

Family Problems, DCF, and the Law: A Guide for Parents

by

Lynn B. Cochrane

Jill Davies

Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.



About the Authors

Attorney Lynn B. Cochrane has worked at Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc. since 1982, where she represents children and parents in child protection matters. She regularly participates in the training of fellow attorneys, and in a number of task forces concerned with improving the quality of care and legal representation which Connecticut provides to its children and their families.

Attorney Jill Davies is the deputy director of Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc. and directs the New England Network on Domestic Violence and Poverty, part of *Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence*, a national multi-year initiative funded by The Ford Foundation. She served as a member of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Advisory Committee, which developed guidelines for policy and practice on effective intervention in domestic violence and child maltreatment cases, and serves as a member of the Connecticut Advisory Committee for Parenting Education Programs. Attorney Davies is co-author of the book, *Safety Planning with Battered Women: Complex Lives/Difficult Choices*, Sage Publications, 1998.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to the United Way of the Capital Area for funding this Guide and its ongoing programmatic support of Greater Hartford Legal Aid. Thanks also go to the CitiGroup Foundation for its grant on behalf of Travelers Insurance and to The Hartford Financial Services Group, Inc. for underwriting updates and reprints.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the generous help of our clients, our colleagues at Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.: Jamey Bell, Anne Shaw, Sandy Pickard, Kara Walsh-Hart, Rafael Rodriguez and Bruce Batts; at Connecticut Legal Services: Doug Crockett and Anne Louise Blanchard; and New Haven Legal Assistance Association, Inc.: Mildred Doody and Katie Rohner; Beth Cady of Hartford Interval House, Robin Anderson-Turner of ADRC Coventry House, Jan Van Tassel of the Connecticut Legal Rights Project, Susan Schechter, Director of the Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence Initiative, Leticia Lacomba of the Department of Children and Families, and Professor Paul Chill of the University of Connecticut School of Law.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
How To Use This Book	2
PART 1	
How To Identify Family Problems And Start Fixing Them	3
Children's basic needs	3
Harm to children	5
Drugs and alcohol	8
Relationship problems	10
Depression	12
PART 2	
DCF And Your Family	14
DCF investigations	15
When DCF finds a problem	17
When your child is in foster care	20
How to disagree with DCF	21
Your records	22
Information for parents who are in prison	23
PART 3	
The Law And Going To Court	24
Juvenile Court:	
When DCF takes your family to court	24
Step-by-step guide to a typical DCF court case	26
Ending parents' rights	29
Working with an attorney	29
Probate Court:	32
When family or friends are caring for your child	
Services	34



Introduction



his book has two goals. The first is to give parents information that will help them identify a family problem and take steps to fix it. The second is to help parents and their children if DCF and the courts get involved in their lives.

Parents, with some help from family and friends, can often solve a family problem. However, sometimes parents can't do it on their own and need help from community professionals. Sometimes, parents don't think their family has a problem even if their children are having trouble or are hurt. That's when the state agency called "DCF" may get involved.

"DCF" is short for the Department of Children and Families. It is DCF's job to make sure children are safe. DCF helps many families and protects many children from harm – still, it is best not to let a problem grow so big that DCF must step in. The first part of this book tries to help you identify problems and to get help so DCF won't need to get involved. The second part of the book will help you make sure that you and your children are treated fairly by DCF and the court system.

We welcome your comments. You may contact us by telephone at 860.541.5000 or via e-mail at ghla@ghla.org.

This Guide is also available in Spanish.



How to use this book

This book covers typical issues and events that may happen to families with child abuse or neglect problems. It does not provide legal advice or cover what may happen if someone is arrested for hurting a family member. You will get the most out of this information if you use it as a general guide and then make use of the resources listed. Reach out for help if you think you or your family may need it.

How To Identify Family Problems And Start Fixing Them

All families have some problems. This part of the book has a series of “checklists” that will help you identify family problems that might be affecting your child. It can be hard to face up to a problem, but you’re not alone. There are people who want to help and your kids need you. Getting the help you need will make things easier for you and better for your kids.

Children’s basic needs

Checklist 1

Check anything that describes your family:

- ☐ *My family has moved several times this year because we’ve lost our housing.*
- ☐ *My family’s home doesn’t always have heat or electricity.*
- ☐ *My child doesn’t always get enough food to eat.*
- ☐ *My child doesn’t always get the medical or dental care she needs.*
- ☐ *My child doesn’t sleep in a bed because we’re living with a relative or friend.*

Food, shelter, and medical care are basic things that all kids need to grow up to be healthy adults. So, if you’ve checked any of these, your family might need some help. You may be a good parent and trying hard to take care of your family and still not have the food, housing, or things you need.

The following example will give you some more information. There is a list of programs that can help your family at the end of this booklet.

Notes For Parents

■ There are programs that can help you find work, get temporary money, pay the rent, and feed your family. See the Services section for more information.

■ When times are hard it is more important than ever to tell your children you’re going to be there for them.

■ Try to make sure your children take a favorite toy, stuffed animal, or book with them if your family has to move or stay in a shelter.



**I am behind on the rent, and will soon be evicted.
I'm broke and by next week I won't have any food.
I've nowhere to go. Am I going to lose my kids?**

Not if you try hard to get help and make sure your children have what they need. It is difficult for a lot of families to make sure their children have enough food, a place to stay, heat in the winter, and clothes to wear. DCF will have to get involved if your children aren't getting the basic things they need. Sometimes this might mean taking your children away from you. But, there are programs that can help. Look at the Services Section. Sometimes DCF can pay for things like rent and utilities to help you keep your children, but it may be hard to get DCF to pay. The second part of this booklet has more information about getting help from DCF. Go to Page 18.

Things you can do to help your family (See page 34 for a list of Services.)

Call Infoline at 211, to find out if your family qualifies for help paying for food, housing, child care, electricity, or heat.

If you think you aren't getting the help from government programs that you should, call Statewide Legal Services at 1-800-453-3320 to find out.

Talk with your child's teacher or school social worker to see what breakfast and lunch programs your child can get at school.

Call HUSKY (HealthCare for Uninsured Kids and Youth) at 1-877-CT-HUSKY (1-877-284-8759) to see if you and your children can get state medical insurance. All kids have a right to medical, mental health, and dental care, even if their families can't afford it. Sometimes, it is hard to get the right help. If you have questions or problems with HUSKY insurance, call the Children's Health Infoline at 1-800-434-7869. Calls are confidential.

If you are not married to the mother of your children, sign the legal papers to become the "legal" father of your children. Support your children emotionally and financially. Help their mother care for them.



Harm to children

Checklist 2

Check anything that describes your family:

- ☐ *My child got a bruise, cut, or burn and it wasn't an accident.*
- ☐ *My child has been punished in a way that hurt him. For example, he was hit with a stick, slapped or locked in a closet.*
- ☐ *My child feels really bad about herself because someone in her family calls her names and yells at her. She feels like no one loves her.*
- ☐ *My child was touched by someone for sexual reasons.*

When a child is hit, cut, burned, or touched sexually it affects her emotionally and physically. All children need an adult in their lives who is loving and supportive. So, if you've checked any of these, then your family probably needs some help. Some of these may even be considered abuse or neglect and force DCF or the police to get involved with your family. As the parent, you are responsible for what happens to your child, even if you aren't the one who actually did the yelling, hitting, or hurting.

The following examples will give you some more information about this. They will help you figure out if your child is in danger and how to get help if you need it.

I sometimes hit my child when he does something wrong. Once in awhile, I leave a mark. My mother used to hit me, and I turned out okay. So, what's wrong with that?

