supervisory or program administrator role means a nice raise in your salary (see Connecticut below)!

**Self-Assessment Checklist: Is this Job for Me?**

- Do you have a passion for protecting children of all ages from diverse backgrounds and making sure they are safe?
- Are you able to work with parents from diverse backgrounds who have abused, neglected, or exploited their children?
- Do you enjoy having a job where your work day is often unpredictable and crisis-driven?
- Would you enjoy having a job where an important aspect of your work is to participate in court hearings within the family court system?
Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>QUALIFICATIONS</th>
<th>SALARY RANGE FOR CPS CASEWORKERS (2007)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree in social work or human services preferred</td>
<td>$2,636.70 to $3,491 per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>BSW or human services degree, or bachelor's degree and 1 year of related experience</td>
<td>$2,903 to $4,229 per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>BSW or related human service field and 4 years of related experience, or MSW or related human service field and 2 years of related experience</td>
<td>$3,645 to $5,437 per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>Only hire those with social work degrees:</td>
<td>1. $43,075 to $47,450 per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Social Work Trainee (2-year training period)—need BSW or related field</td>
<td>2. $56,209 to $71,539 per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Social Worker—must complete 2 years of training and pass exam</td>
<td>3. $61,858 to $78,410 per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Social Work Supervisor—needs MSW</td>
<td>4. $68,565 to $87,947 per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Program Supervisor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: www.dfps.state.tx.us/ComeWorkForUs/fad.asp#
www.oregon.gov/DHS/jobs/salary.shtml
www.state.il.us/DCFS/library/com_communications_employment05.shtml
www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=2553&q=314424&dcfNav=

- Would you enjoy the challenge of working with involuntary clients who are not happy to have you in their lives?
- Would you be able to see and hear details of how a child has been abused and/or neglected including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and various forms of child neglect and exploitation?
- Would you be comfortable having a job with unpredictable work hours?
- Would you be comfortable visiting with clients in their homes (e.g., parents, relatives, foster parents)?
Do you have an assertive personality, and are you comfortable dealing with conflict?

Would you be comfortable working for a government agency that is somewhat bureaucratic and has many rules, regulations, policies, and procedures to follow?

If you answered “yes” to seven or more of the above questions, then working in child protection might be for you!

**RECOMMENDED READINGS/WEB SITES TO LEARN MORE**

- Child Welfare League of America: www.cwla.org
- Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA): www.nationalcasa.org
- Prevent Child Abuse America: www.preventchildabuse.org
- Most states have a Web site for their department of children and families. For example, in Texas, visit: www.dfps.state.tx.us. Just Google “Department of Children and Families” or “Children Protective Services” along with the state where you reside.

**Child Protection Caseworker Exercise**

**Test your knowledge**

1. CPS investigates the following allegations within families:
   a. Physical abuse
   b. Medical or physical neglect
   c. Sexual abuse or exploitation
   d. Abandonment
   e. Emotional or psychological abuse
   f. Inadequate parental supervision of a child
   g. All of the above

2. True or False
   Child *abuse* cases are more prevalent than child *neglect* cases.

3. Which of the following famous writers was an early advocate for children’s rights and child protection?
   a. Jane Austen
   b. Charles Dickens
   c. Herman Melville
   d. Ernest Hemingway
4. True or False

5. When CPS removes a child from their parent(s) or caregiver(s), the case gets heard in a ________ court.
   a. Criminal
   b. Civil or Juvenile

6. Which of the following is an example of a permanency plan for a child who has been removed from his or her home?
   a. Return home to parents/caregiver
   b. Permanent placement with a relative
   c. Adoption
   d. All of the above

7. True or False
   CPS agencies are typically funded by a combination of monies from the state and federal government.

8. When a child is being abused by a caregiver or family member, ________ investigates, but if a child is abused by a stranger, or someone who is not a family member, the ________ investigate.
   a. Police
   b. Child Protective Services

9. In any given year, there are usually approximately ________ children in the custody of CPS in the United States.
   a. 25,000
   b. 100,000
   c. 500,000
   d. million

10. True or False
    There is an abundance of foster and adoptive homes available for children in the child welfare system.

Answers: 1. g; 2. false; 3. b; 4. true; 5. b; 6. d; 7. true; 8. b, a; 9. c; 10. false.

