

Understanding **FOSTER CARE** **A GUIDE FOR PARENTS**



DC Child and Family Services Agency
200 I Street SE, Washington, DC 20003 | 202-442-6100
www.cfsa.dc.gov | www.fosterdckids.org

WHAT'S IN THIS GUIDE

What's in this Guide	ii
Why and When CFSA Separates Children	1
Initial Hearing	1
Family Roadmap and Case Planning	5
Completing Court-Ordered Services	6
Family Time with Your Child	7
The Road to Case Closure	7
Protective Supervision	7
Requirements for Closing Your Case	8
Important Names and Numbers	9

WHY AND WHEN CFSA SEPARATES CHILDREN

CFSA has a legal responsibility to ensure the safety of children. The Agency will only separate children from their home when there are concerns for abuse or neglect by the children's parents or caregivers. Even though a separation is occurring, CFSA will provide services to work with you to help you reduce the identified safety risks, and to work towards reunification when possible.

A separation can be chaotic but we still want you and your child to have what you need to stabilize and to adjust during and after being separated. That way, you and your child can begin the healing process while you and your CFSA team plan the path home for your child.

What Happens During Separation?

- The Office of Hotline and Investigations (OHI) social worker will ask you if any family or close friends can care for your child. CFSA helps families willing to go through the licensing process to become kinship caregivers. Sometimes, there is temporary licensing so your child can spend the first night with your family or a close friend who is familiar.

Note: We refer to family members as “kinship caregivers” when they agree to provide full-time care for your child until your child returns home safely to you.

- When no family is available, CFSA will identify a resource parent home for your child to join.
- Before the Agency places your child in a resource parent's home, CFSA nurses will see how your child is developing by assessing their physical and emotional health. We do this at CFSA headquarters.
- Before the first night of separation, we will give you an opportunity to pack clothes, toys, medications, and any other items helpful for your child to adjust to being away from you. If you need time to decide what your child may want from home, there is time to think about it, and send the items later. However, if there are medications those should be sent with your child.

INITIAL HEARING

The DC Family Court reviews CFSA's decision within 72-hours at an Initial Hearing. The OHI social worker will make sure you have the day, time, and place for the initial hearing. If you need help with bus fare or getting to court on time, let the social worker know. CFSA will help.

It is important to attend the Initial Hearing!

Just seeing you in Family Court, the judge knows you want to take the steps necessary to bring your child home. You will also be assigned an attorney to represent you.

During this initial hearing, the Family Court judge will decide one of three things:

1. **Your child goes home and your case is closed.** If the Family Court judge does not agree with CFSA's recommendation for foster care, the judge can close your case.
2. **Your child goes home on "conditional release."** The judge may decide it is safe for your child to go home under "conditional release," which means there are conditions or requirements for you to make sure your child is safe.
3. **Your child goes into shelter care.** If the judge decides that your child needs to stay in shelter care, CFSA wants to partner with you to make sure your child is with a relative, a close friend, or extended family support. If no kin is identified, a safe and caring non-relative resource (foster) parent will care for your child.

If your case is not closed, there is a neglect trial about three months after the initial hearing. At the neglect trial, you and CFSA will tell the judge how the case is going. The judge may decide to close the case then or – like the initial hearing – your child comes home under certain conditions, or your child stays in foster care.

If your child stays in foster care, there will be a series of hearings scheduled. During these hearings, the judge is most concerned with your child's best interest, including your child's adjustment to joining the resource parent home, overall well-being, and anything your child needs but isn't getting. The judge is also interested in your relationship with your child, and how you take care of yourself so you can keep your child safe.

Lots of decisions take place during these court hearings. These hearings are an opportunity for you to share your efforts with the judge to bring your child home. Keep in mind, the judge may also order services for you to help reduce safety risk.

It is important for you to attend all of your hearings to know the steps towards permanency for your child.

Set a goal for yourself to partner with your supports and the Agency to close this case as soon as possible. You can discuss with your social worker and your attorney all the things you can do in 12 months or less to make sure your child is safe and your family is stable.

FAMILY-DRIVEN MEETINGS

Within the first week of separation, you can expect several meetings.