Hitting your child so hard that it leaves a mark can injure them and cause them emotional problems. Sometimes a parent hits a child because the parent is upset. Some parents believe they need to hit their children to raise them properly. In Connecticut, if you hit your child so hard that it leaves a mark, it is considered abuse. DCF and the police may get involved in your family.

I never hit my child, but I yell at her when she's bad. Does that hurt her?

Yelling can hurt her feelings and make her feel like she is a bad person. If it happens all the time it can cause your child to have problems growing up and may keep her from being healthy and happy. It really depends on what you say and how you say it. For a child, yelling and put-downs can hurt worse than a slap.

☐ Make sure you know and trust anyone who will be alone with your children.

☐ Tell your kids you love them.

☐ If your children are living with someone else for a while, stay in touch with them – call, write, or visit them often.

☐ There are ways to discipline your children without hitting or spanking them. Use a time-out; take away the TV or a toy for a while; put your children to bed early. Help your children understand what they did wrong.

☐ If you get really angry at your child, take a break. Ask someone to watch her for a few minutes while you cool off. Don't act out of anger. Call Parents Anonymous if you think you're going to lose it.

☐ Being a parent can be hard and it is natural to feel frustrated at times. Talk to your family or other parents about how they handle the stress.

☐ Thank your children when they do something you ask them to.

☐ Tell your child something good about himself. "You're smart." "That was great." "I'm proud of you."

Examples of words that hurt:

"You're an idiot, can't you do anything right?"

"I wish you'd never been born"

"You're just like your father, a real loser."

"You're stupid, just like your mother."

"If you don't stop that I'm going to give you away."

I love my children, but I have to work long hours and I leave them with my boyfriend. He's not real good with kids, but he makes sure they eat and go to bed on time. Is that enough?

It may not be. The adult watching your children must also be able to protect your children, be patient with them, and able to handle an emergency. For example, if one of your children gets scared and starts crying, the adult must know how to comfort him. It is your responsibility to make sure your children are taken care of when you leave them with a friend or babysitter.

Sometimes I leave my children alone while I go to the store. If my child care falls through, sometimes they're home alone for a few hours. They're good kids. Is that OK?

It depends on how old your children are and how well they can handle things on their own. There is no set age for when it is OK. It is important to know that even if you think your child is old enough to be left alone, DCF may not think so and might get involved with your family. For example, you might think it is OK for your 11 year old child to be home alone and to watch his 8 year old sister. DCF may believe that you put the children in danger by leaving them alone.

It can be dangerous to leave your children alone in a public place or a car, and it is against the law if your children are under 12.

My child is out of control. He won't listen to me; he screams and cries all the time. His behavior is tearing our family apart. I don't know how to handle him. What can I do?

It can be really difficult for parents to care for a child who has trouble listening and behaving. Children can have trouble behaving for a lot of different reasons. Some children can have a special mental or physical condition which makes it hard for parents to care for them. Sometimes parents need to learn how to help their child. Parents can ask their child's doctor, teacher, or child care provider for information and help. There are programs and people who can help you make things better for your family, including DCF. Go to the resource section for more information about programs.



Notes For Parents

■ Ask your children about what happens when you're not home. Listen to what they say and take it seriously.

■ Check in on your children when someone else is watching them. Call or come home when you're not expected, to see if everything is OK.

■ If your child has been harmed, talk to her doctor right away.

■ If you think your child is mature enough to be left home alone for a while, talk to her about it. Listen carefully to see how she really feels. Go over safety rules, such as answering the telephone and the door. Talk about where she should go in an emergency.

■ Keep young children by your side when out in public.

Things you can do to help your family (See page 35 for a list of Services.)

Talk to a friend or relative about your worries. If you think you might have a problem, ask for help.

Call Infoline at 211 to find out about ParentsWithout Partners, Parents Anonymous, or other support groups for parents under stress.

Talk with your child's teacher or school social worker to find out how your child is doing and what help the school can give your family. The school may be able to tell you why your child is having problems and where to get help.

It might make things better for your family if your child gets counseling or is involved in programs that work with children. Call Infoline at 211 for information.

If you just can't take care of your child, think about asking a friend or family member if they would let your child live with them for a while. Go to the Probate Section on page 32 for information about the legal process for doing this.

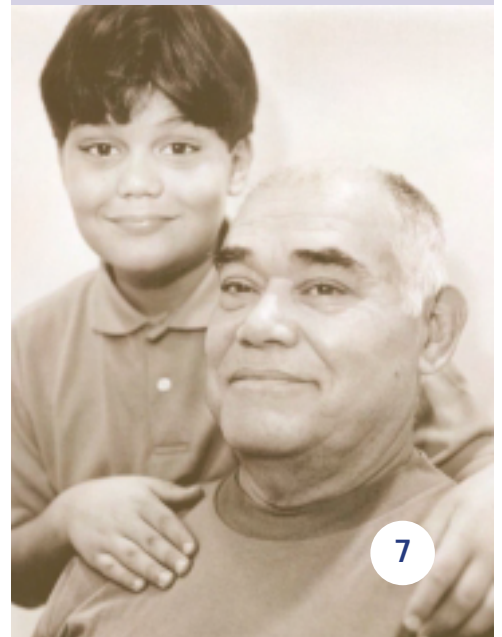
If a child you know is being abused or neglected, call the DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline at 1-800-842-2288 to report it. However, it is a crime to report someone to DCF if the report is a lie.

Notes For Parents

■ Try to spend more time with a child who is having trouble.

■ Take a break if you start getting angry. Ask a family member or friend to help watch your child.

■ Ask for help to figure out why your child is acting the way he is.



Drugs and alcohol

Checklist 3

Check anything that describes your family:

- ☐ *Someone in my home uses drugs or alcohol almost every day.*
- ☐ *Someone in my home drinks to the point of passing out.*
- ☐ *Someone in my home has to drink or use drugs to feel OK.*
- ☐ *Someone in my home spends most of the time figuring out how to get more drugs.*
- ☐ *Someone in my home drinks and doesn't always remember where she was or what she did.*
- ☐ *Someone in my home has been arrested because of drugs or alcohol.*
- ☐ *I'm worried that DCF might take my children away because of alcohol or drugs.*
- ☐ *Other people tell me I drink or drug too much.*

When people use alcohol or drugs, they sometimes use poor judgment and act in ways that are harmful to the children in the home. If you checked any of the items in this checklist, you need to think about what is happening in your home and how your children are doing. It is also a good idea to talk with someone who knows about drug and alcohol problems.

I drink alcohol to help me relax. It's legal and I still take care of my kids. So, what's the problem?

The problem is that alcohol misuse can lead to bigger problems. When you drink you may act differently toward your children. You might not watch them as carefully or make sure they wake up on time, go to school, or eat the right food. Alcohol can change you. You might be mean to your kids when you drink and say things you wouldn't if you were sober. If you drink and then drive your children somewhere, you're putting yourself and the children in danger.

I sometimes use drugs, but I don't do it in front of my kids. I don't see why it is anybody else's business.

It may seem like an invasion of your privacy, but DCF may take action if you are misusing drugs. Using illegal drugs can also lead to your arrest. Drugs hurt a parent's ability to make good decisions about their children.

If you're high you may not be able to protect your child from danger, such as: getting burned by a hot stove, falling out an open window, or getting hit by a car. When you're using drugs you may not feed your child when he's hungry, change his diaper when it needs it, know where



Notes For Parents

☐ Make sure the person watching your children is sober and doesn't use drugs.

☐ Get help. Don't wait until things get worse or something bad happens to you children. Call 211 if you think your alcohol or drug use may be out of control. You can be put in touch with a counselor who you can talk to confidentially.

☐ Make sure your children can't get the drugs or alcohol in your home. Put them out of reach.

he is after school, or make sure he's all right. Your children may end up with health problems, trouble learning in school, or difficulty getting along with other kids.

