



## California Youth Connection Tips on Preparing Foster Youth to Participate in Court

Foster youth want to be a part of decisions made about their life and to participate in the forums where those decisions are made, like court hearings. However, in order for foster youth's participation in court to be meaningful, attorneys and others working with them must adequately prepare youth and support their participation. Following are tips to prepare foster youth in your jurisdiction to participate in court hearings.

- **PRE AND POST SUPPORT:** Work with youth, provider and social worker to ensure youth has therapeutic and relational support both before and after the hearing to deal with feelings that will inevitably arise. Many of the issues discussed may bring up strong feelings and reactions with youth, and this is a valuable opportunity for youth to learn to deal with these feelings in a healthy way.
- **ATTORNEY'S ROLE:** Explain to youth what your role as their attorney is, how frequently they will see you, how to contact you and how long it usually takes you to get back to your clients. Also educate youth on their rights and what issues you can help with. Provide information to youth on how they can advocate for themselves if they have concerns about the legal or social work services they are receiving.
- **WHAT?** Explain what the purpose of the hearing is, what type of issues might be discussed, what type of information might be helpful for the youth to share, and issues that are appropriate to raise with the judge. Review the court report with the youth for any inaccuracies, clarifications or additions. Youth should have the chance to add and respond to information contained in the report. Explain to youth courtroom etiquette and how to request a private meeting with the judge.
- **WHO?** Talk with your client about who might attend the hearing, including professionals, other attorneys, judges and family members. Explain what the role of each person who will be attending the hearing is, and what they may say/do at the hearing. Give youth information about the judge. Discuss any emotional

- issues or potential problems that may arise in the hearing. Give youth the option to bring a support person to the hearing, and make any necessary arrangements to facilitate this.
- **WHEN?** Discuss how long the hearing and possible wait time may be. Review the time frame for when hearings must take place.
  - **WHERE?** Provide information on where the hearing will take place, where youth will be waiting, and where parents and other family members may wait. Also describe or draw a map of where parties will be sitting in the courtroom. Give tips to the youth on where they can have privacy or alone time if needed. If possible, take the youth to visit the courthouse prior to the hearing so it won't be so unfamiliar and scary.
  - **DRESS:** Explain how others will be dressed at the hearing. Encourage the youth to dress in a way that will help them feel comfortable and not out of place. If youth need help obtaining clothing, work with the provider and social worker.
  - **TRANSPORTATION:** Assist with arranging reliable transportation to and from the hearing so youth can attend. Follow up to ensure youth are actually transported to the hearing.
  - **LEGAL LINGO:** Provide a “cheat sheet” of legal terms and definitions that will be used in the hearing. After, be sure to debrief with the youth to ensure they understood what happened in the hearing and answer any questions about next steps.
  - **NOTICE:** Ensure youth is receiving timely notice of the hearing. Many youth do not receive notice that is mailed to providers. This is important to mentally prepare for the hearing, as well as to adjust work/school/therapy/activity schedules.
  - **ROLEPLAYING:** Roleplaying can be important to helping youth feel prepared and informed. Roleplaying is particularly important if the youth wants to address the judge or will be testifying in the hearing.