- CFSA schedules a Family Team Meeting (FTM) after separation to promote your family's voice. You can invite family members or people who are important to you, including the family members or close friends who might be willing to be licensed as a kinship caregiver.
Reminder: Kinship caregivers are trusted family members who temporarily provide full-time care for your child until your child comes home to you.
 - During the FTM, you will probably create a schedule for visiting with your child (called "Family Time"). The amount of Family Time might depend on the age of your child and safety risks. The FTM is an opportunity to start figuring out what makes the most sense for those visits.
 - You, your family, your child (depending on their age) and CFSA staff at the FTM outline together the initial steps needed for your child to come home (reunification). We call these steps your **Family Roadmap and your Case Plan**. Whatever steps or help you need to follow the roadmap and stick to the plan, many people are here to guide, support, and encourage you.
- CFSA offers you a one-to-one meeting with a PEER who has lived experience as a parent with CFSA, either preventing their child from coming into foster care or successfully bringing their child home. A PEER (Parent Engagement, Education, and Resource Support Specialist) can really help you advocate for you and your family.
- If you feel it might be helpful, you can always ask your social worker about an "icebreaker" meeting with non-relative resource parents. The icebreaker meeting is designed to help you and the resource parents get to know each other and share information about your child. These meetings can help you and the resource parents work together for your child's best interests.

Note: If you believe your situation is completely unjust, you can appeal CFSA decisions through a Fair Hearing. Ask the social worker, or your assigned attorney to guide you.

SERVICE PROVIDERS YOU MAY MEET ALONG THE WAY

It takes many professionals to support you and your family towards reunification. Here is a list of some of the most important people here to support YOU **and** your child.

- **Out-of-Home Social Worker** – Your out-of-home social worker will guide you through all of the steps you’ve created for your Family Roadmap to reunification. The social worker will visit your home regularly to check in on you and do their best to support you.
- **Family Support Worker (FSW)** – The FSW helps the social worker with additional tasks, including transportation for Family Time and, in some instances, transportation to and from CFSA, Family Court, and service providers.
- **Parent Engagement, Education, and Resource Support Specialist (PEER)** - As noted above, CFSA offers you additional support from a PEER who has lived experience as a parent with CFSA, either preventing their child from coming into foster care or successfully bringing their child home. A PEER can really help you advocate for you and your family.
- **Your Attorney** – Your court-appointed attorney works for you and represents your best interests. You will meet your attorney during the initial hearing and have the opportunity to share your thoughts and concerns with them. Talk to your attorney about any concerns you have, and about what you can and should discuss with the other people involved in your case.
- **Your Child’s Lawyer** – The Family Court will also assign an attorney for your child. This person is known as the guardian *ad litem* or GAL. “Ad litem” means while the court case is open, the attorney assigned to support your child ensures CFSA is making decisions that are in their best interest. The GAL may also reach out to discuss your child with you.
- **Nurse Care Manager (NCM)** – Sometimes smaller children or children with special needs are assigned an NCM to support their medical needs while in the care of CFSA.
- **Other providers** – Many different people may interact with you and your child on this journey, including service providers (therapists, parenting coaches, a child’s mentor or tutor) and volunteers or other professionals in the community.

THE ROAD TO PERMANENCY



At CFSA, permanency refers to the process of establishing a safe, legally recognized, and nurturing, lifelong family connection for children, typically achieved through reunification, adoption, or guardianship.

Reunification: Bringing your child home is called “reunification.” The primary goal for your family is always reunification, whenever it is safe to do so. This road takes time and includes documented completion of court-ordered programs, attending Family Time to ensure you maintain a connection with your child, and participation in supports provided by the Agency to ensure your family can thrive even after CFSA involvement. Supports may include programs related to employment, housing, and referrals to community-based resources.

Adoption: If the Court determines that reunification efforts may have lacked consistency or were not effective, and your child cannot safely return home, the discussions will begin about the possibility of adoption for your child. The Court may then direct CFSA to find a new, permanent adoptive resource for your child (who could be a member of your family).

Guardianship: If the Court determines that your child cannot be safely reunified with you, and there is someone who has already established a bond with your child while providing care or knew your child before CFSA involvement, discussions may begin about the possibility of guardianship for your child. Guardianship will involve giving another person parental rights and responsibilities.

FAMILY ROADMAP AND CASE PLANNING

The **Family Roadmap** describes specific actions you and others will take based on your family’s strengths, challenges and goals. You will complete your first Family Roadmap during the FTM. The **case plan** goes along with the Family Roadmap. You complete it within 45 days of the child’s separation. Then, you and your social worker will review and update the roadmap and case plan every four months.

For both the roadmap and the case plan, you get to decide how best to achieve the actions you need to bring your child home. For services like therapy or making sure you can attend your child’s medical appointments, or even for attending meetings at school (depending on ages of the children), CFSA will help you get there by providing, for example, a Metro card. You are obligated to be at meetings and appointments. You will also lead your team to support reunification.

Your roadmap and your case plan change as you and your children change.

All families with a child in foster care have a **case goal** that always starts out as a child coming home from foster care (**reunification**). When there are reasons why a child cannot return home, the Court and CFSA will work to find the best alternative case goal. This goal might include someone (or a relative) taking on **guardianship or adoption of your child**.