Drug use can lead to other problems, like losing your job or your home, stealing, prostitution, and selling drugs. This means you could lose everything, including your kids.

Things you can do to help your family (See page 35 for a list of Services.)

Be honest with yourself. It can be hard to accept that you have a problem with alcohol or drugs. Most people try to convince themselves and their families that everything is OK. They might say, "I can handle it." "I can stop anytime." "I only drink on the weekends."

Ask for help. Even if you're not sure you have a problem, talk to someone who will give you an honest opinion. Call Infoline at 211 to find a local AA or NA meeting.

If you're pregnant or think you might be, stop drinking or using drugs. Any drugs or alcohol can seriously hurt your baby. If you can't stop call for help.

Try again. Maybe you stopped but started using again. Most people need help and more than one chance to stop.

Ask for support and help if someone in your family is abusing drugs or alcohol. There are programs that will give you information and support to help you make things better for you and your family. Call Infoline at 211 to find a local Alanon/NAanon

If you just can't take care of your child, think about asking a friend or family member if they would let your child live with them for awhile. Go to the Probate Section at page 32 for information about the legal process for doing this.



Relationship problems

Checklist 4

Check anything that describes your relationship with your partner:

- ☐ *We fight all the time. I get screamed at and put down. I can't seem to do anything right.*
- ☐ *Sometimes I'm afraid of my partner.*
- ☐ *My partner has hit me, punched me or kicked me.*
- ☐ *Sometimes my partner forces me to have sex I don't want.*
- ☐ *I'm in charge in this relationship. Sometimes I have to hit my partner to show I'm the boss.*
- ☐ *My partner watches everything I do. I can't even read the mail or go out with friends when I want to.*
- ☐ *One time, my partner broke up our furniture and punched holes in our walls.*

All relationships have some ups and downs. And, all families have some conflict and stress. But, when the arguing gets really bad and there is hitting, threats and fear, then there is a serious problem. Sometimes when this happens it is called domestic violence. If you checked any of the items in this checklist, you need to think about what is happening in your home and how your children are doing. If you're the person being hurt, there are laws and programs that will help you protect yourself and your children.

The following examples will give you some more information about relationship issues and how they affect your children. There is also information about how to get the help you and your children need.

My partner and I argue a lot. Sometimes he hits me, but my children don't see it. Should I worry about them?

Yes. Conflict and violence in the home scare kids and can hurt them. Kids often hear and know when bad things are happening in their home, even if their parents think they don't. Parents may think their kids are asleep or can't hear the fighting, but kids usually do. Even if they don't hear or see it, they'll know when you're upset or afraid or if you've been hurt. Your kids may worry that they are going to lose you. They might have trouble learning or sleeping and may have problems behaving or getting along with other kids.

Your kids may even try to physically stop the fighting to keep you from getting hurt. Your kids could get hit or hurt when they try to do this.

Notes For Parents

■ Tell your kids you love them and that the problem with your partner is not their fault.

■ Ask your kids if they're afraid of your partner. Let them talk about how they feel and tell them you care about them.

■ If your kids are old enough, make sure they know where to go so they won't get in the way of the fighting. Tell them not to try to stop adults who are fighting.

■ If you're hitting your partner, stop. What you're doing is hurting the children, damaging your relationship, and is against the law. Ask for help.

■ Tell your kids that violence is not OK and not the way to solve problems.

If you are being hit by your partner, it is not your fault. Your partner's violence is wrong and against the law. There are laws and programs to protect you and your children. There are also programs for your partner that might teach him to stop hurting you. But, it is also important to think about how your children are doing. If they are being hurt physically or emotionally by the conflict and violence, then DCF may get involved with your family.

Things you can do to help your family (See page 36 for a list of Services.)

Talk to someone you trust about your relationship and what's happening to your kids.

Get help for yourself. You don't deserve to be treated badly. You deserve better. There are programs and people that can give you information that will help you decide what you can do and what is best for your family. Even if you tried before, try again to find the help that is right for you.

Call the domestic violence hotline: 1-888-774-2900. Even if you don't think you're a "battered woman," they might be able to help you.

Get help for your children. Don't assume they're OK. Talk to their doctor, their teacher, or child care provider to see how they're doing. Ask them where you can get help if it seems your children need it.

If you hit your partner, your children, or try to control and scare them – you need to stop. What you are doing is hurting your children. Hitting your partner is against the law and you may be arrested. You could lose everything – your job, your home, and even contact with your children. Talk to a counselor, minister, or someone you trust, about what you're doing. There are also programs to help people stop hitting their partners called batterer intervention programs. Ask them to help you stop.



Depression

Checklist 5

Check anything that describes how you feel:

- ☐ *I just feel sad all the time.*
- ☐ *I don't want to do anything or go anywhere.*
- ☐ *I have no patience with my kids.*
- ☐ *I no longer enjoy doing things I used to do.*
- ☐ *I feel hopeless and worthless.*
- ☐ *I get so worried and anxious that I don't even want to leave the house.*

When a person feels sad she may be suffering from an illness called depression. A lot of people who are depressed don't even realize there is a problem. If you have a problem with depression it can mean your children aren't getting the care and attention they need. If you checked any of the items in this checklist, you need to think about how your children are doing. It is also a good idea to talk with someone who knows about depression.

Depression is very common and happens to a lot of people. When a person feels sad on and off, that's a normal part of life. But sometimes, the sadness may last a long time, and all the joy is gone from life. That might be depression. It can stop a person from getting out of bed in the morning, from talking to the children, from fixing meals or getting to work. A person might think about suicide and death.

The following example will give you some more information about emotional issues like depression and how they affect your children. There is also information about how to get the help you and your children need.

Sometimes I feel so low I can't even get out of bed in the morning. My child is able to feed and dress herself. And, she gets herself to school in the morning. Is that OK?

If your child is fairly young it can be a problem if she has to do all that by herself. Your young child needs help fixing meals and getting to school. You may also need help because you're feeling so bad you can't get up in the morning. When emotional problems get in the way of enjoying daily life and stop a person from being an active and loving parent, some professional help is needed. This help can be talking to a counselor, a therapist, a doctor, a member of the clergy trained to help, or a psychiatrist. Sometimes taking medication can help. Most people who have emotional problems and get help can get better.

When a parent can't take care of the children and the household, an older child might try to take over by bathing the younger ones, getting her own meals, bathing herself, and spending time reassuring a parent that she'll take care of things. This child stops being a child, and starts acting like an adult. This can lead to problems for her and for the children she's caring for.



Things you can do to help your family (See page 36 for a list of Services.)

Talk to someone you trust about how you feel. Just sharing a problem can make it seem better.

Ask for help — even if you just want to figure out if you do have a problem. Call Infoline at 211 to find a counselor who can help.

Ask for support and help if someone in your family is depressed or has emotional issues. There are programs that will give you information and support to help you make things better for you and your family. Call Infoline at 211.

If you just can't take care of your child, think about asking a friend or family member if they would let your child live with them for a while. Go to the Probate Section at page 32 for information about the legal process for doing this.

Notes For Parents

■ Try to use what energy you have to talk to your children or do something with them.

■ You don't have to feel this way. There are programs, counseling, support groups, and medicines that can help you feel better.

Part 2

DCF And Your Family

What is DCF?

“**DCF**” is short for Department of Children and Families. DCF is a state agency whose most important job is to protect children from being hurt. It may also help families grow stronger by helping them fix their problems. DCF case workers can help families get many different types of help, like counseling, parent aides, support groups, substance abuse treatment, and mental health services for children.



When does DCF get involved in a family?

