From Orphanage to Child Welfare Worker

Hard Lessons Newcomer Parents Can Use to Stay Off the System's Radar

By Deborah Dzifah Tamakloe

A Letter to Newcomer Parents

When I was a child in Ghana, I had both parents alive. However, I spent a chunk of my life at the orphanage due to reasons known only to my parents. Maybe they were in love with the fact that I would be clothed and fed and have education and most importantly interact with volunteers from the western world who used to visit orphanages back in the days.

At the orphanage, I lived in a large building with many children, some beds, some food, and adults who tried their best. I did not have anyone who held me close and called me by a special name. I did not have anyone to tell me stories about my family or my culture. I did not belong to anyone (My full orphanage life is document in the book Beyond the orphanage https://www.amazon.ca/-/fr/Beyond-Orphanage-Journey-Hope-Aspirations/dp/9988539436).

Years later, I earned a Master of Social Work degree in Canada. I worked on the frontlines of child welfare, inside the system that separates children from families. I have sat in meetings where social workers decide whether a child should stay with their parents or be taken into care. I have written reports that go into court files. I have seen both sides: the orphanage, and the system that creates it.

This booklet is written from both of those places in me.

I am writing to you as a newcomer parent because I know you are afraid. You moved to Canada for your children's future, and now you worry: "What if I make a mistake? What if the system takes my kids away?" You know stories, from friends, from your community, of families torn apart, of parents who "did not know the rules."

I want to give you the rules. Not to shame you, but to protect you.

This is not a lecture from someone who grew up in a comfortable Canadian home and studied child welfare in a classroom. This is guidance from someone who lived without a family, who learned the system from inside, and who now sits with newcomer families every day.

Read this. Share it with your community. And know that understanding these lessons is how you keep your children with you, in your arms, where they belong.

Part 1: My Story – Why I Understand

Growing Up Without a Family

I can tell you exactly when my life in the orphanage began. I was very young around age 11. I remember the noise, many children crying, shouting, playing.

The smell of overcrowded rooms. The feeling of not being special to anyone. No one asked about my day. No one brushed my hair with care. No one said, "You are my child and I love you."

The other children and I ate together. We slept in rows. We were clothed, and we were safe from the street. But we were not home. We were not family.

As I grew older, I began to understand: I was separated from my parents, and the system, the child welfare system, had decided that was where I should be. I did not hate the orphanage. I was grateful for the food and shelter. But I grieved. I grieved every day for a family I might never know.

When I was old enough, I asked, "Why am I here? I never got the answers to date?"

No one gave me a clear answer. That not knowing, that uncertainty became part of who I was.

Years passed. I went to school. I worked hard. And eventually, I left Ghana to join my husband in Canada and to study.

Finding My Way to Child Welfare Work

In Canada, I discovered that separation happens here too. It looks different, more organized, more legal, more documented. But the outcome is the same: children without their parents, parents without their children.

As I trained to be a social worker, I realized something: many of the families I was learning

about, the ones marked as "at risk" or "neglectful", reminded me of people I knew in Ghana. Parents doing their best with very little. Parents loving their children but lacking support, resources, or understanding of the system.

And I realized: *If I had been born in Canada to those parents, would I have ended up in an orphanage, I mean, in the child welfare system, instead of at home?*

That question changed everything for me.

I committed to this work: to help families stay together. To help newcomer parents understand the system before the system comes to understand them as "problems." To use what I know from both sides, the loss of family separation, and the inside knowledge of how systems work, to protect families.

What I Learned as a Child Welfare Worker

For years, I have worked in child welfare offices, investigated concerns, written reports, and sat in meetings where children's futures were decided.

What I learned:

The system is not evil, but it is powerful. Workers are not trying to hurt families. But the power imbalance is real. You are in a foreign country, speaking a different language, with less information than the worker has. That imbalance matters.

Misunderstandings escalate quickly. A teacher reports something. The report goes on file. Another

report comes. Before long, there is an investigation. And you did not even know the first thing was being interpreted as a "concern."