As your case continues, you and your clinical social worker will review services, add services, change or update the services on your family's roadmap and case plan. The Family Court will also be involved in reviewing progress on the roadmap and the case plan. If you are struggling with something, it is important to share your challenges with your clinical social worker, FSW, and attorney. Ask questions. Ask for help.

Remember: CFSA's goal is to support you to be able to keep your child safe.

Whatever faces you in the future, we want you to have the skills and know the resources available to you to handle it (without CFSA).

COMPLETING COURT-ORDERED SERVICES

Following your family's initial hearing and other hearings, there may be a list of specific court-ordered services to address safety risks and the overall well-being of everyone in the family. Case closure almost always requires completion of court-ordered services. The most common services are related to mental health, parenting skills, domestic violence, and substance use.

The judge usually orders one or more of these services based upon the results of CFSA's investigation, the Family Team Meeting discussions, and information you share.

- Decide for yourself how you can make use of court-ordered services. Be honest with yourself, your social worker, your attorney, your PEER, and the judge. It is better to empower yourself on the front end of these decisions.
- Remember that these service decisions are part of the case plan. You and the social worker and the judge will review your progress and your child's progress.
- Whether you have one or several service obligations, make sure you keep track of dates, times, and locations.
- Once a service is court-ordered, make a list of what support you need to get to every single appointment as it is scheduled. Ask CFSA for support when needed.
- Consider keeping a journal of ways the service helped or did not help you so you can share that information with the judge and also add it as a skill in your future.
- Keep an open mind throughout your time with your court-ordered services. Make it work for you and then report to the judge how you made it work to ensure your child will be safe.

Some services are short-term, like parenting classes. Other services, like family therapy, might continue after your child is home and your CFSA case is closed.

These post-reunification services, if you need them, are usually in your neighborhood and managed by a local non-governmental community service agency, such as one of the five Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives.

FAMILY TIME WITH YOUR CHILD

You and your child will want to see each other as soon as possible after the separation. Remember to discuss the schedule with your social worker. Also remember that we can help you with transportation to and from Family Time. **Let your social worker know as soon as possible if you need to reschedule.**

Keep in mind that your social worker will be with you during many of your Family Time sessions. These supervised sessions are usually court-ordered to ensure continued child safety. As Family Time continues, the progress you and your child make together will support reunification.

- Family Time is an opportunity to maintain your loving bond with your child and to demonstrate your ability to parent your child. For example, you can try out new skills from parenting classes, therapy and other supports during family time. Just continue being your true self, but also be patient with yourself, and be patient with your child.
- High emotions are expected during Family Time. It is important to demonstrate a positive attitude during Family Time to ensure the best outcomes for everyone.
- Plan ahead for Family Time. Be on time or even a little bit early. Bring favorite games, books, food. Consider planning a family activity.

THE ROAD TO CASE CLOSURE

The fastest road to case closure is being present and engaged for all hearings, meetings, and appointments. You'll be talking with social workers, resource parents, attorneys, doctors, therapists, and others. It is not an easy task, but you will be supported.

PROTECTIVE SUPERVISION

Once you have completed court-ordered services and have made progress towards reunification through your Family Roadmap, CFSA may request that your child be reunified with you under "protective supervision."

Protective Supervision means your child leaves foster care and is home before the case is officially closed. By law, CFSA continues to visit every few weeks to observe

your family's progress and then report to the judge. Protective supervision usually lasts for a few months. Make sure you have what you need to continue following the conditions set by the judge, so your home remains safe for your child.

After your child comes home, there will be an adjustment period. If at any moment in time you need support, use your community resources. Ask for help from any service provider, even CFSA. Advocate for yourself. Rely on others you trust to help you through whatever new challenges you might be facing.

REQUIREMENTS FOR CLOSING YOUR CASE

- The protective supervision period went well. Your home is safe for your child and your child is safe at home.
- There are no open CFSA investigations with your family.
- There are no substantiated Hotline reports with you as a parent for at least 60 days prior to case closure.

REMEMBER! We want you to succeed, and we promise to do the best we can to help you to close your case. Along the path to closure, if you believe the Agency has mishandled your family situation, you have the right to appeal CFSA decisions through a Fair Hearing. Ask the social worker, or your assigned attorney to guide you.

IMPORTANT NAMES AND NUMBERS

Social Worker

Name _____
Phone # _____
Email _____

Social Worker's Supervisor

Name _____
Phone # _____
Email _____

PEER/Parent Advocate

Name _____
Phone # _____
Email _____

Attorney

Name _____
Phone # _____
Email _____

Resource Parent

Name _____
Phone # _____
Email _____

Guardian Ad Litem (GAL)

Name _____
Phone # _____
Email _____

Judge

Name _____
Phone # _____
Email _____

Judge's Clerk

Name _____
Phone # _____
Email _____