The law says DCF must get involved when it gets a report that a child may have been hurt. Reports can be made by anyone, including neighbors or family members. Some groups of people, like doctors, teachers, and child care workers are required by law to tell DCF if they think a child is in danger or a child isn't getting the care he needs.

This guide uses the word “hurt” to mean injuring a child on purpose or not properly taking care of a child. The law allows DCF to get involved with your family if your child is abused (injured on purpose), neglected (your child isn't getting proper care or protection), or at risk of being abused or neglected (your child will probably be abused or neglected in the future).

The law says DCF must get involved if any of the following are happening to your child:

- ☐ your child was injured and it wasn't an accident;
- ☐ your child's injuries don't match your explanation of them;
- ☐ your child is in poor health because she hasn't gotten the food or care she needs;
- ☐ your child was treated badly emotionally or touched sexually;
- ☐ your child was punished in a cruel way;
- ☐ your child was abandoned;
- ☐ your child does not get the care and attention she needs;
- ☐ your child isn't going to school regularly;
- ☐ your child needs medical care and is not getting it;
- ☐ your child lives in conditions that harm her well-being.

DCF investigations

How will DCF decide if there's a problem with my child?

A case worker will investigate the report by talking to you, your child, and other children and adults living in your home. She may ask to look at your child's body to see if she is bruised or injured. She may also talk with your child's teachers, doctors or other people who know your family. After quickly getting as much information as she can, the case worker will decide if your child was hurt, in danger, or not getting the care she needs.

If the worker decides there is no problem or a small problem that you will fix, DCF will close the investigation and not open a case.

Do I have to cooperate with DCF?

No. It can feel very threatening and like a violation of your privacy to have someone from the State ask you questions about private family matters. It is never easy. But if you don't talk with DCF, they won't know your side of the story. They also won't know if you have family and friends who can help. Nobody can force you to work with DCF. But sometimes, if you want to keep your kids, you'll have to get the help DCF says you and your kids need.

Do I have to let DCF into my home?

No. A DCF worker cannot go into your home unless you or another adult gives her permission. But, if the case worker is not allowed in and she thinks a child inside is in danger, she will call the police to help her. The police can go into your home without permission if they believe a child inside is in danger.

Can DCF talk to my child without my permission?

Sometimes. Generally, the DCF case worker must get your permission to talk to your child. She does NOT need your permission if she believes you might be the person who caused the harm to your child. In ALL cases, a case worker must talk with your child apart from you or another guardian.

Notes For Parents

- Explain to your children what is happening.

- Encourage your children to tell DCF the truth. Asking your children to lie is very stressful for them and can make things worse later. Lying also makes it more difficult for DCF to help you or your children.

- Don't talk about adult or scary things in front of your children. Try to talk to DCF in a place where your children can't hear.

- Try to reassure your children and tell them you care about them.

- Try to keep your children on their usual schedule of school, play, eating, sleep, and other activities.

Things you can do to help your family when DCF investigates:

Find out why DCF is concerned about your children. They may have information that will help you protect your children.

It is natural to be scared or angry when an outsider tells you what to do for your family. But, it is important to try to stay calm and control your anger when talking with DCF, even if you don't agree with what they're saying. If you threaten, shout, or act out of control it will only make it harder for DCF to hear your side.

Try to answer DCF's questions. It can be hard to decide what to tell DCF, especially if you know your family has a problem or that your child was hurt on purpose. If you admit what is happening, DCF could take your children and the police might even get involved. But, sometimes DCF will think you're a better parent if you admit you have a problem and ask for help. And, if you deny you have a problem that DCF knows you have, it could make things worse. DCF may take your children, because it can't trust that you'll fix the problem that is hurting your children. Talking to an attorney can help you decide what to tell DCF and others who are asking questions about your children. See page 29 on getting an attorney.

Ask questions if you do not understand what DCF is saying or what they want.

Ask DCF or the police to help protect you if you're afraid of the person who is hurting your child. See page 36 for more information and places that can help.



When DCF finds a problem

What happens if DCF finds a problem?

DCF will open a case. A DCF worker will probably talk to you a lot about what happened to your child. The worker will also tell you what she suggests you can do to be a better parent and make your child safe. DCF may be able to give you some help immediately. Whether DCF decides to take your child right away or not, or goes to court or not, depends on how serious the problem is.

DCF will invite you to a meeting to talk about a **treatment plan** for your family. Generally, a treatment plan is a formal written document that describes your family's strengths and weaknesses, what help you need, who will give the help, and a date when the help needs to be done. Usually, the goal of the treatment plan is to get you the help you need so your children can stay at home or come back home and be OK.

Sometimes, DCF asks a parent to sign a paper that lists specific rules DCF wants the parent to follow. It is called a **service agreement**. The goal of a service agreement is to prevent certain bad patterns from developing. For example, a parent might be asked to come to visits on time and sober. When you sign a service agreement you are promising to do all the things listed in it. If you don't, DCF may start more serious actions. For example, DCF may ask the court to let DCF keep your children or stop you from visiting them.

What happens if DCF says I have a serious problem, but my child can stay at home?

Although DCF has decided that your child is still safe at home, it will still want you to get help. As long as you try to get that help and keep your child safe, DCF will probably not try to take your child away or start a court case. DCF will keep checking on your child to make sure things improve. For example, if DCF finds your child wasn't getting important medical care she needed, a case worker would talk to her doctor to check that she is now getting the care she needs.

What happens if DCF says I have a serious problem, and the worker takes my child?

If the investigation shows your child has been badly hurt or is in danger, DCF will take him right away to protect him. DCF must try to get your permission. But if you can't be found or you say no, DCF can still take your child to keep him safe. They will use a special DCF power called a "96-hour hold." DCF then has 96 hours (4 days) to either give your child back or start a court case asking a judge to give DCF the power to keep your child for a while. See the **Going to Court** section of this book for more information. DCF will only give your child back if it believes she is safe with you.

If DCF has your child, you probably will not have much time to fix your problem – generally, about 15 months. After that time, DCF might have to ask a judge to keep your child from you forever.



Things you can do when DCF opens a case for your family:

*Go to the meeting DCF schedules to write the treatment plan for your family. This is called a “**treatment planning conference**.” Be prepared to give your own ideas about what needs to be done. You can disagree with DCF’s ideas. Tell them if there is something in the plan you won’t be able to do without more help. Ask for the help you need. If you don’t have an attorney, you can bring someone with you, like a trusted family member or friend, to support you and help you tell DCF what you need.*

Help DCF can give:

DCF can give families many different kinds of help. Help can simply be talking with you about ways to fix your problem. Or, help could last a year or more. It could be full-time, like helping your child to go to a school for children with special problems. Here are some of the other services DCF can help you get:

- *drug and alcohol treatment to help you with a substance abuse problem;*
- *parenting classes, support groups, and parent aides to help you be a better parent;*
- *counseling for you and your child;*
- *visiting nurses and homemakers to help you care for your child and your home;*
- *sexual abuse evaluation to find out if your child has been touched sexually;*
- *referrals to legal and housing services to help your family;*
- *in-home support to help families in crisis, or to help children return home from foster care;*
- *voluntary help for children with behavioral health issues.*

Sometimes it can be hard to get DCF to help. You may have to push them to get what you need. Sometimes DCF does not have to help parents at all. Usually, this only happens if your child was very badly hurt. A court must give DCF permission to stop helping you. You and your attorney can tell the court why DCF should keep helping you.

Speak up if you need more time to read and understand the treatment plan. If you disagree with an important part of the plan, ask DCF to write down what you disagree about. Make sure you get a copy.

Start right away to do the most important things DCF asks you to do.

Try to write things down and stay organized. It is important not to miss an appointment. So, write down meetings and appointments in a place that will help you remember. If you can’t get to a meeting, call and reschedule right away.



