



WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME?

This playbook is offered to explain one part of the family-court system in neutral, educational terms. It does not tell you what to file, how to respond, or what to do in your case. This is the first in a five-part series designed to help individuals understand the structure of the family-court process and communicate safely within it. Most people enter family court without any preparation, so confusion is normal.

The five playbooks cover:

- What Is Happening to Me?
- Communicating Safely in the Family-Court System
- Tracking, Documenting, and Staying Organized
- Your Rights
- Family Court Professionals

In this playbook:

- Why family court feels different
- The stages of the process
- Why the system feels unclear
- How professionals operate
- Where your rights fit in
- What comes next

A Map of the Family Court Process

(For Educational Purposes Only. Not legal Advice.)

Family court can feel confusing, disorienting, and unpredictable. This page explains the **structure** of the process in clear, neutral terms so individuals can better understand what they are experiencing. This page helps you understand the structure of the process so you can stay grounded and make informed decisions. It does not tell you what to file, how to respond, or what decisions to make. It does **not** provide legal advice or guidance for any specific case.

1. Family Court Functions Differently Than Other Courts

Although family court uses the same buildings and titles as other courts, it often operates more like an administrative system. Proceedings may be informal, timelines flexible, and decisions based on broad standards rather than strict rules of evidence. This can make the process feel unfamiliar or unclear.

Unlike the other courts, family court relies upon broad discretion, allows flexible timelines, and empowers multiple layers of professionals, which can make the process feel unpredictable even when you are doing everything correctly. Often, what parents are experiencing is a combination of professional familiarity, lawyer-to-lawyer dynamics, and uneven access to information, not an actual judgment about their worth as a parent.

2. The Process Has Distinct Stages

Family court is a multi-stage process. Understanding where you are in the process can help you make sense of what is happening. Most cases move through several stages, though not always in a straight line:



- (a) **Petition / Response** The case begins when one party files a petition and the other responds. This establishes the court's authority to make decisions.
- (b) **Temporary Orders** Early, short-term orders set expectations for parenting time, communication, and responsibilities. These orders may remain in place for months and often shape the direction of the case.
- (c) **Information-Gathering** Courts may use tools such as parenting evaluations, classes, communication platforms, or reports from professionals. These materials help the court understand the family's circumstances but are not the same as formal evidence in a trial.
- (d) **Negotiation and Settlement Efforts** Many cases are directed toward mediation or settlement conferences. Courts encourage agreement when possible to reduce conflict and delay.
- (e) **Trial** (Less Common) Only a small percentage of cases proceed to a full evidentiary hearing. Trials require significant time and resources, so many cases resolve earlier.
- (f) **Modification and Review** Because children grow and circumstances change, families may return to court for updates or modifications. This can create a sense of ongoing involvement with the system.

Most people reading this are somewhere between Temporary Orders and Information-Gathering. If you're unsure where you are, identify the last major action in your case, that usually tells you the stage.

It is common to move forward, backward, or repeat stages. This is a feature of the system, not a sign that you are failing. Most stages take longer than people expect, and delays are normal even when you are doing everything correctly.

3. The System Can Feel Opaque

Family court does not always provide a clear roadmap, and procedures vary by county, judge, or case type. For example, you may receive a hearing notice without a clear explanation of what the court expects from you. Individuals may feel unsure about:

- what will happen next
- how decisions are made
- what information matters
- why timelines shift
- why different professionals are involved

This uncertainty is common and reflects the structure of the system, not a personal failure.

4. Professionals Operate Within a Closed Network

Playbook 1 of 5 • The Due Process Project • Educational Playbook Series • This material is for public education and systems literacy. It is not legal advice and does not create an attorney–client relationship.



Attorneys, evaluators, mediators, and other professionals in the family court ecosystem often work together repeatedly. They may attend the same trainings, use the same tools, or follow similar practices.

This can create a sense that information is unevenly distributed or difficult to access. Many parents interpret this as bias or discrimination, and those feelings are valid. The experience of being the “outsider” in a closed professional network is real.

At the same time, much of what feels personal is actually **professional familiarity**, not targeted bias. Understanding this distinction can help you stay grounded and avoid assuming the worst about yourself.

5. Constitutional Rights Still Apply, But They May Not Be Obvious

You have constitutional protections for your liberty, your family relationships, and your right to be free from unreasonable government interference. You have a fundamental liberty interest in the care, custody, and control of your children, your home, person and property. Individuals retain due-process rights, access rights, and rights under disability laws.

However, these rights may not be clearly explained, and the process for asserting them is procedural and often unfamiliar. Understanding the structure of the system can help individuals navigate it more effectively.

6. You Are Not Alone

Many people experience confusion, frustration, or uncertainty in family court. These reactions are understandable given the system’s structure. You are not imagining the difficulty. You are not overreacting. You are not failing. You are moving through a system that was not designed to be intuitive. And you are not doing it alone.

The next step is learning how to communicate clearly and safely within this system, and there are tools that can help you do that.

This playbook is part of a five-part series designed to help individuals understand the structure of the family-court system. It does not provide legal advice.

****If you are in immediate danger, call 911. For domestic violence support, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or thehotline.org.***