ADOPTION SOCIAL WORKER

Many social workers who are interested in child welfare find themselves working in the fascinating field of adoption. This is a more positive side of child welfare because you get to witness the joyful experience of a child being placed into a new “forever” family. The job of the adoption
social worker is to prepare the biological parents, the child, and the adoptive parents for the adoption. As you can imagine, it is a very exciting and emotional time for the child who needs a “forever home” and the families who want a child to love and parent. Many families who decide to adopt a child have not been able to conceive a child on their own.

It is important to know that adoption has changed in recent years. Due to the increased acceptance of abortion and birth control, as well as the trend toward teen mothers keeping their babies, there are fewer healthy infants available for adoption. Children available for adoption today are more likely to be older, nonwhite, and have special needs (medical or emotional problems). Social workers need to be skilled and creative to find the right homes for these children because many adoptive parents are seeking healthy infants.

Another major change is the increasing number of “open adoptions,” adoptions that allow some continued contact between the biological parents, the child, and the adoptive parents. Sometimes, letters and pictures are exchanged, while in other cases, children may have periodic visits with their biological parents. Social workers assist parties in coming to an agreement that is in the best interests of all who are involved in the adoption triad.

New federal laws have been passed in recent years that emphasize the idea that children in foster care have the right to be in a permanent home as soon as possible. There is a strong emphasis on finding adoptive homes for these children, as soon as possible, so they do not grow up in the foster care system. Finally, it is important to know that adoption is a lifelong process, and the social worker’s job often does not end when the child is placed in their new adoptive home. Many families will continue to need support and postadoption services to help with adjustment and ongoing issues.

Once families decide they want to adopt a child, they have a number of options: Do they want an international adoption? Do they prefer adopting through the child welfare system in the United States? Do they feel more comfortable going through a private adoption agency? Thus, you will find adoption social workers in each of these settings (e.g., state child welfare agency or private agencies that specialize in domestic or international adoptions). A growing number of “kinship adoptions” are also taking place (e.g., family member, typically a grandparent or aunt, adopts a child related to them because the biological parent is unable to parent the child, in many cases due to substance abuse problems). These
families also need help and support, and there are a growing number of programs to meet this need. The following tasks are routinely performed by adoption social workers:

1. **Preparing children for adoption.** Before older children can be placed for adoption, they must be adequately prepared. In some cases, they may need counseling. Sometimes social workers help the child prepare a “Life Book,” which helps them document their life before the adoption and to process why they could not continue to live with their birth parents. If children are not sufficiently prepared, there is a risk that the adoption process will be disrupted and the child will not be able to stay in the adoptive home.

2. **Counseling the birthparents.** As you can imagine, the decision to place a child for adoption is not easy. The parent(s) will need counseling and support to grieve the loss of the child and to help guide them through the adoption process. Some parents give their child up voluntarily, whereas those involved in the child welfare system sometimes have their parental rights terminated by the court against their will.

3. **Recruiting prospective adoptive parents.** It is unfortunate that there are not enough adoptive homes for all of the children who are available for adoption in this country. Recruitment is especially important for special needs children. Social workers may use a variety of strategies, such as community presentations, public service announcements on radio and television, and the Internet, to find homes for these children.

4. **Training and approving prospective adoptive parents.** Many adoption agencies require parents to complete training (typically 10 to 12 weeks) to learn the adoption process, all of the requirements, and also to prepare them for the challenges and benefits of adopting a child. An important part of this process is conducting a very thorough home study to assess the suitability of the parents to adopt a child. Parents will be assessed on their motivation for adopting a child, the stability of their relationship (if married), their physical and emotional health, and their financial stability. The agency will also perform a criminal background and child abuse check. Some social workers perform home studies on a contract basis with a state or private agency.
5. **Matching children and parents.** This is an art as much as it is a science. It takes experience and good assessment skills to match a child with the right family. Social workers must know the child and the prospective adoptive parents very well in order to make a good match. In some cases, the birthmother is allowed to select, or at least have input into selecting, the adoptive parents.

6. **Supporting families after the adoption placement.** Many agencies recognize that adoption is a lifelong process and that families may need short- or long-term services, such as counseling, support groups, in-home support by caseworkers, and referrals to other community resources, as needed.

7. **The legal work required to finalize an adoption.** Social workers need to become well versed on the legal process for finalizing an adoption. Adoption social workers will spend some of their time doing legal paperwork and appearing in court.