Keep a diary. Make short notes about who you talked to, what you talked about, and anything else that seems important to you. Here is an example: Called DCF 2/4/01. Not in. Left message I want another visit every week with Juan. 2/6/01 judge ordered drug test. Appointment is Jan. 3 at 2 p.m. at the clinic on Main Street.

Be on time for meetings. Try to make a list of the questions you need answered at the meeting. Do not drink or do drugs before coming to a meeting. Bring your attorney with you if you have one.

Tell DCF if you are having trouble getting the help they want you to get.

Things you can do if DCF takes your child:

Ask the case worker for visitation. Also ask if she has gone to court yet. If she has, you should go to the court to apply for an attorney if you can't afford to hire one.

Try to go with DCF if they take your child to a doctor for an exam. You'll be able to comfort your child and tell the doctor about your child's health. A doctor may ask for your permission to do special tests on your child. You do not have to give permission, but the doctor may have to go ahead without it.



What does DCF do after the treatment plan is made?

DCF should do the things the plan says it should do, like refer you to family therapy, supervise visits with your children, or help you get drug treatment. Every six months, you and DCF will meet to see if you are doing the things you are supposed to do and if the treatment plan is working. This meeting is called an **administrative case review**. During this meeting, you and DCF will talk about how your child is doing in foster care, what you've done and what you still need to do. It is important that you tell DCF if you are having problems getting the help listed in the treatment plan.

When your child is in foster care

Foster care can be hard to get used to. You and your child may be very upset that she is in a foster home. It is important to do everything possible to remind your child that she is loved and will be safe. Having both you and your child do well during her stay in foster care makes it more likely you will be together soon.



Things you can do when your child is in foster care:

Visit as often as you can. Ask DCF if you can take your child somewhere fun during visits.

Keep in touch with DCF. Show you are interested in what happens to your child. Your case worker will see your child regularly and can tell you a lot about how she's doing.

If possible, try to get to know the foster parents. If your child is in a group home, get to know her caregivers and therapists.

Keep going to school meetings, doctors appointments, and other things your child is involved with. Make sure DCF and the foster parent tell you when these are.

If you learn from your child he is being hit or hurt in the foster home, tell your case worker right away so she can look into it.

Help your child get along with the foster family and follow their rules. It can make things hard for your child if you're telling them one thing and the foster family is telling them another.

If you are in prison and want to stay in your child's life, keep in touch however you can. Visit and call as often as you can. Send cards and letters often.

DCF must tell you ahead of time if it is changing your child's foster home, or if the visitation plan is changing, unless there is an emergency. You can disagree with these changes. See page 21.

Notes For Parents

■ Keep in regular touch with your child by telephone, visits, and cards and letters. If you miss a visit or a call, apologize and explain to your child what happened. Try to get a make-up visit.

■ It is ok to tell your child you are working hard to be a better parent.

■ Do not tell your child she is coming home if you don't know that for sure from DCF. It will only hurt and confuse your child .

How to disagree with DCF

Can I disagree with a DCF decision?

Yes. DCF may make some decisions you do not like. And, sometimes DCF makes mistakes. Or, they may not have the correct information about you or your children. There are several good ways to disagree and try to get DCF to see your point of view. Usually it is best to start by talking with the DCF case worker involved with your family. Tell her what you disagree about and why. Listen to what she has to say. If you still disagree, ask to meet with her supervisor or program supervisor. You can bring along a family friend or other person if you think it will help.

It can be scary to disagree with DCF. If you know it's the right thing to do for your child, do it. Use the information and resources in this guide to prepare. If you have an attorney, talk over your concerns with her first.

What kinds of things can I disagree about?

You can disagree about many important things, including:

The content of your family's treatment plan. For example, your may think you don't need certain help or should get help that is not listed in the plan.

The amount of visitation you have with a child living in foster care. For example, you may want to visit more than once a week or be able to call your child more often.

Where your child is living. For example, you may not think DCF chose the right foster home for your child.

Who will pay for the cost of treatment or help. For example, DCF may say it won't pay for something you or your child need.

What if talking to the case worker or supervisor doesn't work?

You can call the supervisor's boss or even the boss's boss. If you are still not satisfied you may have a right to a **hearing** with a specially trained Hearing Officer. At the hearing, you will get to tell the officer why you think what DCF did was wrong. The DCF worker will explain why she thinks she did what was right. The Hearing Officer will decide if DCF was right. Usually, the Hearing Officer will write her decision and mail it to you later.

How do I ask for a hearing?

Send a letter asking for a hearing to: DCF – Administrative Hearings Unit, 505 Hudson St., Hartford, CT 06106. Write your name, your children's names, the case worker's name and your reasons. Keep a copy. Make sure you mail it in on time. To be safe, mail it within 10 days of when DCF said no to your request for a change in DCF's actions. If you have an attorney, try to talk with her first.

If your case is already in court, you might not get a fair hearing. This is because the fair hearings officer can let the judge decide the problem. Ask your attorney if he can try to get what you want in court.

Notes For Parents

- Play and talk with your kids during visits. Your time together is short. Try not to spend time watching TV or chatting with the case worker.
- Take your children to the library or read a book together.
- Try to eat a meal together with your children.
- Respect your child's other parent, the foster parent, and her DCF case worker.
- If allowed, visit your child's classroom or day care. Tell him he's doing well.

Things you can do that will help you change a DCF decision:

Ask your attorney for help, if you have one.

Bring a friend or other person you trust to help you at the hearing.

Try to explain clearly what you disagree about and why.

If a counselor, advocate, or other person working with your family agrees with you, ask that person to talk to DCF or write a letter you can bring with you to the hearing.

Your records

What kinds of records does DCF keep about me?

DCF often keeps a lot of information about families it is involved with. DCF workers write notes about what they think happened to your child and about every conversation they have with someone about your family. DCF also keeps copies of reports and records from other agencies they talk to about your family. For example, it may have your child's school and medical records, your medical or treatment records, and reports from therapists or counselors you have seen. Usually, DCF needs to get your written permission or a court order to get copies of your private records.

All DCF records are private and cannot be shared without your permission. There are some exceptions. For example, DCF can share information with the police without your permission.



Things you can do to check your DCF records:

Ask to see your DCF file. You cannot see the parts about other people, only yourself.

If you have a DCF record saying you hurt your child, and you are sure it is wrong, you can take steps to undo it. Ask your attorney or case worker how to do this.

You may think DCF's notes about what happened in your family are wrong. You have a right to have your side of the story put in your DCF file. Put it in writing, and give it to your case worker.

Information for parents who are in prison

The Department of Corrections is in charge of services and programs in prison, not DCF. Use any parenting, treatment, or educational program the prison offers that will help you be a better parent. Keep copies of program certificates. Make sure DCF knows what you are doing to fix your problems. Tell DCF what help you need that you can't get in prison.

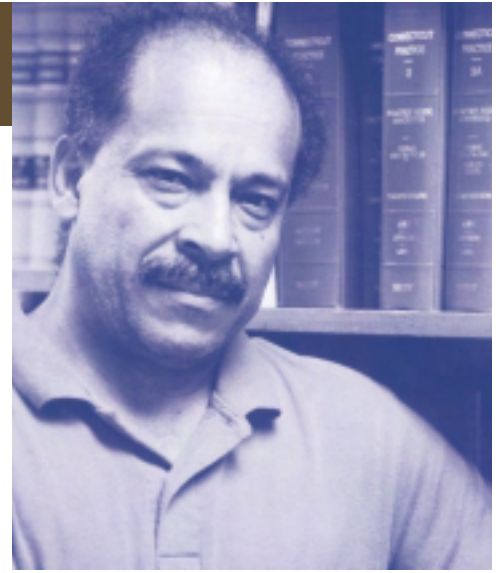
Sometimes children worry about their parents if they are in prison. If you're allowed to, stay in contact with your children. Try to get visits as often as you can.