Culture is often invisible to the system. Workers are trained to see "best practices" and "Canadian standards." Cultural differences are sometimes seen as deficits. A practice that is normal and loving in your country can be written into a report as "risky."

Stress and poverty get labeled as neglect. Many families in the system are poor, isolated, or traumatized. Those things are hard, but they are not abuse. Yet they get written up as if they are parenting failures.

But families can stay together. I have also seen families move from "high risk" to "safe and supported." I have seen parents learn the system, adjust their practices, ask for help early, and keep their children at home. That is possible.

Part 2: The Myths That Can Hurt You

Before I give you the rules, I want to clear up some myths, things many newcomer parents believe, but that can actually get you in trouble.

Myth #1: "If I love my children and provide food

and shelter, nothing else matters."

The Truth: In Canada, child welfare looks at much more than basics.

Workers assess:

- **Supervision**: Is the child safe and appropriately watched?
- **Education**: Is the child attending school? Are you responding to school concerns?
- **Health**: Is the child getting medical care when needed?
- **Emotional safety**: Is the child experiencing violence, threats, or emotional cruelty?
- **Stability**: Is housing secure? Is life predictable?

Love is not enough, even though it should be. The system wants to see evidence that you are meeting all these areas.

What this means for you: Do not assume that because you love your children deeply, you are "safe." Show your love through specific actions the system recognizes.

Myth #2: "The system only gets involved if someone hits a child or starves them."

The Truth: The system gets involved for many reasons.

They investigate:

- **School absenteeism** (missing too many days).
- **Lack of supervision** (child left alone too young, or young sibling in charge).
- **Housing concerns** (unsafe conditions, overcrowding).
- **Parent's mental health or substance use** that affects the child.
- **Unmet medical needs** or missed appointments.
- **Allegations from teachers, neighbors, or relatives** (even if they are not true).

Hitting or starving is the most serious, but it is not the only reason.

What this means for you: Understand that many things matter. Do not wait until there is a "big" problem. Address smaller concerns before they become investigations.

Myth #3: "If I tell the truth, I will get in trouble."

The Truth: Not telling the truth is usually what gets you in trouble.

When a worker asks, "Why is your child missing school?" and you lie, they will find out. Then they distrust you. If you tell them the truth "We are struggling with transportation, or my child is being bullied, or we needed the child to help at home" they can help.

Lying makes you look like you have something to hide. The truth, even if it is hard, helps the worker understand your real situation.

What this means for you: Be honest, even when you are scared. Ask for help. Hiding makes everything worse.

Myth #4: "What happens in my home is my business. No one should interfere."

The Truth: In Canada, child safety is public business.

Teachers, doctors, neighbors, and relatives can report concerns. Reporting is anonymous, so you might never know who called. This is the law, and it does not change even if you do not like it.

What this means for you: Raise your children knowing that your home is not private. This is not fair if you are used to different norms, but it is reality. Adjust your practices accordingly.

Myth #5: "If I cooperate with the system, they will take my children away."

The Truth: Not cooperating is more likely to cause that outcome.

When a worker investigates and you refuse to let them in, do not answer questions, or avoid meetings, they see that as suspicious. They are more likely to continue the investigation and escalate concerns.

When you cooperate, open your home, answer questions, follow the plan, show up to appointments, workers see you as willing to change. That usually leads to case closure or less intense involvement.

What this means for you: Cooperation does not guarantee your children stay, but non-cooperation makes removal more likely.

Part 3: The Rules – Practical Do's and Don'ts

Now I am going to give you specific rules. These are the things that keep you off the radar or, if the system is already involved, help you move toward case closure and family safety.

Rule #1: School Is Non-Negotiable

DO:

- Make sure your child goes to school every single day, unless they are very sick.
- If your child is sick, call or email the school the same day to explain.
- Respond to all communication from the school (emails, calls, notes).
- Go to parent-teacher meetings and ask questions if you do not understand.
- If your child is struggling academically or socially, ask the school for support early.

