



Differential Response – Summary

Differential Response (DR) is an alternate way of working with families that have been screened in for Child Protective Services investigations. DR allows for a traditional investigation track for those cases that pose an immediate threat to child safety and/or allegations of serious abuse such as sexual abuse; and a family assessment track that allows for social workers to avoid a formal investigation and determination of maltreatment for cases that are less severe. The family assessment track utilizes a comprehensive assessment tool to determine child safety while also addressing more systemic issues such as those related to poverty.

Defining Differential Response

The National Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response in Child Protective Services (QIC-DR) outlines seven key elements of Differential Response¹:

1. Use of two or more response pathways for cases that are screened in and accepted for investigation;
2. Establishment of discrete response pathways is codified in statute, policy or protocol;
3. Pathway assignment depends on an array of factors, such as the presence of imminent danger, level of risk, number of previous reports, source of the report, and/or presenting case characteristics;
4. Original pathway assignment can change, based on new information that alters risk level or safety concerns;
5. Families are served in a non-investigative pathway **without a formal determination of child maltreatment**;
6. A family assessment is mandatory in the non-investigative pathway; services are not court ordered but courts may get involved if families are non-compliant and safety or well-being is at risk.
7. The name of the alleged perpetrator is not entered into the central child abuse registry for those individuals who are served through a non-investigative pathway.

Implementing Differential Response

Legislative Enactment: In states like Minnesota, New York, and Ohio, where Differential Response was implemented with the most success, it was done through legislation that included the following key elements:

1. The creation of a two track system with a traditional investigation track and a family assessment track that utilizes a comprehensive family assessment tool to assess safety, needs, and family strengths.
2. A clear definition of Differential Response that highlights the fact that families in the assessment track do not undergo a formal investigation or determination of abuse or neglect.
3. A list of cases that must be referred for traditional investigation including those with allegations of serious physical abuse and neglect and allegations of sexual abuse.
4. The ability to allow child welfare agencies to switch families from the family assessment track to traditional investigation if child safety comes into question or if the family is not complying with services; and the ability for child welfare agencies to switch families to a family assessment track if after an investigation risk is low.
5. An authorization for the Children's Administration to perform a phased implementation with evaluations to the legislation and a timeline for state wide implementation.

¹ <http://www.ncsl.org/?tabid=21277> National Conference of State Legislators. Lawmakers in 14 states have enacted laws that authorize or require child welfare agencies to either implement or consider DR as defined above – Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, and Wyoming.

Training: For DR to be most successful child welfare agencies, contracted providers, and communities need to undergo training on the key elements of DR. National organizations such as American Humane Association offer technical assistance and have expertise in helping in the implementation of DR around the country.

Public-Private Partnerships: The success of DR relies on the ability of public child welfare agencies and private service providers to form strong partnership that allow families to easily access an array of community services.

Flexible Funding: Flexible funding allows for the contracting of services that best fit families' needs; flexible funding also allows for the provision of more concrete services that meet poverty related needs like rent.

Positive Outcomes for Families in Differential Response

Reduces Re-referrals:

- The Minnesota DR extended study looked at close to 4000 family cases over an average of 3.6 years and found that in that time differential response lowered the risk of re-referral by close to 30%.²
- The Ohio DR study looked at about 4500 family cases over an average of 12 month and found that in the first year 13.3% of traditional investigation families had a new referral compared to 11.2% of DR families.³

Reduces Out of Home Placements:

- The Minnesota report found that after an average of 3.6 years families who went through differential response were half as likely to have children in out-of-home placement as those families who had gone through a traditional investigation.⁴
- The Ohio report found after the first year 3.7% of families in the traditional response track had children removed compared to 1.8% in DR.⁵

Increases Family Engagement

- Evaluations done in numerous states that implemented DR found that families reported less negative emotion during the initial visit and an increased sense of empowerment during service delivery.
- DR families reported that they felt listened to, respected, and valued more often than those parents in traditional investigations. For example, families in DR in Minnesota reported that they felt they received services they actually needed at much higher rates than families in traditional investigation.⁶

Increases Worker Satisfaction

- In Minnesota CPS workers reported feeling better able to offer families the services they needed.⁷
- In New York 70% of CPS workers interviewed who utilized DR believed they had intervened effectively versus 52% of CPS workers who utilized traditional responses⁸.
- In Ohio over 70% of CPS workers reported that they believed families in DR were approached in a more friendly and non-adversarial way compared to traditional response⁹.