York Correctional Institution has a DCF liaison social worker that can help you get in touch with DCF, your attorney, and your children.

Parents in prison can use the telephone to be a part of all DCF treatment plan meetings. As soon as you get a DCF letter with the date of the meeting, talk to your prison counselor about setting this up. It's a good time to tell DCF what programs you are in, to talk about visits with your kids, and to talk about getting back with your kids.

DCF and the courts cannot say a child has been abandoned just because you are in prison. But, DCF can try to show that your child has been neglected or that you have not fixed your problems and that your conviction or the length of your sentence is part of the problem. Not making an effort to have visits and calls, or to send cards or letters, can hurt your case - and your child - also.

If your child is living with relatives and DCF is not involved, you can ask them to bring your child to prison for visits. If the relatives don't want to do this, you may need help from Probate or Family Court. If transportation is a problem, the relatives can call Families in Crisis at 860-236-3593 or Infoline at 211 to learn about vans and buses that go to some of the prisons each weekend.



The Law and Going to Court

How does the law protect parents and their children?

The Constitution of the United States protects a family's right to stay together, and to live together as they think best. This means parents have the power to make many different decisions for their children, such as where they will live, what doctor they'll see, and how they'll be raised. Parents also have a legal responsibility to take care of their children, protect them, and make sure they have the things they need to grow up healthy.

Married parents share this power equally. Unmarried parents share this power if the father signs a legal paper that swears he is the father of the child. This paper is called an **acknowledgment of paternity**. If the unmarried father does not acknowledge paternity, then the mother has the sole power to make decisions for the child and the courts will not protect the father's legal rights.

The law does not allow parents to put their child in danger, or to hurt their child. If they do, DCF has the right and the duty to step into the family's private life to protect the child. In serious cases, DCF may try to take a child away from the parents. In the most serious cases, DCF may ask a court to permanently take away a parent's legal rights over their children.

Connecticut has three different courts for family cases.

Juvenile Court: is for abuse, neglect, and termination of parental rights cases started by DCF, and delinquency cases.

Family Court: is for divorces, child custody, visitation, and support cases. Cases are started by parents or spouses.

Probate Court: is for you or a relative to try to change a child's custody or guardianship because of a parent's illness, death, absence, or neglect. Probate Court handles all adoptions.

Juvenile Court: When DCF takes your family to court

Why does DCF go to court?

Because DCF needs court permission to take a child unless there is a serious emergency. Even in an emergency, DCF can keep your child for only 96 hours. If they need to keep your child longer than that, they must get a judge's permission. They ask for this permission by starting a case in Juvenile Court.

Generally, DCF needs two good reasons to start a court case to remove your child. First, DCF must believe that your child has been hurt in some way. Second, they must believe that removing your child from you is the best thing for the child. The goal of DCF's court case is to keep your child safe and to help strengthen your family. It is not to punish you.

Juvenile Court cases can be stressful and hard to understand. Try to read through this section before you go to court, and prepare questions for your attorney and case worker. It may be easier if you know what to expect.

Court Time Line



Step-by-step guide to a typical DCF court case.

DCF files papers in court:

DCF says your child is in danger and neglected. DCF also asks the court for permission to remove your child from you. They often ask for both temporary custody and guardianship for up to a year. DCF guardianship is called a commitment.

Judge reviews the papers:

The judge decides whether to give DCF permission to keep your child until there is a hearing for you. This permission is called an order of temporary custody – an “OTC,” for short.

Parents get a copy of the court papers:

A person called a “marshal” brings the papers to your house. This is when you should go to the Juvenile Court clerk’s office and ask for a lawyer. See page 29 for information about working with your attorney. The papers tell you what the judge ordered and when to come to court.

Court has an “OTC” hearing:

The judge decides if your child needs to stay with DCF for a short time to stay safe.

Your “OTC” hearing will happen within 10 days after the start of the case. When you go to court for the hearing, a Court Services Officer meets with you, your attorney, DCF, and other attorneys. At the meeting everyone talks about what happened to your child and whether DCF or someone else should keep your child.

You and the other parent also see the judge, who tells you your rights, and asks if you need an attorney (if you don’t have one). You tell the judge if you agree or disagree that DCF should keep your child for a short time. The judge orders you and DCF to start working on the problems. These orders are called “specific steps.”

If you do not agree DCF should keep your child, the court schedules another OTC hearing within 10 days. At that hearing, a judge listens to witnesses. The judge will decide if your child can go home with you OR your child is in danger and needs to stay with DCF.

Court asks parents to agree or disagree with DCF’s papers:

The court papers will say how DCF thinks you hurt your child. They also say why DCF should keep your child for a year. If you disagree with what DCF says, there will be more court hearings so you can tell your side of the story. The judge decides whose story is right.



Judge might order psychological evaluation of the family:

A judge will order this if it is hard to figure out what happened to your child and why, and how your child is doing right now. At an evaluation, a psychologist or psychiatrist meets with you and your children to ask you about your family. He writes a report saying what he thinks about your family's strengths and weaknesses and what should happen to your child. The report is shared with DCF and the attorneys involved in your case. See page 28 for information on how you can get ready for your family's evaluation.

Court asks everyone to come to a "case status conference":

The Court Services Officer meets with DCF and all the attorneys involved in the case to talk about what should happen with your child. You will probably be asked to wait outside the meeting and be available to talk with your attorney.

Court decides what should happen to your child:

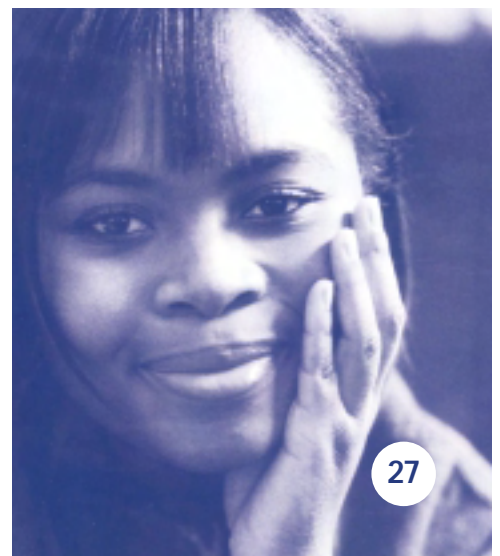
A judge decides whether your child was hurt and where she will live. If you and DCF agree about your child, a judge will usually follow that agreement. If you and DCF don't agree, there will be a trial in a month or two. If DCF ends up being your child's guardian for a while, it is called a commitment.

Court reviews the case:

About one year after your court case first started, a judge looks at the case again to see if things are getting better or worse. The judge will also decide whether your child is likely to return home soon or needs a different permanent home. A court review can happen more than once.

Court reviews parent's request to return child:

Your attorney can ask the court to return your child when you are ready to have her back. The judge will decide if your problems are gone and if it is best for your child to live with you. This is called a "revocation of commitment."



Things you can do to help your court case:

Make sure you come to all hearings scheduled by the court. If you can't make a hearing call your attorney and the court. You could lose your case if you're not there.

Make sure you understand and follow all orders made by the judge.

Always let your attorney, DCF, and the Court Clerk know your current address and telephone number.

Keep DCF up-to-date on your progress. Tell DCF if wait lists, transportation, or child care problems are holding you back from doing what you need to do.

If you start therapy, counseling, or parenting classes, work hard and sincerely try to understand your family's problems and to fix them. A therapist can usually tell when a parent is just "going through the motions."

