

TIPS FROM LIVED EXPERTS

Stay organized - get a binder to hold all your documents.

Document every interaction, this can be done through emails or hand-written notes and should include the date/time and who is involved.

Know when the next court hearing is and make a note of it while still in court.

Get familiar with the people in the court room and your service providers.

Get contact information of the people involved in your case and their supervisors.

Ask how the decision to remove the child was made and if an in-home safety plan was considered.

Stay in communication with all parties involved in a timely manner.

Ask questions.

DOCUMENTATION

- You can request copies of any documents concerning your case.
- These documents may come from your attorney, GAL, case manager, service providers, or the court.
- Common Documents: Family Functioning Assessment, Comprehensive Behavioral Health Assessment, shelter petition, judicial review reports, treatment records, and other case progress reports.

IDENTIFYING SUPPORT

Get connected with a parent or youth who has navigated the system (**peer support**).

Identify a support person to attend meetings, court hearings, and provider appointments.



HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

1

Prioritize your basic needs; eating and sleeping

2

Identify one enjoyable activity

3

Build your village



UNDERSTANDING DEPENDENCY COURT

This guide was developed by lived experts with experience in the dependency court system for youth, caregivers, and parents.

Disclaimer: Every dependency case is different and should be individualized based on the needs of each family.

Scan the code below for more resources



WHO IS IN THE COURTROOM

- **Child Protective Investigator (CPI):** The person responsible for investigating the abuse report.
- **Attorney for the State:** A Children's Legal Services attorney for the Department of Children and Families (DCF), to ensure the health and safety of children.
- **Case Manager:** The person who coordinates services for the family and prepares most reports for the court.
- **Guardian ad Litem (GAL):** An attorney, child welfare professional, and a volunteer who work as a team to represent the child using a best interest standard of decision making.
- **Attorney ad Litem (AAL):** An attorney appointed by the court to represent a child in a dependency case who has an attorney-client relationship with the child.
- **Parent's Attorney:** The attorney who represents the views and interests of the parent.
- **Parents, Caregivers, Children**

THROUGHOUT THE CASE

- The family may be given a case plan with tasks and goals to complete.
- Parents will be informed about what needs to happen to achieve reunification. The law defines this as meeting the "conditions for return". Conditions for return may include being in substantial compliance with your case plan i.e. doing your services. Many times this guides the timeline for reunification.
- Safety plans may be a condition of placement and failure to adhere to a safety plan may be grounds for removal or may delay reunification.
- Family time (visitation) should be occurring regularly throughout the case. Family time may be therapeutic, supervised, or unsupervised.

YOU SHOULD KNOW...

- Your voice matters. You have the right to be heard at meetings and court hearings.
- Parents and youth should notify their attorney, GAL, and the court immediately if they are having trouble accessing services or the service provider.
- Parents and youth may ask for alternative services.
- Parents may provide input regarding the placement of their child.
- Parents are entitled to legal representation (they may hire an attorney, or one may be appointed by the court). They may request new legal representation at any time throughout the case.
- Youth with certain special needs may have an attorney appointed by the court.
- Everything you say may be written down and discussed.
- Non-TPR court hearings are open to the public.
- Without substantial compliance with the case plan or if the child is out of the home for 12 months, a TPR petition can be filed.
- If parents or youth are unsatisfied with how their case is being handled, their attorney or GAL may help them file a complaint.
- Youth, parents, and caregivers all have individual rights. You should be provided a copy of your rights.
- Rights are listed in Chapter 39 of Florida Statutes. Additional rights are also listed in Administrative Code and Department of Children and Families Operating Procedures.
- When necessary, the parent's attorney may help file an appeal (**within a certain timeframe**).

COURT HEARING PROCESS

1. A call is accepted from the abuse hotline with safety concerns for the child, and an investigator is assigned to look into the allegations.
2. If it is determined that the child is unsafe, he or she may be removed from the home.
3. A **shelter hearing** is held within 24 hours of the child's removal from the home and is the court hearing where a court determines if there is probable cause for the removal.
4. An **arraignment hearing** occurs within the next 28 days regarding allegations, where the parents enter a plea to the allegations in the dependency petition.
5. A **disposition hearing** will occur within the next 15 days if the parent admits or consents to the allegations in the petition for dependency.
6. If allegations are denied an **adjudicatory hearing** (trial) will be held to determine if the case proceeds.
7. **Judicial reviews** (court hearings) will be held at least every six months.
8. **Permanency hearings** will start occurring at a minimum of 12 months after removal.
9. If the safety concerns cannot be resolved a **Termination of Parental Rights** (TPR) petition may be filed. This may result in a TPR trial.