



Preparing to Go to Court

Court. It's a word that, for many foster parents, conjures fear, nervousness, and the unsettling butterflies of the unknown. What will the attorneys, judges, and social workers—people who may seem far removed from the realities of your everyday life—decide about the child you care for every day? The language of the court system—legal terms, jargon, and acronyms—can make it challenging to understand what is being said. While you do not need to dive deep into all the legalese, it may help to know the basics and what you can do to get yourself and the older child or teen in your care ready for court.

What drives decisions made in child welfare?

Agencies focus on safety and permanency when making child welfare decisions. Permanency means a forever family. It means the child has a safe, stable home and a lifelong relationship with a caregiver. Permanency may mean returning home, guardianship, adoption, or a planned living arrangement with a relative or non-relative. Returning home is always the preferred choice. If that cannot happen, the hope is that one of the other arrangements will allow the child to have a permanent legal family and lifelong support.

This emphasis may sometimes contradict your concerns as a foster parent. You may wonder about the quality of parenting happening in the birth home. It may help to think of the child in the context of having a birth family and a supporting family, with permanence as the ultimate goal.

Why go to court?

- *Your Input is Valuable.* The court's decisions about children's lives are only as good as the information provided, so your observations are essential. As a foster parent, you have impressions that come from direct, day-to-day involvement with the child as well as school personnel, medical professionals, therapists, or birth parents. See our [Importance of Documentation tip sheet](#) for more on recording your notes. We recommend talking to the social worker and the Guardian ad Litem (GAL) before a hearing to share the information you've gathered since the last hearing. This could be done in an email that includes the worker, GAL, and supervisor.
- *To Play a Role.* Foster parents have not always had a clear role in legal proceedings about the children in their care, but there have been some changes. Foster parents and relative caregivers have the right to attend court hearings to understand what is happening with the child in their care and to provide input on the child's well-being. For example, if a child has been in foster care for at least 6 months and a change of placement is proposed, the foster parents have the right to contest the change. The foster parents must be notified of the change and have a time frame during which

they can object.

- *To Gather Information.* Whether or not the social worker suggests you should go to court, we recommend doing so if you have the opportunity. You will gain valuable information at court that you would otherwise only learn secondhand, later, or not at all.

A family affair

The legal terms used in child welfare are intentionally different from those used in criminal court. Even though a child's caregivers are ultimately legally accountable, the child welfare system in Wisconsin focuses on the needs and safety of the child. Legal terms used in the criminal system are given family-friendly alternatives: "disposition" instead of "sentencing," and "fact-finding" instead of "trial." It may be helpful for you to think about and discuss the court process as a way to help children and families heal rather than to assign punishment.

Some participants view the legal process as adversarial, having winners and losers. We want to keep the child's best interests in mind and, in most cases, improve their life within their birth family. No one wants a child or family to feel like they have "lost" during the court process. A trauma-informed approach will view the family as a whole rather than the child in a vacuum. So, when we work to respect, dignify, and support the child and birth family throughout the legal process, the child will benefit.

The practical pieces

Here are some practical tips for preparing for going to court:

- Keep your explanations positive and developmentally appropriate when discussing court with the child in your care. For teens, explain the roles of the various people attending the hearing.
- If the child or youth will be attending the hearing, take them on a tour of the courthouse and courtroom ahead of time if possible. If you cannot take a tour in person, you might look at pictures in books or online.
- GALs or other attorneys involved in the hearing may want to speak with the child before the hearing. Do your best to ensure the child is available to engage in those conversations.
- If you cannot be present for the hearing, you may be able to participate by other means. (See section titled "Participating in Court" later in this tip sheet.)
- Prepare for pre-hearing interactions that may occur while you're waiting for the hearing to begin. For example, you may have a conversation or meeting with the child's birth family. Your social worker can help you stay informed about recent developments in the case.
- Bring an item for the child or teen to occupy their time during what is sometimes a long wait for the hearing.
- Dress—Wear casual but slightly more formal clothing; the same is true for the child or youth participating in the hearing.
- Arrive well ahead of the hearing time to allow for parking, security screenings, and finding your courtroom.
- While arriving on time is important, understand that there could be long delays before your

hearing.

- Be aware that this time may be difficult for the older child or teen who attends court. They may feel confused about whom to talk to or sit with. You might find it helpful to talk about these options with the child or youth ahead of time.
- Child welfare proceedings are confidential. Please know that the courtroom will be secured at the start of the hearing. Each court jurisdiction has its own culture, and protocol will probably vary from district to district and even between judges' courtrooms. Your social worker may have additional information or tips about what you expect at the hearing.
- Courtroom etiquette calls for addressing the judge as "Your Honor." Children and youth may not be familiar with this courtesy, so you may wish to discuss this with them before the hearing.
- Be mindful that emotions can run high. You might prepare by thinking about what might trigger an emotional reaction for you or the child, and by developing techniques to help you remain calm.
- The birth family may have strong feelings about the decisions made in this hearing. It may help to try to see the situation from their point of view and to remind yourself that you are all interested in the best outcome for the child.
- Remember that pre- or post-court, the child may act out, withdraw, or exhibit other signs that they are processing the monumental decisions that are happening. Support the child in your care, and do your best to help them regulate their emotions.