DON'T:

- Keep your child home without a good reason.
- Ignore calls or letters from the school.
- Use your child as a full-time translator for your appointments (it affects their school).
- Assume your child's school struggles will go away on their own.

Why this matters: School attendance and engagement is one of the first things child welfare workers look at. Chronic absenteeism triggers

investigation. Schools have to report concerns about children.

Rule #2: Supervision Means an Adult, Nearby and Aware

DO:

- Know your province's legal age for leaving children alone (usually around 10–12).
- Arrange for a trusted adult to watch your children when you are working or away.
- If you use an older sibling, they should not be the only caregiver for long periods.
- Have your children know important contacts.
- Make sure your children know how to call for help in an emergency.

DON'T:

- Leave young children home alone, even for "just an hour."
- Assume an older sibling can handle an emergency.
- Leave children with someone you do not trust.
- Ignore neighbors or school staff if they express concern about your child being unsupervised.

Why this matters: Lack of supervision is one of the most common reasons for child welfare involvement. It is also one of the easiest things to fix. Getting supervision right is protective.

Rule #3: Medical Care Is Required, Not Optional

DO:

- Take your child to regular check-ups and immunizations.
- Seek medical help promptly when your child is injured or very sick.
- Tell the doctor about any concerns—injuries, behavior changes, school problems.
- Ask questions if you do not understand medical advice.
- Keep appointments, even if it is hard to get time off work.

DON'T:

- Delay seeking help because you are afraid the doctor will "report" you.
- Rely only on traditional remedies if your child needs urgent medical care.
- Miss health appointments repeatedly.
- Hide injuries or lie to doctors about how an injury happened.

Why this matters: Untreated injuries, missed appointments, and unimmunized children trigger reports. Medical professionals are mandated reporters. Being transparent with them builds trust and protection, not risk.

Rule #4: Discipline Must Not Leave Marks or Cause Fear

DO:

- Use time-outs, loss of privileges, or calm conversations to teach your child.
- Explain why something was wrong and what you expect next time.
- Stay calm when disciplining, even when you are frustrated.
- Use the same consequences consistently.

DON'T:

- Hit, slap, or use objects like belts or sticks.
- Shame or humiliate your child in front of others.
- Use harsh words or threats.
- Discipline while you are angry (take a break first).
- Punish for things your child cannot help (accidents, developmental abilities).

Why this matters: In Canada, physical punishment is illegal and can trigger child welfare investigation. Even one incident with visible marks can open a case. The goal is to teach, not to hurt.

Rule #5: Know and Respond to School Concerns Immediately

DO:

- When the school calls about behavior, grades, or attendance, respond quickly.
- Ask specifically what the concern is and what they want you to do.
- Work with the school on a plan (e.g., tutoring, counseling, behavior support).
- Follow through on the plan and report back to the school.
- If you do not understand, ask for an interpreter or a settlement worker to help.

DON'T:

- Ignore messages from the school.
- Blame the school or the teacher for your child's struggles.
- Make excuses instead of problem-solving.
- Promise to fix things and then do not follow through.

Why this matters: Schools are mandated reporters. When they see repeated behavior concerns or missed school, they report. If you respond quickly and work on the problem, they often do not need to report. If you ignore them, they feel forced to call child welfare.

Rule #6: Mental Health Matters—Get Help Early

DO:

- Notice changes in your child's mood or behavior (withdrawn, aggressive, anxious).
- Ask the school, doctor, or community health center for help if you see concerns.
- Consider counseling or parenting support if your family is under stress.
- Get help for your own mental health (depression, anxiety, trauma).
- Be honest with providers about struggles.

DON'T:

- Ignore signs of mental health struggles and hope they go away.
- Be ashamed to ask for mental health help.
- Assume your child will just "toughen up" or adapt on their own.
- Neglect your own mental health. If you are struggling, your children feel that.

Why this matters: Untreated mental health issues in children or parents can lead to neglect or harm. Early support prevents escalation. Asking for help shows responsibility, not failure.

