

# New public-centered child protection system in Korea

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## Key message

Korea's child abuse response system was transformed under policy change in April 2020, from what was previously operated on a private-centered basis to a focus on the public sector with expanded role of local governments. Promising outcomes are expected with new system as greater governmental intervention will effectively protect at-risk children with acceleration in institutional collaboration and expertise in information management and administration.

## Restructuring of the child protection system in Korea

Korea's child protection system was initiated with the revision of the Child Welfare Act in 2000, which stipulated the roles of child protection agencies such as protecting abused children and prosecuting child abusers. In the following 20 years, nongovernmental organizations and social welfare foundations were entrusted by the government as child protection agencies. Accomplishments were made, such as the expansion of safety nets for children (the number of child protection agencies increased from 18 in 2001 to 95 in 2022), accumulation of expertise in child abuse investigation, and efficient data management with the development of the National Child Abuse Information System. The Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Child Abuse Crime (hereinafter, the "Child Abuse Punishment Act") was enacted in 2014, limiting child abusers' rights and punishing them even if they are the guardians of the victimized child(ren). With inception of the Child Abuse Punishment Act, the gravity of child abuse has been shared among local governments and judicial authorities, thereby reinforcing cooperation.

However, whenever a major child abuse incident occurred, "state responsibility" was highlighted, with criticism on the limitations of the contracted-out system. This prompted the government to expand its public responsibility of the child protection system. The National Policy on Government-Inclusive Child Protection,<sup>1)</sup> released in May 2019, emphasized the public role of the child protection system. Consequently, revised laws (Child Welfare Act, Child Abuse Punishment Act) were proposed in September 2019 to strengthen government responsibility in

responding to child abuse. In April 2020, amended laws were passed at the National Assembly, opening a new era for child protection with an expanded state role.

The amendments were as follows: (a) Existing roles of child protection agencies including crime scene visits, emergency measure implementation, and investigations in child abuse cases have been transferred to child protection government officers, while child protection agencies were converted to case management institutions. (b) Child welfare agents have been deployed in local governments to provide protective services for at-risk children and inspect childrearing conditions. (c) Expert groups have been established to make timely deliberations of child protection measures or case termination and modification.

## Process of the new public-centered child protection system in Korea

The child protection system in Korea is triggered when child abuse incidents are reported. Once a call is received, the police or a child protection government officer visits the scene to investigate the parties involved to determine whether abuse has occurred. Expert groups participate in this determination process, and law enforcement conducts separate investigations as required. In the event that a child requires emergency care during an investigation due to physical or emotional abuse, temporary protective measures can be taken (Fig. 1).

Once a child abuse case has been identified, a child protection government officer establishes a Child Protection Plan and notifies the relevant child protection agency of necessary protective measures in consultation with the expert group as needed. Thereafter, the agency establishes a Case Management Plan by interviewing and assessing the families of the affected children. The agency then shares the plan with child protection government officers and provides necessary services for a defined period, with changes made based on regular check-ups on the reduction of abuse risk factors and possibility of abuse recurrence. If long-term protection is required for the affected child, child protection government officers must follow up and inspect the childcare conditions even if the official case is terminated.<sup>2)</sup>