Prepare for psychological evaluations.

- *Be sure to talk to your attorney about this ahead of time. You do not have to agree to be evaluated.*
- *If an evaluation is ordered, try not to be nervous. Evaluations can last several hours or more. Get a good night's sleep the night before.*
- *Come to the evaluation on time. Don't drink or do drugs before the evaluation.*
- *Bring some healthy snacks for your child if she will be there with you.*
- *Bring a few favorite quiet toys for your child to play with, such as paper and crayons, puzzles or cards.*
- *Pay attention to your child. Try to be the best parent you can be. The evaluator is judging your strengths and weaknesses as a parent.*
- *Answer the evaluator's questions as honestly as you can. Don't make things up or try to give the answer you think the evaluator wants to hear.*

Prepare for court hearing and meetings.

- *Get to the courthouse about 15 minutes early. Call the court if you'll be late. The judge could decide that you lose the whole case just because you are absent.*
- *Dress neatly and simply.*
- *When you speak to the judge, say "Yes, Sir", "No, Ma'm" or "Your Honor." Try your best to stay calm and polite. You'll make a good impression.*
- *Don't talk in court unless your attorney says it is OK. Quietly ask your attorney if you do not understand something that is happening.*
- *Ask ahead of time for an interpreter if you need one.*
- *Ask your attorney for help if you are afraid of your child's other parent or think he might hurt you in court.*

Notes For Parents

■ Be sensitive to your child's feelings right now. She may be very sad and miss you a lot. Your child may also be scared and hurt. She may not want to see you or another family member. Try to be patient and understanding.

■ Some of your children may need more comforting than the others. Listen carefully to their words and watch how they act. Try to give them some extra love if they need it.

■ If you have other children still at home, they may be worried they will be taken away, too. Reassure them that they are safe, and that their brother or sister is safe.

■ Try not to let your worries show in front of the other children. They need you to be especially strong right now.

Ending parents' rights:

A termination of parental rights is the end of the legal tie between a parent and a child. It makes a child free for adoption by another family. If parents' problems don't get better in about 15 months, or if their children have been very badly hurt or a sibling has been killed, the law says DCF must ask for a termination. Many, but not all, termination cases end with the parents losing rights. You don't have to give up hope. You can work with your attorney to protect your parental rights.

In some termination cases, it may be best for parents to let go of their child. This thought can be very painful, but it can also be a sign of their love. Is the child happy and healthy where he is? Does the parent seriously doubt if she can take care of him soon? Agreeing to let her child live permanently with someone who can take good care of him maybe the best thing for the child and the parent. The parent might want to talk to a counselor or therapist about her feelings. An attorney can also tell a parent about some legal choices she can make, including whether she can visit her child after a termination.

Working with an attorney

If you cannot afford an attorney, and you are the parent or guardian of a child named in a juvenile court case, you can ask for a free attorney at the Clerk's Office of the Juvenile Court where your case has been filed. Apply for an attorney as soon as possible. Take a pay stub or other proof of income. Children are appointed an attorney automatically.

What does an attorney do?

Attorneys can be very helpful in explaining child protection laws and your legal rights. They can protect your rights in court and with DCF. An attorney cannot help your case without your cooperation. The more you work with your attorney, the more she'll be able to do for you.

There are two important things to know about using an attorney. First, conversations between you and your attorney are private. This legal confidentiality is to help you to share very personal and maybe painful information with her. Your attorney may need this information to do the best job she can.

Second, you are the boss. In a juvenile court case, your attorney's job is to do her best to get what you want from the court and DCF. Attorneys can make small decisions, like which witnesses to use, but you decide what the big goals are. For example, you decide if you want to ask the court to give your children back or not. It is also the attorney's job to tell you if you are not likely to get what you are asking for.

Notes For Parents

■ You may be able to keep visiting your child even if DCF starts a termination case. This can be very important to your child, and it may help your case. Your attorney can check with your child's therapist to see if this is a good idea.

■ Ask your case worker how to make a scrap book for your child so she will know something about her family.

■ If you can't find the words to explain to your child what is happening, ask your therapist or a counselor for some ideas.

■ Later on, your grown-up child may want to find you. If you would like her to be able to do that, let DCF Central Office know how to reach you.

What kinds of help can my court-appointed attorney give me?

Generally:

- *She gives legal advice about what is likely to happen in your case and what your choices are.*
- *She speaks up for you in court and tells the judge what you want and need.*
- *She investigates your case by reading DCF's file and other papers, talking to the case worker, and other people who may help or hurt your case.*
- *She files papers in court or with DCF asking for things you need or want, to make your family stronger.*
- *She reminds you of all court dates.*

For an OTC hearing:

- *She helps you come up with a plan for your child's safe care, other than foster care. For example, you and your attorney can figure out how to get rid of the danger your child was in. Or, you can give her names of relatives and friends who might be able to take care of your child. Your attorney can ask DCF to check out these families to see if they can be licensed for foster care. The judge can be told about this plan at the OTC hearing.*
- *She helps you decide which "specific steps" and other help may be useful, and talk to DCF about getting it.*

When your child is in DCF custody:

- *She makes sure you are getting regular visits and phone calls. She can ask the court or DCF for more visits, or a different kind of visit, if you want.*
- *If DCF has your children in different foster homes, she can ask DCF or the court to try to move them together.*
- *She files papers in court asking the judge to return your child to you when you are ready.*

With DCF:

- *She goes to most or all DCF meetings about your treatment plan.*
- *She keeps in touch with DCF to make sure they are doing what they should.*
- *She helps you complain to DCF if you are getting the wrong help, or if you are stuck on a wait list for help. She can help with DCF fair hearings.*
- *She strongly disagrees with DCF if they decide to stop helping and you still want the help. Even if the judge agrees with DCF you and your attorney could still try to get help on your own.*



Things you can do to help your attorney help you:

- *Keep all appointments with your attorney. Answer her phone calls and letters.*
- *Always let your attorney know if your address and telephone or beeper number change.*
- *Call your attorney every month or so to let her know what you are doing and where you need help. Call as soon as you think there is a problem. Also tell her when things are going well. Leave clear messages on voice mail if she is not in.*
- *Ask questions about anything you do not understand or agree with.*
- *Be ready to share a lot of your life with your attorney. She will probably need to know all about your family, your education, and any medical, mental health or criminal history. Remember to tell her about any orders from other courts. She will also want to know the names, addresses and telephone numbers of your family, especially the names of relatives and others who might help or hurt your case.*



My attorney just isn't working for me. What can I do?

First, try to talk it over with your attorney. If talking does not work, you could write the Juvenile Court judge to ask for a new attorney. Clearly and briefly list the reasons why you need a new attorney. For example, "My attorney never returned five phone calls I made to his office." or "my attorney never tried to get me the visits I wanted." If your reasons are good ones, you will be given a new attorney.

If you think your attorney is doing a very bad job for you, you can file a serious complaint against him. Call the Statewide Grievance Committee at (860) 568-5157 to learn how.

Probate Court: When family or friends are caring for your child

Sometimes a parent can't take care of their children and asks someone they trust to take the children for awhile. Family or friends can take care of your child for a short time without changing legal custody and guardianship. But they will probably have trouble signing permission for certain things your child needs, like medical care and school-related things. So, if you need full-time child care for longer than a few weeks, or if you cannot be contacted in an emergency, you may need to give legal temporary custody of your child to another person. This gives the caretaker the legal power to care for your child properly.

How can I give the care of my child to someone else?

There are several ways you can do this, depending on what you and your child need. You could do it informally, without legal changes, or formally, with a court's approval. Changes could last a short or a long time. Also, you could share guardianship now, or arrange to give it away if something happens to you in the future. The Probate Court Clerk's office or an attorney can give you more information.