Rule #7: Housing Safety Is Non-Negotiable

DO:

- Keep your home clean and safe (no hazards, working locks, safe sleeping spaces).
- Report hazards to your landlord and document your requests.
- If housing is unsafe or abusive, reach out to housing or legal aid services.
- Make sure each child has a safe place to sleep.
- Address pest problems, dampness, or structural issues.

DON'T:

- Leave serious hazards unfixed (exposed wires, no heat, broken windows).
- Allow domestic violence in your home.
- Live in overcrowded conditions that endanger children.
- Ignore housing instability.

Why this matters: Unsafe housing is documented by child welfare and used in assessments. It is also genuinely dangerous for your children. Fixing housing problems is one of the best protective moves you can make.

Rule #8: Communication With Authorities Is Your Right and Responsibility

DO:

- Use an interpreter for any important meetings or conversations with teachers, doctors, or workers.
- Ask questions and get things explained in ways you understand.
- Ask for written summaries of meetings and plans.
- Bring a trusted support person to important meetings.
- Ask for information in your language, not just English.

DON'T:

- Let your child interpret for you in serious matters.
- Nod and pretend to understand when you do not.

- Miss appointments because you are afraid or confused.
- Believe that not responding makes a problem go away.

Why this matters: Miscommunication is one of the biggest sources of trouble for newcomer families. When workers think you do not understand or are avoiding them, they escalate. When you clearly understand and participate, they see you as engaged and cooperative.

Rule #9: Build a Support Network Before You Need It

DO:

- Connect with other families from your culture or community.
- Find a trusted religious or cultural leader.
- Identify a settlement agency or community center you can access.
- Know at least two people you could call in an emergency with your children.
- Build relationships with teachers, doctors, and neighbors.

DON'T:

- Isolate your family.
- Be ashamed to ask for help.

- Wait until there is a crisis to reach out.

Why this matters: When families are isolated, child welfare is more likely to investigate and more likely to remove children. When families have community support, they are protected. Workers see community connection as a protective factor.

Rule #10: If You Are Under Investigation, Be Honest and Cooperative

DO:

- Let the worker into your home (unless you have legal advice not to).
- Answer questions truthfully.
- Ask for an interpreter and time to understand things.
- Make a written plan and follow it.
- Keep all appointments and follow-up meetings.
- Update the worker on progress.

DON'T:

- Hide or lie about anything.
- Refuse to let workers see your home or children.
- Miss appointments.

- Make promises you cannot keep.
- Blame the system or the worker instead of focusing on solutions.

Why this matters: Investigation is scary, but cooperation almost always leads to better outcomes than resistance. When workers see you are willing to work with them, they are more likely to close the case or provide support rather than remove your children.

Part 4: Lessons From My Two Worlds

What the Orphanage Taught Me

I spent my childhood without my parents. I do not know why I was there, if it was temporary, or if my family wanted me back. That not knowing broke something in me that took years to fix.

I am telling you this because I know what it is like to lose a family. I know the grief. I know the feeling of not belonging to anyone. I know the lifelong questions.

Do everything you can to stay together with your children.

Not because you are being judged by the system. Not because you are afraid. But because your children need you. Because separation damages children in

ways that are hard to heal. Because you are their parent, and that matters infinitely.

What the System Taught Me

I have sat in many meetings about families. I have read many files. I have worked with social workers, good ones, committed ones, ones who really do want to help.

What I learned:

The system is not trying to separate families. It is trying to protect children. But because of poverty, racism, and misunderstanding of culture, the system sometimes separates families to keep children "safe," when really, support would keep them together.

Most families in child welfare are not bad people. They are people under stress who did not understand the rules or ask for help in time. They are people whose culture was misunderstood. They are people who needed support, not investigation.

The system responds to specific behaviors, not to your character. If your child goes to school, you are responsive to school concerns, your home is safe, you use non-physical discipline, you get medical help when needed—then child welfare is much less likely to investigate. These specific behaviors matter more than how much you love your child (even though love matters enormously).