8. **Helping adoptees and birthparents with the search.** When a child or a birthparent decides they would like to search and meet each other, they will often need to seek the help of a social worker to guide them through this process so that it can be as successful as possible. This is an emotional journey for everyone involved!

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**Core Competencies and Skills**

- Ability to do thorough assessments of children and families (home studies and matching children with adoptive parents).
- Strong counseling skills and understanding of the grieving process (birthparents who are losing a child or adoptive parents who were not able to conceive a child).
- Thorough understanding of the adoption process and how it affects each member of the adoption triad (e.g., child, biological parents, adoptive parents).
- Strong presentation and training skills (e.g., community presentations, training of adoptive parents).
- Understand the importance of cultural identity (this is especially important in transracial adoptions).
- Ability to mediate between biological parents and adoptive parents.
- Media and marketing skills (recruiting adoptive families).
- Good legal skills and knowledge of the laws surrounding domestic and intercountry adoption.
Educational and Licensing Requirements

You may be able to get a job as an adoption social worker with a BSW, but many employers prefer those with a master's degree and previous experience in child welfare. Agencies may also require a social work license, depending on the state where you reside.

Best Aspects of this Job

- Playing a role in creating a new family can be very rewarding!
- Finding a wonderful forever family for children, some of whom may have experienced abuse and/or neglect or a turbulent or uncertain beginning in life.
- Helping biological parents make peace with the decision that it would be in their child's best interest to be placed for adoption.
- Placing a child into an adoptive home, and helping adoptive parents realize their dream of having a child.
- Facilitating a successful open adoption so that a child can stay connected with their biological family and community of origin.
- Helping adoptive parents understand the importance of keeping a child connected to their culture or country of origin, especially when there are cultural differences between the child and the adoptive parents.
- Facilitating a successful reunion between an adopted child and a biological parent when the child reaches adulthood.
- Working in a field that is extremely fascinating and complex—the emotional rewards are great!
- Finding a loving home for an older child or a child with special needs is awesome!

Challenging Aspects of this Job

- Dealing with the stereotypes and myths surrounding adoption.
- It can be tough to balance the needs of the adoptive triad.
- Adoption often has happy endings, and yet it also involves grief and loss. Many families, children, and professionals have a hard time dealing with this concept.
- As with all social work, it is not an exact science and can be a roller coaster of emotions as you work with adoptive parents, children, and birthparents.
Adoptive parents who are anxiously awaiting an addition to their family are looking for a sense of fulfillment; they want to “get from” the child and to feel the return love of a child. This doesn’t always happen, especially not immediately.

Working with children who have a difficult time attaching to their new family.

Helping adoptive parents deal with not having the perfect, idealized child they have always dreamed of having.

Convincing families that adoption is a lifelong process and will present new challenges at different life stages.

Seeing some children wait for long periods of time for their “forever home,” and others who will not be placed due to having significant physical, behavioral, or emotional needs.

Working with children who have experienced abuse, neglect, and termination of parental rights can be challenging to deal with emotionally.

When an adoption disrupts or does not work out, putting the pieces back together is very difficult. (The child and the adoptive parents are hurt and grieving. The child has experienced a rejection.)

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Social Worker Spotlight: Agnes Zarcaro, LCSW
Spaulding for Children, Houston, Texas

I received my MSW in 1971 from the University of Houston. Today, I am a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW). I have worked in the field of adoption for 36 years.

My present position is manager of the South Texas Adoption and Family Support Programs of Spaulding for Children; these programs are located in Corpus Christi, McAllen, and Laredo, Texas. The Adoption Program centers on the adoption of older children who are in the Texas state foster care system—those who have had parental rights terminated and are awaiting a permanent adoptive home. The Family Support Program offers an array of services to the families as they await an adoptive placement. Once the adoptive placement occurs, the families and children are offered services through the finalization of the adoption and the post-legal adoption period. These programs include marriage communication; family, parent, and children’s support groups; family retreats; and therapy.
The field of adoption has changed dramatically since I began, in November 1971, as a birthparent counselor, assisting “unwed mothers” (as they were called at that time) with making a decision about their “unplanned” pregnancy. Most birthmothers, at this time, did choose adoption for their babies. In the late 70s and 80s, birthmothers began parenting their children more and more, so the “homes for unwed mothers” began to change and began offering many more services to teens who decided to parent their children. In the 90s, infant adoptions were few and far between. International adoptions increased in numbers as U.S. families continued to want infants and found adopting domestically to be too expensive and complicated. The majority of children available today in the United States are older children or children with various special needs.

