

Engaging Children in Child Dependency Court Hearings

Resources for Judges and the Court Community

Message from the Virginia Court Improvement Program

Engaging children in child dependency court hearings held about them begins with the child's attendance in court and extends to meaningful participation in discussions and decisions being made about their lives.

We hope using these resources will help you identify practices and develop policies that encourage and support the child voice in court.



[Youth Engagement Project](#)

This website from the American Bar Association Youth Engagement Project includes laws, policies, and materials related to engaging youth in court, permanency and transition planning, and extending foster care for youth after age 18.

[National Adoption Month](#)

This website from the Children's Bureau, Office of the Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, includes [resources for legal professionals](#) that describe strategies for engaging youth in court hearings, collaborating with child welfare, and supporting permanency for older youth.

[How Adolescent Brain Science Supports Youth Engagement in Court Hearings and Case Planning](#), American Bar Association (ABA) Youth Engagement Project, 2019. This article by the ABA Youth Engagement Project, which is part of an adolescent brain development [toolkit](#), highlights the 3 major systems of the brain: regulatory, relationships, and reward, that are changing during adolescence, and offers tips to attorneys for meaningfully engaging adolescent youth in court hearings and case planning that support this brain development. The adolescent brain changes discussed in this article are from [The Road to Adulthood: Aligning Child Welfare Practice with Adolescent Brain Development](#), a report published by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

[Questions Every Judge and Lawyer Should Ask About Infants and Children in the Child Welfare System](#), National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ), 2017 (PDF). This resource offers questions that judges, attorneys, child advocates, and child welfare professionals may consider asking to ensure the needs of children under 5 years of age and in foster care are being met. Topics include the child's physical, developmental, and mental health, fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, exposure to domestic violence, and trauma and parenting. A related [benchcard](#) is also available.

[Youth Voices for Permanency Courtroom Guide on How Courts and Judges Can Make a Difference](#), Voice for Adoption, 2016 (PDF). This guide identifies barriers to permanency for youth in foster care and action steps judges can take to overcome the barriers. It also includes questions youth would like judges to ask in court. A related [benchcard](#) is also available.

[Seen, Heard, and Engaged: Children in Dependency Court Hearings](#), NCJFCJ, 2012 (PDF). This technical assistance bulletin provides information on bringing children to court, including the legal framework supporting children's attendance in court, children in court as a best practice, and judicial considerations for bringing children to court.

[Judicial Benchcard Series](#), ABA Youth Engagement Project, 2008 (PDF).

- [Engaging Young Children \(ages 0-12 mo\) in the Courtroom](#)
- [Engaging Toddlers \(ages 1-3\) & Preschoolers \(ages 3-5\) in the Courtroom](#)
- [Engaging School-Age Children \(ages 5-11\) in the Courtroom](#)
- [Engaging Adolescents \(ages 12-15\) in the courtroom](#)
- [Engaging Older Adolescents \(ages 16+\) in the courtroom](#)

This benchcard series was created to assist judges when a child is present in court. The benchcards offer judges techniques to prepare for the child's attendance in court and for interacting with the child during court hearings. Questions judges may ask the caregiver and the child are also provided.