Informal, without court help:

You could have a relative or friend take care of your child for as long as you both agree. You keep all of your rights and responsibilities as a parent and a court is not involved.

Formal, with court help:

You could sign probate court papers to share or give away custody or guardianship of your child. This can last a short or a long time. Generally, you must be the child's only guardian, or have the agreement of the other parent to make these changes. Probate Court must approve most changes in guardianship.

What if the person needs money to care for my child?

The person may be able to get child support from you or the other parent. As a parent, you have the responsibility to pay for your child's care until he is 18. If the person is in your family, DCF may be able to pay support if the relative is a licensed foster parent and DCF is your child's guardian. This can turn into more permanent support if your child stays with that family for more than 12 months. This is called a subsidized guardianship. ***DCF support is NOT available if someone has started to care for your child informally or if probate court gave the person guardianship of your child.***

There are also government programs that can help support your child when he is in someone else's care. See the section on where to get help for a list of programs.

If someone else cares for my child for a while, can I get him back?

Usually but not always. If the probate court gave guardianship to another person, you will have to show the judge that you can now care for your child.

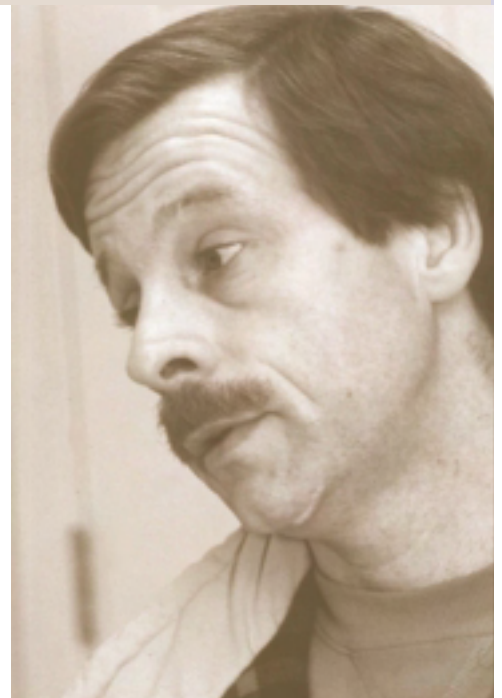
Notes For Parents

■ Keep in touch with your child with visits, cards, and calls. Birthdays are especially important to children.

■ If a relative takes guardianship of your child against your wishes, don't put your child in the middle. He needs to know he is loved by everyone who cares for him.

Things you can do if your child's guardianship changes in Probate Court:

- *If a relative starts the case, you may be able to get a court-appointed attorney if you are poor. If you start the case, you may be able to get brief free legal advice. Apply at the Probate Court.*
- *You can apply for a fee waiver if you do not have the money to file Probate Court papers.*
- *Ask the Court that ordered the guardianship change for help if bad feelings between you and the new guardian are interfering with visits with your child. The judge might order a schedule of visits and calls that people must obey.*
- *Work on fixing the problems that caused the change in guardianship. Call Infoline at 211 for advice on help for a specific problem.*



SERVICES for Checklist 1

What you need	What help is available	Phone number
Medical and dental care	<p>All children in Connecticut have a right to medical and dental care.</p> <p>There are also program for adults who can't afford health insurance.</p> <p>Questions or problems with HUSKY</p>	<p>Call HUSKY(HealthCare for Uninsured Kids and Youth): 1-877-284-8759</p> <p>Call HUSKY or your town's social services office Call 1-877-284-8759</p>
Temporary income	Temporary Family Assistance	call DSS Regional Office - www.dss.state.ct.us , or Infoline at 211
Help finding work	"One stop centers" can help you find a job or get the training you need to get a better job	1-888-CT-WORKS, press "5", and enter your zip code - www.ctdol.state.ct.us
Income if you're disabled	<p>Social Security Disability</p> <p>Supplemental Security Income programs can give you income if you're disabled.</p>	<p>Call your nearest U.S. Social Security Administration - www.ssa.gov</p> <p>DSS Regional Office or town's social service office</p>
Child Support	Child support enforcement can help you find your child's other parent and help you collect child support.	1-800-228-KIDS
Help with utilities	Helps pay for electricities, heat, gas, or oil, especially winter heating programs	DSS Regional Office, or Infoline at 211
Emergency shelter	Gives you and your family a place to stay overnight	Infoline at 211
Housing	Can help you pay the rent or security deposit, especially if you are in danger of becoming homeless	DSS Regional Office, or Infoline at 211
Food	Food banks will give you food. Food stamps pay for food.	DSS Regional Office or Food Stamp Hotline: 1-800-842-1508
Child care	Helps pay for child care	1-800-811-6141
Child care safety	You can ask the Department of Public Health to check if there have been any complaints about a licensed day care operator.	<p>Call 1-800-282-6063 and ask for the Help Desk.</p> <p>Call 1-860-509-8045 outside CT</p> <p>www.state.ct.us/dph</p> <p>1-800-453-3320</p> <p>www.slsct.org</p>
Legal help	If you have very little money and are having trouble getting help from these programs or are being evicted, or have other problems, you can call Statewide Legal Services to see if you can get legal help.	

SERVICES for Checklist 2

What you need	What help is available	Phone number
Advice and support on parenting, child development, discipline, and so on	Parents Anonymous, counselors, clergy, and Parents without Partners provide advice, support groups, and referrals to other types of help.	Infoline at 211
Physical and mental health care for your child	Child's doctor, teacher, child care provider, community health center, child guidance clinic will provide advice, treatment and referrals on most physical and mental health needs of children. Special advice, treatment, and referrals are available if you think your child may have been touched sexually	Infoline at 211 Sexual Assault Crisis Services English: 1-888-999-5545 Spanish: 1-888-568-8332

SERVICES for Checklist 3

What you need	What help is available	Phone number
Alcoholics Anonymous	12-Step program, support, and advice for persons with alcohol problem	Infoline at 211
Narcotics Anonymous	12-Step program, support, and advice for persons with drug problems	Infoline at 211
Drug treatment	In and out-patient treatment, support and testing	Infoline at 211
Community Mental Health	Advice, support and therapy for persons with behavioral health problems	Infoline at 211
Employee Assistance Programs	Referrals to advice, support and therapy programs	Infoline at 211
Alanon/Nar-anon	Support groups and advice for relatives and friends of persons with substance abuse problems	Infoline at 211



SERVICES for Checklist 4

What you need	What help is available	Phone number
Domestic violence hotline and shelter program information:	Advice, support, housing and referrals for persons with serious relationship problems	1-888-774-2900 or 211
Statewide Legal Services:	Legal advice and referrals to other legal services programs around the state	1-800-453-3320
Batterer intervention programs	Advice, support and counseling for persons with anger and violence problems	Infoline at 211

SERVICES for Checklist 5

What you need	What help is available	Phone number
Community Mental Health	Advice, counseling for persons with behavioral health issues	Infoline at 211
Clergy, pastors, religious groups	Support, counseling, spiritual guidance	Infoline at 211
Doctors, Psychiatrists	Diagnosis and treatment of behavioral health problems	Infoline at 211
National Alliance of Mental Illness – Connecticut Chapter	Emotional support and information about mental illness, coping strategies and local services that might help	Infoline at 211

Art Direction & Graphic Design: Adell Donaghue
Photography: Nick Lacy and Peter Glass
Printing: New Image Printers



Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.
999 Asylum Ave., 3rd Floor • Hartford, CT 06106-2465
T: 860.541.5000 • F: 860.541.5050
e-mail: ghla@ghla.org



Funded by the United Way of the Capital Area

Copyright 2006