Within the field of adoption, there are many different areas where a social worker might concentrate. One can work with all triad members, or only one member of the triad. One can work in the pre-adoption, placement, or postadoption phase. One can work solely as a recruiter of adoptive families, or one can work in the clinical arena assisting families and children as they move through the phases and issues of the adoption. One can work in the legal system as a liaison with the courts on terminations and adoptions. Another area is post-adoption, including the search and reunions of adoptees and birthparents. One can work for the state CPS agency or a private adoption agency that specializes in either domestic or international adoptions. Research is always an option as well. Our program is funded through two large federal grants, and we are obliged to have a research component which will help to advance the field as well as help in the evaluation and efficacy of the work.

The best part of working in adoption is that it is such a diverse field and it is very challenging. Families are made! Children will have a family in which they belong. When a teen who has been in the foster care system since age 2 is adopted at age 15, this is such a wonderful thing to happen for that child.

Compensation and Employment Outlook

Social workers who work in adoption are typically employed by either the state CPS agency or a private, nonprofit organization. For information on
salaries for CPS caseworkers, please refer to the beginning of this chapter. Salaries for social workers working in a private adoption agency will vary greatly from agency to agency and by state. Due to the knowledge and skills required for this job, many social workers apply and get hired after gaining experience in other jobs within the child welfare system (e.g., CPS). In the state child welfare agency, jobs in the adoption unit are competitive and are reserved for experienced child welfare caseworkers. Seasoned caseworkers can enjoy a career transition to this division, which comes with the reward of finding children their “forever home.”

**Self-Assessment Checklist: Is This Job for Me?**

- ☐ Do you have a passion for finding homes for children available for adoption?
- ☐ Can you work with and support birthparents who are placing their child for adoption?
- ☐ Do you believe there is a home for every child if you can just find it?
- ☐ Would you enjoy working with children, some of whom have experienced child abuse and have abandonment issues?
- ☐ Can you work with and support adoptive parents who are desperate for a child and have a history of infertility?
- ☐ Would you be comfortable making home visits?
- ☐ Are you comfortable asking people very sensitive questions to determine their suitability to be adoptive parents?
- ☐ Are you able to balance the needs of the child, the biological parents, and the adoptive parents?
- ☐ Would you enjoy the challenge of working with adoptive families after the child has been placed in order to support that placement?
- ☐ Would you be able to hear details of how a child has been abused and/or neglected including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and various forms of child neglect and exploitation?

If you answered “yes” to seven or more of the above questions, then working in the field of adoption might be for you!

**RECOMMENDED READINGS/WEB SITES TO LEARN MORE**

AdoptUSKids: www.adoptuskids.org
Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE): www.adoptionsupport.org
FOSTER CARE SOCIAL WORKER

Though many child welfare social workers have a passion for adoption, others love the thrill of foster care. Because this field of practice has a lot of overlap with adoption, we advise you to read the previous section. Here, we will highlight some of the distinct aspects of working in foster care as a social worker. In the “old days,” foster care and adoption were two very separate entities, and foster parents were not encouraged to adopt children in their care. This has definitely changed! According to the Child Welfare League of America, there are approximately 513,000 children in foster care, and 60% of children adopted from the child welfare system are adopted by their foster parents (“Quick Facts,” n.d.).

However, at least initially, foster care is somewhat of a different experience from adoption because it is meant to be a temporary placement for the child while efforts are made to reunify the child with his/her parents. Foster parents must learn to deal with feelings of grief and disappointment when a child leaves their home to be reunified with their parents or is placed permanently with a relative, or when the child is exhibiting dangerous behaviors and needs to be placed in a more structured environment, such as a residential treatment center.
Unfortunately, many foster parents are often perceived in a negative light due to the small number of high profile media cases where foster parents have been found to be abusive to children in their care. However, most foster parents are generous, caring people who are willing to take children into their home who have suffered serious abuse and/or neglect at the hands of their caregivers. Foster parents come from all walks of life. They are childless young couples hoping to adopt, single parents, gay couples, older couples who have already raised their children, and families who already have biological children but want to add to their family.

Social workers who wish to work in foster care are typically employed by private foster care agencies that contract with the state to provide this service. The following tasks are very commonly carried out by foster care case managers:

■ Recruiting members of the community to be foster parents—this is crucial since there is a severe shortage of foster parents in most states.

