

# Differential Response: Summary of Research Findings

By the end of 2011, more than 20 states had evaluated differential response to gauge its potential as a flexible service approach for families screened-in to child protection services. Many of these states compared families receiving assessments against families receiving investigations. In particular, Minnesota, Ohio, and the county of Onondaga, New York identified families that were eligible for an assessment and randomly assigned them to either an assessment or traditional CPS investigation track. By using this randomized methodology, evaluators ensured that all families in the sample were classified as low- to-moderate risk. The below handout summarizes findings from multiple states.<sup>1</sup>

## Child Safety

- Child safety was not compromised under differential response systems. Studies revealed that children whose cases received an assessment were less or as likely to be the subject of a subsequent report or investigation as children who received an investigation (Chiple et al., 1999; English et al., 2000; Loman & Siegel, 2004a; Loman & Siegel, 2004b; Virginia Department of Social Services, 2004; Center for Child and Family Policy, 2004).
- Safety was also maintained in Minnesota’s experimental study, which randomly assigned comparable families to an assessment or investigation track (Loman & Siegel, 2004b).

## Services

- Children and families who received assessments were more likely to receive services than those receiving investigations (Shusterman et al., 2005; Loman & Siegel, 2004a; Virginia Department of Social Services, 2004). Services may even be provided earlier to families that are assessed (Siegel & Loman, 2000).
- The number of services received by families who were assessed was greater than those received by families who were investigated. Minnesota and Missouri experienced increased linkages of families to community providers, as well as a shift toward support services related to basic financial needs (Loman & Siegel, 2004a; Loman & Siegel, 2004b; Institute of Applied Research, 2005).
- The non-adversarial and participatory approach associated with differential response was linked to reduced recurrence even when services were not delivered (Institute of Applied Research, 2005).

## Referral and Substantiation

- The proportion of investigations that were substantiated increased when differential response was employed (Loman & Siegel, 2004a; Virginia Department of Social Services, 2004).
- States experienced a decrease in the numbers of victims and non-victims that they identified.

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<sup>1</sup> Research findings are taken from reports released by the National Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response in Child Protective Services (2011) and Child Welfare Information Gateway (2008). See the References section for full citations of these summary documents, as well as their original sources when applicable.

## Child and Case Characteristics

- Assessments were more likely to be used for cases with fewer immediate safety concerns and less likely to be used in sexual abuse cases (Shusterman et al., 2005; Virginia Department of Social Services, 2004; Loman & Siegel, 2004a; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003a).
- Referrals from social workers, medical personnel, and legal/criminal justice sources were less likely to receive an assessment response than referrals from parents, relatives, friends, schools, or the children themselves (Shusterman et al., 2005; English et al., 2000).
- Older children generally were more likely to receive an assessment, while younger children were more likely to be assigned to investigation (Shusterman et al., 2005; Siegel & Loman, 2000; Chipley, Sheets, Baumann, Robinson, & Graham, 1999; English, Wingard, Marshall, Orme, & Orme, 2000).
- Children and families who were referred for assessment were similar in demographics (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, family structure) to those who received traditional investigations (Shusterman et al., 2005; English et al., 2000; Siegel & Loman, 2000).
- Prior victimization was often associated with a decreased likelihood of an assessment response but not in all states (Shusterman et al., 2005).

## Cost Effectiveness

- Differential response appears to be cost effective over the long term, despite a higher initial investment, due to reduced costs for case management and follow-up (Loman & Siegel, 2005).

## Family Satisfaction and Engagement

- Families reported satisfaction with differential response. In Minnesota, families receiving differential response reported that they were treated in a friendly and fair manner, listened to by workers, connected to other community resources, and benefited from the intervention more often than families receiving traditional response (Loman & Siegel, 2005).

## Staff Perspectives and Issues

- Child protection staff generally like differential response. Most evaluations that examined agency staffing issues found greater worker satisfaction for assessment pathways versus investigation pathways. In Minnesota, workers reported that families in the assessment track were more cooperative and willing to accept services (Loman & Siegel, 2005).
- Large caseloads and limited resources are obstacles to differential response effectiveness. To offset the mitigating impact of large caseloads and limited resources in Minnesota, evaluators recommended reducing worker caseloads, as well as increasing and accelerating community development activities and resources (Loman & Siegel, 2004a). Evaluators in North Carolina recommended limiting caseload sizes to six to eight families per worker or implementing team models (Center for Child and Family Policy, 2004).

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