

Hi there. If your case involves custody of a child, this series is for you. We will cover seven important topics. This is the first video and to get started, we'll talk about what family services are and why they're important. We'll also define some terms you need to know.

First, what are family services?

CHAPTER HEADING: FAMILY SERVICES

They're programs meant to help the court and you. Some services allow the court to learn more about you and your family. These include:

- custody and specific issue evaluations
- mental health evaluations
- home Studies, drug, and alcohol screenings; and
- child counsel.

Other services like parenting education, mediation, and supervised visitation and monitored exchanges are meant to help you and the other party or parties best support your children. We're using the terms "party" and "parties." Let's talk about this.

CHAPTER HEADING: PARTIES

A party in this context is someone who wants to maintain or establish a parent-child relationship. Naturally, this includes biological, step, and adoptive parents. It also includes people recognized by the court as having forged a parent-child bond. This is called a de facto parent.

You might be wondering, "Do I have to participate in family services?"

CHAPTER HEADING: DO I HAVE TO PARTICIPATE IN FAMILY SERVICES?

Not necessarily. If you and the other party or parties are able to reach an agreement about your children outside of court, you may not need to participate in family service programs. Consider mediation to come up with your own solutions. This is discussed in part 8 of the series. Mediation is almost always better than relying on a judge to decide what's best for your family. If you are considering mediation, make sure you and the other party are able to communicate in a safe and productive way. Your safety comes first.

What happens if you're unable to reach an agreement? It could be that you have a disagreement about physical custody or parenting time, which is when your child spends time with each of you. Or, you may disagree on how major decisions about your child will be made. This is called decision-making authority or legal custody. Contested cases like these, where the parties can't reach an agreement, frequently end up in court.

If your case is contested, the court will decide if family services are needed.

CHAPTER HEADING: THE COURT WILL DECIDE IF FAMILY SERVICES ARE NEEDED

In most counties, there will be a scheduling conference to decide what services, if any, are needed. This is a meeting with a judge, magistrate, or court employee intended to identify issues that need to be resolved and to set important dates.

The court may order you and the other party or parties to participate in some, none, or even all of the family service programs. It will depend on your situation, your family, and the issues the court needs to resolve. You can also request specific services if you think they would be helpful to your case.

There are a few things you should know about family services.

CHAPTER HEADING: THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT FAMILY SERVICES

First, know that each circuit court handles family services differently. For example, some courts have staff who provide services while others may refer you to professionals in the community. Services may be provided in-person, remotely, or a combination of the two. A good person to talk with is your court's Family Support Services Coordinator. They can tell you what family services are available to you, answer questions, and connect you with resources. They can also talk with you about fees, which is the second thing you should know about family services.

CHAPTER HEADING: FEES

There is usually a cost for family services. They vary by court and service. In general, fees are divided among the parties, but the court can order one party to pay all or most. It can get expensive. Some courts, however, offer services at no cost. Others offer fee waivers if you aren't in a position to pay. The Family Support Services Coordinator can help determine whether you are eligible for a waiver.

The third thing you should know is that, while they are helpful, some family services can feel intrusive.

CHAPTER HEADING: FAMILY SERVICES CAN FEEL INTRUSIVE

Remember, the court doesn't know you or your family. These programs explore sensitive family issues at what is probably a difficult time. You'll be asked to share personal information and even open your home to another person who is trying to help the court decide what is in the best interest of your child. This can be stressful.

We have covered a lot. Let's review.

CHAPTER HEADING: LET'S REVIEW

If you and the other party or parties cannot agree on arrangements regarding the care or support of your children, the court may order to you to participate in family services. You can also request some of these services yourself. Family service programs help the court learn more about your family. The goal is to determine what is in the best interest of your child and help you better support their needs. While family service programs provide the court with helpful information, they can feel intrusive. You can save time, money, and stress if you are able to reach an agreement with the other party or parties outside of court.

Thanks for watching. We hope this video has been helpful.