

Understanding the Juvenile Court Process

A simple guide for parents and caregivers

THE MAIN IDEA

Juvenile court cases focus on child safety and family needs. The judge reviews information and decides what should happen next.

Your Questions, Answered

Who gives information to the judge?

The judge may hear from DCFS, the parents, the attorneys, the guardian ad litem, and other people involved in the case.

What is a Temporary Custody Hearing?

This is also called a Shelter Care Hearing. It is usually one of the first hearings. The judge decides where your child will stay while the case continues. It should happen within 48 work hours after your child is removed from your care. Ask the investigator or caseworker when it is scheduled.

What happens at an Adjudicatory Hearing?

This is sometimes called the trial part of the case. The judge decides whether the State has shown that the child was abused, neglected, or dependent.

What happens at a Dispositional Hearing?

If the judge finds abuse, neglect, or dependency, the judge decides what orders are needed. The judge may decide where the child will live, who will have custody or guardianship, and what services the parents must complete.

What happens at a Permanency Hearing?

The judge reviews the case and decides the long-term goal for the child. The court looks at the parents' progress in services, how the child is doing, and what needs to happen next.

What is a service plan?

A service plan is a written guide from DCFS. It tells you what to work on. It may include counseling, parenting classes, substance use treatment, mental health or domestic violence services, housing, visits, or other steps toward reunification.

Why does my service plan matter?

The court looks at whether you are making reasonable efforts and reasonable progress. The court may look at whether you:

- Visit your child when visits are allowed
- Stay in contact with DCFS and your caseworker
- Take part in services and make changes that help keep your child safe
- Address the reasons the case came to court

What is a permanency goal?

It is the long-term plan for the child. The goal can change during the case. The court may choose return home, return home within a set time, guardianship, subsidized guardianship, adoption, continued foster or substitute care, or independence for some older youth.

What should I do during my case?

- Talk with your attorney and attend every court date unless your attorney tells you otherwise
- Stay in contact with your attorney and caseworker, and ask questions when you do not understand
- Follow your service plan, keep proof of completed services, and ask for help when you need it
- Tell your attorney about changes in your contact information, job, housing, treatment, or visits

What if a service is hard to use or does not help?

Tell your attorney if a service is not helpful, is not available, is too far away, costs too much, or does not fit your needs. If you do not understand what you must do, ask your attorney.

Words You May Hear

Guardian ad litem or GAL: A person appointed to speak for the child's best interests in court.

Guardianship: A relative, foster parent, or another safe adult becomes the child's legal guardian. It may be used when return home is not possible soon and adoption is not the best option.

Subsidized guardianship: A guardianship in which the caregiver may receive financial help to care for the child.

Adoption: If parental rights are terminated, the adoptive parent becomes the child's legal parent.

Where can I learn more?

For more information, see the Juvenile Court Act of 1987, 705 ILCS 405, and Illinois DCFS Procedures 300.120(j), 315.140, 315.145, and 315.230.

Important: Every case is different. This handout gives general information only. It is not legal advice. Talk to your attorney about your case, your rights, your service plan, and what you should do next.