

# THE SUPREME COURT *of* OHIO

## TIPS FOR YOUTH IN COURT





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**I**f you have been placed out of your home with a relative, foster parent, in a group home or other placement, there will be several court hearings to decide whether you can go home. You have a right to attend any of your court hearings.

If you are attending a court hearing for the first time, you may feel nervous, confused, afraid, or even sad. These are normal reactions when important decisions are being made and you don't know what to expect.

This guide gives you tips to help you through your hearings and make sure that your voice is heard when decisions are made that effect your placement.



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## Before the Hearing

- You have the right to be at your hearing. If you would like to attend, let your Guardian ad Litem (GAL), attorney, or caseworker know that you want to go to court.
- Arrange transportation prior to the court date so that you know how you will get there and who will take you.
- Let your GAL, attorney, or caseworker know whether you would like to visit the courthouse/room before your hearing.
- Make sure to arrive to court early if your GAL or attorney plans to walk you through the courthouse, and introduce you to the bailiff, court reporter, or other staff.
- You can bring a support person to be with you in court and talk to when you are finished.
- If you are hearing impaired or your primary language is not English, the court must provide you with a qualified interpreter.
- If you are unable to attend court, you can write a letter to the judge or magistrate. Give the letter to your GAL, attorney, or caseworker and they can take it to court. This letter will not be private; everyone involved in the case will be able to read the letter.

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## During the Hearing

- Prepare yourself to see the parent or people that caused your case to come before the court.
- Let your GAL or attorney know whether you need a separate place to wait for the court hearing.
- Many courts have rules about appropriate clothing; ask your GAL, attorney, or caseworker what is acceptable. Some courts do not allow shorts, halter tops, hats, or other items.
- Make sure to stand when the judge or magistrate enters or exits the courtroom. The court officer will tell you when to sit and stand. If you are unsure when you can sit down, you can sit once the judge is seated.
- Always call the judge or magistrate “Your Honor.” Always be respectful of the judge or magistrate.
- Only speak when the judge or magistrate asks you. Always speak directly to the judge or magistrate when questions are asked.
- If you would like to speak, ask for permission from the judge or magistrate or raise your hand.
- Stand when you are talking with the judge or magistrate.
- Present information in a clear and concise manner – write it out before you go to court so it can be reviewed and you won’t forget anything.
- Think about your answer before you give it.
- Remember, the truth is the right answer.

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- If you don't remember how something happened, say "I don't remember."
  - If you don't understand a question, say "I don't understand the question."
  - If you are asked if something happened, and it did not, say so.
  - Never get into an argument or interrupt when another person is speaking.
  - You are able to tell the judge or magistrate what you want or about something that is bothering you about your case. The judge or magistrate may not give you what you want, but they will take what you say into consideration.
  - It is okay to change your mind from one hearing to the next. Let the judge or magistrate know of any changes.
  - Make sure to speak clearly as most court hearings are recorded by audio or by a court reporter. Do not shake your head as a response to questions.
  - If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you may leave the hearing.
  - When your hearing is completed, make sure to exit the courtroom immediately.
  - Have discussions outside the courtroom or in a private place.

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## Who Is at the Hearing

There will be several people at the hearing. Here is a list of some of the people who are involved.

- **Judge or Magistrate** – This is the person who listens to what everyone has to say and makes the final decisions about your case.
- **Caseworker** – The caseworker visits you and your family to make sure you are safe and your family has the help they need. It is important you talk to your case worker and let them know if you need anything. The caseworker shares this information with court officials so they can make decisions about your case.
- **Guardian ad Litem (GAL) or Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)** – The GAL or CASA talks to you, your family, and others. The GAL or CASA tells the court what they think is best for you.
- **Attorney** – An attorney represents people at court. You, your parents, and the caseworker may have attorneys at court. Your attorney talks to you about your case and tells the court what you want. If you have questions about court, you can contact your attorney for help.
- **Bailiff** – The bailiff makes sure that everyone in the courtroom is safe and following the rules of the court.
- **Interpreter** – If you or your family speak a language other than English and want someone to tell you what is being said in the language that you speak, the court will have someone there to speak your language. If an interpreter is not there, you can request one.
- **Court Reporter** – If the court does not have a recording system, there will be a court reporter to write down everything that is said in court.

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## After the Hearing

- Talk to your GAL, attorney, and/or caseworker about what happened at the hearing. Make sure you understand all of the court orders and any decisions that were made during the hearing.
- Do not leave the courthouse until you know the next steps in your case.

## Take Time

After the hearing you may feel sad, upset, or angry, even if things went as planned. It is normal to have a wide range of feelings after court. To help with these feelings, talk to a friend, relative, caregiver, or other support person, take several deep breaths, exercise/play, or enjoy a relaxing activity.

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## Resources

ABA Bar-Youth Empowerment Program with Florida's Children First, Inc. (2008). Hearing Your Voice: A Guide to Your Dependency Court Case.

<http://floridaschildrenfirst.org/pdf/HearingYourVoiceForDistribution.pdf>

Ohio Youth Advisory Board. (2015) Foster Youth Rights Handbook.

<http://www.odjfs.state.oh.us/forms/file.asp?id=2720&type=application/pdf>

For more information on the Ohio Youth Advisory Board, visit: Foster Action Ohio.

<https://fosteractionohio.org/> or <http://www.pcsao.org/programs/ohio-youth-advisory-board>

Family and Youth Advocacy Center - A legal clinic for youth involved in child welfare and juvenile justice court systems.

For information on services, call 614-236-6768 or visit

<http://familyyouthlaw.org/fyac.php>

## Other Websites for Youth in Care

Foster Club, Ohio Group Page: <https://www.fosterclub.com/groups/ohio>

Foster Action Ohio: <http://fosteractionohio.blogspot.com/>

Youth M.O.V.E. Ohio: <https://ohioyouthmove.org/>

Published by the Supreme Court of Ohio  
June 2017



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65 SOUTH FRONT STREET COLUMBUS, OHIO 43215-3431