Increases Access to Services

- More access to goods that meet basic needs for families living in poverty: In Ohio DR families received statistically significant higher rates of help with rent, housing services, basic home goods, food, transportation, medical care, and child care. In the category of help with rent or house payments 83% of DR families reported receiving help versus 30% of traditional response families.¹⁰

² Minnesota Study: Loman, A., & Siegal, G., (2004) . Minnesota Alternative Response Evaluation: Final Report. *Institute of Applied Research*. St. Louis, MO.

³ Ohio Study: Loman, A, Filonow, C., & Siegal, G. (2010). Ohio Alternative Response Evaluation: Final Report. *Institute of Applied Research*. St. Louis, MO.

⁴ Minnesota Study

⁵ Ohio Study

⁶Minnesota Extended Study: Loman, A., & Siegal, G., (2006) . Extended Follow-up Study of Minnesota's Family Assessment Response. *Institute of Applied Research*. St. Louis, MO.

⁷ Minnesota Study.

⁸ New York Study: Ruppel, J., Huang, Y., & Haulenbeek, G., (2011). Differential Response in Child Welfare Services in New York State: Implementation, Initial Outcomes, and Impacts of Pilot Programs. Bureau of Evaluation and Research. Albany, New York.

⁹ Ohio Study

¹⁰ Ibid

- More access to social and psychological services: In Minnesota 54% of DR families compared to 36% of traditional response families received one or more specific social or psychological service.¹¹
- More access to community based services: In Minnesota 40% of DR cases received services from community based providers versus 22% of traditional response cases and 17% of DR cases received services from unfunded community partners versus 10% of traditional response cases.¹²

Reduces Cost to State Over Time

- The Extended Minnesota Study found that over an average of 3.6 years DR families saved the state an average of 35%.¹³ (For the first 15-18 months DR cases cost the state more money, decreasing overtime).

Frequently Asked Question:

1. Why use differential response if children are found to be no safer than with traditional investigation?

Differential response is an intervention geared at keeping families out of the traditional child welfare system, reducing out of home placements, and reducing reoccurrence of abuse – it is not designed to directly impact the immediate safety of a child. The fact that children are no less safe in the differential response track ensures that children are still being kept safe but in a way that is less intrusive to families and less expensive to the state.

2. Will differential response be effective if services in the non-investigative track are not court ordered?

The fact that court systems are not involved in the beginning of the case often leads to families being more engaged and more willing to participate in services. The family assessment is still mandatory and in all of the states reviewed, legislators give child welfare agencies the right to change families from a DR track to an investigation track that can involve the courts. The ability to change tracks allows states to still use the courts for enforcement if the safety or well-being of a child is at risk.

3. Will differential response cost more money because more services are offered?

While it is true that DR can cost more money upfront in order to provide more concrete services, such as rent assistance, long term cost analysis shows that DR can save the state up to 35%. The upfront investment can also be connected to the State's potential 4(e) waiver and/or private funders. The other option is to allow for state Children's Administration money to be used in a more flexible manner that allows for the provision of non-traditional services that prove to be effective in reducing entry rates such as help with basic food, clothing, and housing.

4. What does differential response do to help with racial disproportionality?

DR has proven to be highly effective in better serving low-income families and we know that there is a high numbers of children of color that are both low income and in the child welfare system. DR has shown to help lower rate of African American and Latino children in the system in many states. More research needs to be done to look at how DR can be adapted in working with Native families.

5. How is Differential Response different from Washington's current Alternative Response System?

Washington's current Alternative Response System, including the Early Family Support Services program, serves families who are screened in at intake but not for an investigation. Some of these families are referred to an EFSS provider in the community, some receive a letter from the Children's

¹¹ Minnesota Study

¹² Ibid

¹³ Minnesota Extended Study.

Administration that includes services the family might want to access, some receive a phone call from a state worker, some receive nothing. And, no one screened into our current ARS/EFSS receives an investigation. Differential Response is for families screened in for an investigation but rather than being investigated by CPS and having a determination made as to whether the allegation was founded or unfounded for abuse/neglect, the family receives an assessment response and there is no finding of abuse or neglect made.