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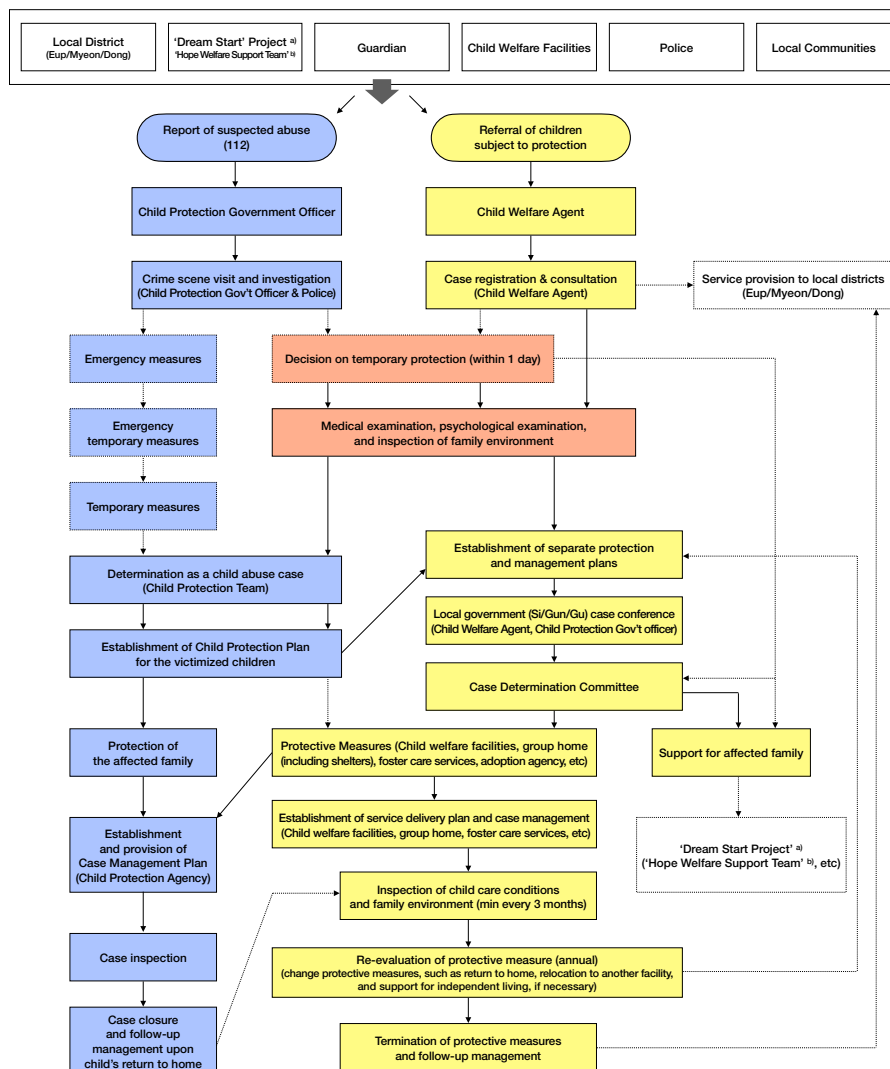


Fig. 1. Process of the Child Protection System in Korea. <sup>a)</sup>'Dream Start' refers to a national project providing customized and integrated services to children in vulnerable situations. <sup>b)</sup>'Hope Welfare Support Team' is an organization affiliated with local governments to provide integrated services relating to health, welfare, education and living to families requiring economic, medical, and psychological assistance.

## Expectations of the new child protection system in Korea

According to 2021 statistics,<sup>3)</sup> 53,932 cases of suspected child abuse were reported, a 27.6% increase over the previous year. Investigations revealed that 37,605 of these cases involved child abuse, a 21.7% increase over the previous year. However, Korea's child abuse detection rate (5.02%) remains lower than that of developed countries (e.g., 8.4% in the United States). Moreover, the number of child abuse cases is steadily increasing (3,671 in 2020 to 5,517 in 2021). Therefore, the government demonstrated its commitment to improving child protection and managing shortfalls. Announced in August 2021, the "Supplementary Measures on the Child Protection System" statement describes the government's holistic plan to provide a multilayered prevention and response mechanism on child abuse through "early detection and intervention on children at risk, protection

system advancement based on the child's perspective, raising awareness, and improvement of infrastructure."

The new child protection system with stronger government responsibility fortifies the system and serves as a paradigm shift to advance the system to the next level. In this vein, there are expectations on how public efforts in information management, administrative services, and stronger governmental intervention will contribute to better ability to protect children from abuse. Child protection agencies are also expected to effect greater positive outcomes by redefining their institutional identities as specialized organizations in case management.

## Footnotes

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