



How to Prepare for Your First Family Court Hearing

A Practical Guide for Self-Representing
Parents

Prepared by Finley James Family Court Assistance
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1. Understand the Purpose of the Hearing

Your first hearing is typically a Case Management Hearing or a First Hearing Dispute Resolution Appointment (FHDRA).

The FHDRA is not a final hearing. Instead, it is designed to:

- Identify the key issues in dispute (e.g. contact / residence).
- Consider any safeguarding information (such as the CAFCASS safeguarding letter or social services input).
- Explore the possibility of resolution through agreement or dispute resolution (mediation or negotiation).
- Determine the need for further evidence or reports (e.g. Section 7 report).
- Give directions for how the case should progress (including listing future hearings).

2. Gather and Organise Your Documents

Essential Documents to Bring:

- Your application (e.g. C100 form) and any attached supplemental information.
- Any response documents (e.g. C7 form) received from the other party.
- CAFCASS Safeguarding Letter, if issued.
- Chronology of Key Events - concise, factual, dated timeline relevant to the child's welfare.
- Any existing court orders, witness statements, or schedules of allegations.
- Copies of relevant communications (texts, emails, letters), only those directly relevant to the child's welfare.
- Evidence of attempts at dispute resolution (e.g. MIAM certificate, if applicable).

3. Prepare Your Position Statement

A Position Statement is a concise (1–2 pages) written summary that outlines your position for the hearing. It helps the judge quickly understand what you are asking for and why.

What to Include:

- Your current position: What orders or arrangements you are seeking (e.g. shared care, contact schedule).
- Background summary: Briefly explain the history of the matter and any concerns (e.g. domestic abuse, relocation issues, lack of contact).
- Response to any allegations or issues: Clarify your side if there are safeguarding concerns or allegations raised.
- Suggested way forward: Proposals for next steps (e.g. parenting plan, Section 7 report, interim contact arrangements).





4. Know What to Expect on the Day

- Arrive at least 30 minutes early to allow time for security checks and to find the correct courtroom.
- Bring photo ID and any letters or notices from the court.
- Security screening will take place upon arrival (similar to airport checks).
- You may have a waiting room shared with the other party. If you feel unsafe, notify court staff; you can request to wait separately.
- Hearings are private, therefore members of the public are not allowed in.
- A CAFCASS officer may wish to speak to you beforehand if one is appointed in your case, their role is to advise the court on what is safe and in the child's best interests.
- Judges or magistrates will speak directly to you, particularly if you are a litigant in person.
- The judge's role is to determine what arrangement is in the child's welfare interests, in accordance with the Welfare Checklist.

5. Understand Courtroom Etiquette

Proper conduct in court is essential and can impact how your case is perceived. Remember:

- Address the judge appropriately:
 - Magistrates: "Sir" or "Madam"
 - District Judge or Circuit Judge: "Sir", "Madam", or "Judge"
 - High Court Judge: "My Lord" / "My Lady" or "Your Lordship" / "Your Ladyship"
- Speak only when invited by the judge or your legal representative.
- Never interrupt the judge, magistrates, or the other party, even if you disagree with what is being said.
- Remain calm and respectful at all times.
- Switch off mobile phones and avoid distractions in the courtroom.
- Dress appropriately: smart, respectful clothing is expected.

6. Bring Support - A McKenzie Friend

If you are not legally represented, you may be accompanied by a McKenzie Friend. This can be a friend, family member, or a professional support person. If you intend to bring a McKenzie Friend, you should inform the court in advance and be prepared to explain who they are and why their assistance is needed. The court has discretion to refuse permission if it deems the person inappropriate.



7. Make Accurate Notes During the Hearing

Bring a notepad and pen, or request permission to use a device discreetly for note-taking.

Record the following:

- What the judge says, especially rulings, observations, or warnings.
- Deadlines or future hearing dates, including any timescales for submitting documents.
- Directions or orders, such as the filing of a statement, CAFCASS involvement, or interim contact.
- If anything is unclear, politely request clarification at the appropriate time. Do not interrupt the judge but raise questions when invited to speak.

8. After the Hearing: What Happens Next?

Following the hearing, the court may issue:

- Case Management Directions (e.g. filing statements, scheduling a fact-finding hearing).
- Interim or Final Orders (e.g. child contact to begin, resume, or be supervised).
- Referral to Mediation (under Section 1(2) of the Children Act 1989, where appropriate).
- Listed Dates for future hearings (Dispute Resolution Appointment, Final Hearing, etc.).

9. Stay Child-Focused

The court applies the Welfare Checklist from Section 1 of the Children Act 1989, which prioritises the child's:

- Wishes and feelings (considered in light of age and understanding)
- Physical, emotional and educational needs
- Effect of changes in circumstances
- Age, sex, background and other relevant characteristics
- Any risk of harm
- Capability of each parent
- Powers available to the court

When communicating with the other party or the court:

- Keep correspondence child-centred, avoiding blame or inflammatory language.
- Be respectful and focused on solutions, especially when proposing contact or arrangements.
- Demonstrate a willingness to co-operate, unless safeguarding concerns apply.
- Avoid accusatory language unless evidentially justified, and then present it clearly, not emotionally.

10. Where to Get Help

If you need support, consider using a McKenzie Friend from Finley James. They can assist with court preparation, help with forms and statements, and provide guidance throughout your family court case.

Their support can help you feel more confident and better prepared during hearings and throughout the legal process.