■ Training and certifying individuals to be foster parents. Foster care agencies require prospective foster parents to complete a training (typically 10 to 12 weeks) to learn about the process, all of the requirements, and to prepare them for parenting abused children who often have a range of emotional problems and challenging behaviors. An important part of this process is conducting a very thorough home study to assess the suitability of these parents to foster a child. The agency will also perform background checks on all adults in the home.

■ Supporting the foster parents after the child has been placed. The child typically has their own caseworker, so the social worker’s job is to offer the foster parents guidance and support and ensure that they have the resources they need (e.g., counseling, clothing vouchers, adequate financial compensation).

■ Advocating for the foster parents on your caseload and ensuring that they are treated as a respected member of the team by the state child welfare agency and judicial system.

■ Making frequent home visits and monitoring the placement to evaluate whether the child is safe and is receiving good care. Ensuring that the foster parents are continuing to meet licensing requirements (e.g., ongoing foster parent training, fire inspection, CPR certification).
■ Helping the family through the legal process of adopting the child if he/she becomes available for adoption, or providing emotional support if the child later leaves the home.

**Core Competencies and Skills**

Many of the same competencies and skills that are required for adoption social workers are needed for foster care social workers as well (see previous section). In addition, foster care social workers must have the ability to work with troubled or special needs children. Foster care social workers, in some cases, need to have the ability to support the child and foster families if and when the child leaves the foster home.

**Best Aspects of This Job**

■ Seeing children who are dealing with the trauma of being removed from their home being placed in a safe, loving foster home—one that you were responsible for recruiting and training.
■ The joy of finding the perfect foster home for a large sibling group so the children do not have to be separated.
■ Witnessing the happy ending of a foster home placement that turns into a permanent adoption for a child in need of a “forever home.”
■ Working with amazingly giving foster parents who take “special needs” children into their home, some with serious physical and mental disabilities.
■ Seeing children thrive in a foster home, with love and structure, and heal from the abuse and/or neglect they suffered.

**Challenging Aspects of this Job**

■ Dealing with the shortage of foster homes in most communities can be very frustrating.
■ Witnessing the devastation of foster parents who lose a child they have become extremely attached to. Helping foster parents accept the decision when it is in a child’s best interest to go back home.
■ Working with a foster family when a child has to leave the foster home due to escalating problems, or when a child is unable to attach to their new caregivers.
Dealing with a child abuse allegation in a foster home.

Balancing the needs of the child, the foster parents, and the biological parents.

**RECOMMENDED READINGS/WEB SITES TO LEARN MORE**

Casey Family Programs: www.casey.org
National Foster Care Coalition: www.nationalfostercare.org
National Foster Parent Association: www.nfpainc.org
Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care: www.pewfostercare.org

**Foster Care and Adoption Exercise**

**Case study**

You are a caseworker in the adoption unit at the child welfare agency in your state, and your supervisor has just assigned a new case to you. Her name is Sarah, she is 10 years old, of Hispanic origin (she speaks Spanish and English), and she is available for adoption. You begin reading her file and see right away that this will not be an easy case. Sarah was sexually abused by her step-father for a number of years before she was removed from her home. As a result, she does not trust men. She has had a difficult time talking about this in therapy, as she is embarrassed and ashamed. She is still very angry and hurt that her mother did not protect her from this abuse.

Her adjustment to foster care has not been an easy one. She has been in a foster home for 2 years and has been able to maintain a stable placement, but her foster parents report that she will not let them get close to her. She has not been able to talk with them much about her life prior to foster care. On the positive side, she does well in school, gets along well with other children, and makes good grades. She is on the soccer team at school and plays the piano. She loves animals and would like to be a veterinarian one day. So far, she has expressed that she does not want to be adopted, even though her parents’ rights have been terminated. She harbors fantasies of being reunited with her mother someday.
Questions

1. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you read this case scenario?
2. What do you think Sarah’s chances are of being placed into an adoptive home?
3. How would you build a relationship with Sarah? Plan your first meeting with her.
4. How would you work with Sarah to help her be more open to the idea of being adopted?
5. Do you think Sarah is ready for adoption yet? If not, what kinds of services does she need to help her move forward?
6. What kind of family would be ideal for Sarah? List a few family characteristics that you feel would be important.
7. Do you think her current foster home might be an option for her? Why or why not?
8. Does Sarah have the right to decide whether she will be adopted?

REFERENCES