The Thread That Holds It Together

From both worlds, the orphanage and the agency, carry one core belief:

> Children are safest and strongest when they are in safe, supported families that know how to navigate the system around them.

You cannot control everything. You cannot change every law or every bias. But you can:

- Learn the expectations.
- Adjust where needed without losing your cultural identity.
- Ask for help early.
- Build allies, teachers, doctors, community workers, who see you as partners.

That is how you stay off the system's radar or, if you are already on it, how you move toward freedom.

Part 5: Your Next Steps

Step 1: Choose One Rule to Start With

Look back over the rules and ask yourself:

- Which area feels weakest right now, school, supervision, discipline, housing, communication?

- What is one small change I can make this week?

Start there. One change done consistently is better than many promises that fade.

Step 2: Talk With Your Children

Honest conversations build trust.

- Explain, in age-appropriate language, that Canada has rules to keep children safe.
- Tell them you are learning those rules so your family can stay together.
- Invite their feelings about school, friends, and life in Canada.

Your children may also be afraid of "the system." Let them know they can talk to you about anything.

Step 3: Build or Strengthen Your Support Network

Make a short list:

- One community group or faith community you could join.
- One newcomer or settlement service in your city.
- One person you trust and can call if you need help with your children.

Reach out this month. Send a message, attend a meeting, or book an appointment.

Step 4: If You Already Have a File

If child welfare is already involved:

- Ask the worker for a clear written plan: "What needs to change for this file to close?"
- Ask for help in meeting those expectations, programs, services, community supports.
- Keep your own record of what you have done: classes attended, appointments kept, changes made at home.
- Show this progress at every review.

You are allowed to ask, "What else do you need to see from me to feel that my children are safe?"

Step 5: Share What You Learn

Many families around you are quietly afraid. Share this information:

- With friend groups
- At community gatherings
- In WhatsApp chats
- With your faith community or cultural association

Knowledge shared is protection multiplied.

Bring This Story to Your Community

This booklet is only the beginning. The lessons become even more powerful when they are heard live, discussed, and applied together.

You can:

- Use this booklet in parent circles at settlement agencies or community organizations.
- Host a workshop where newcomer parents read sections and talk about their fears and questions.
- Invite service providers, teachers, social workers, health workers, to hear this perspective and learn how to work with your community more respectfully.

Invite me to speak or train your parent group.

In your community, I can:

- Share more of my story, from the orphanage in Ghana to frontline child welfare work in Canada.
- Explain how child welfare decisions are made in simple, honest language.
- Answer questions parents are often too afraid to ask.

- Teach practical strategies to reduce risk and increase safety.
- Train local workers or leaders on culturally aware, trauma-informed practice with newcomer families.

Together, we can reduce fear, build trust, and keep more children safely at home.

A Closing Word

Your journey to Canada was not easy. You have already shown courage and deep love for your children. Learning how to navigate this new system is another step in that same courage.

Hold on to your culture. Hold on to your children.

Let this booklet be one of the tools that helps you do both.

Your children belong with you. Protect that.

This booklet was written for newcomer and immigrant families in Canada, based on lived experience in child welfare and personal experience of family separation. It is available in multiple languages and can be adapted for different communities and contexts.

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About the Author

Deborah Dzifah Tamakloe, MSW, is a Child Welfare Advocate specializing in the immigrant and refugee experience. With deep expertise in the Canadian legal system and West African communal values, she bridges the gap between clinical requirements and cultural heritage.

Deborah empowers professionals to move beyond "system shock" to build genuine equity. She provides the strategic tools and "Dual-Lens" perspective necessary to protect family unity while ensuring newcomers thrive within Western frameworks.

Part of her mandate is to support newcomer families and to transform how agencies engage with the diaspora by replacing cultural misunderstanding with clinical strategy, ensuring every newcomer family has the tools to remain whole and 'system-proof' in a new land."