What happens at hearings

It may help you and the child in your care to understand the purpose of the hearing you will be attending. Your social worker, the GAL, or experienced foster parents might be able to help answer your questions or address any concerns you may be feeling. Courtroom protocols differ depending on the type of hearing, so you may wish to learn more about each type to best prepare for whatever will be expected of you or the child. For more information, see the [Wisconsin Foster Family Handbook](#) for an excellent explanation of the child welfare process.

Typical hearings in the child welfare system might include temporary physical custody, change of placement, plea hearing, and termination of parental rights. See Chapter 48 (children's code) in the [Wisconsin Statutes](#) for more details on what happens in child welfare hearings. For information on youth justice, visit Chapter 938 in the same handbook.

Participating in court

There are various ways to provide your input to the court. These might include testifying, participating by phone, or writing a letter.

Provide testimony. As a foster parent, you may be called upon to testify. Alternatively, the judge may ask you questions while sitting in the courtroom.

The information you may be asked to present:

- Your credentials and experience as a foster parent

- Your observations of the child during placement
- Your interactions and shared parenting with the birth parents
- The role you have played as a foster parent and any supportive activities you have engaged in, such as therapy, involvement with the child's education, medical services, etc.

Here are a few things to keep in mind if you are asked to testify:

- Check with your social worker before court. Any written notes or documents you bring could be copied by the attorneys and kept for the record.
- While testifying, do your best to answer as directly and succinctly as possible.
- Focus on the facts. For example, avoid saying, "he always cried after visits because he hated going." Instead, you might say, after a visit on a particular date, "his appetite was different, and he wet the bed that night."

Participate by phone. This is generally not recommended and is typically used for the birth parents or another "party to the action." Nevertheless, in many hearings you have the right to participate, so if you cannot be present in person, ask your social worker how to request to appear by phone. Be sure to make your request well before the court date.

Write a letter. Whether you appear in person or not, a written letter to the court will ensure that all involved in the court process hear your observations and impressions. Mail the letter to the court well before the proceeding; copies will be available to all parties. As with testimony, do your best to present your information factually without including opinions or assumptions.

Sometimes, the wheels of justice turn slowly. There may be a continuance (postponement) of a legal action at many points in the process. Some reasons may be:

- The court may need participants to gather more information, such as what can be learned from a parental capacity assessment or an alcohol and drug evaluation.
- The attorneys involved may have scheduling conflicts, or new attorneys may have been assigned to take over cases, causing delays.
- The system may have a bottleneck that prevents your case from being heard until months beyond when statutes indicate it should be heard.

Whatever the reason, you will surely need patience with what can become a long, drawn-out process. Here are a few final tips for what to do while you wait:

- To a child, a few weeks can seem like years. Use developmentally appropriate ways to communicate where you're at on the legal timeline. For example, "The judge is giving your parents some extra time to make things safe for you at home."
- It may be tempting to avoid talking about the court process with the child during the in-between periods. However, emotions surrounding court may be just under the surface for the child. Keep the lines of communication open, get answers to the child's questions, and assist the child in regulating emotions.

- Move your child's healing journey forward. Talk to your social worker about how best to take advantage of the additional time, whether scheduling visits with brothers or sisters, adding an extracurricular activity, or squeezing in further therapy.

While the court process may seem intimidating and endless, have confidence in the legal journey you, the child, and the child's family are traveling. Preparing for court will help you and the child in your home adjust. Remember: eventually, there will be a resolution!

Resources

Tip Sheet

- [The Importance of Documentation](#)

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Just for Now: Kids and the People of the Court*, by Kimberly Norris
- *What's Happening in Court?*, by Judicial Council of California
- Legal Resource Manual for Foster Parents, 4-module curriculum by Regina Deihl, J.D.
- *Objection, Your Honor*, by multiple authors
- *Monty's Day in Court—What to expect when you have to testify in court*, by Jessica Miles

Learn in [the Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Understanding the Courts: CHIPS, Guardianship and TPR](#)

Additional Resources

- [Advice for Foster Parents Going to Court](#)
- [Wisconsin Foster Family Handbook](#)
- [Foster Care and Child Welfare Services from the Wisconsin Law Library](#)
- [Wisconsin Courts Information on Zoom Hearings](#)