



Representing Yourself
at
Your Family Law Trial
- A Guide -

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OCJFamilyGuide

REPRESENTING YOURSELF AT YOUR FAMILY LAW TRIAL IN THE ONTARIO COURT OF JUSTICE

This is intended to help you represent yourself in a family law trial at the Ontario Court of Justice. Please be aware that this is basic information. It is not legal advice and it does not cover every situation that may come up in your trial.

HIRING A LAWYER AND LEGAL AID ONTARIO:

Family law is very complex. If you can, it is extremely important that you hire a lawyer to ensure that your rights are protected. If you can't hire a lawyer for your entire trial, you should consider consulting a lawyer for specific issues.

You can get referrals to a lawyer from the **Law Society Referral Service at the Law Society of Ontario** at 1.800.268.8326 toll free or 416.947.3330. The Referral Service will give you the name of a lawyer within or near your community. The lawyer will give you a free consultation of up to 30 minutes.

You may qualify for legal assistance from the **Legal Aid Ontario**. You should know, however, that you must qualify financially in order to receive a certificate to hire a lawyer. Legal Aid Ontario also provides advice counsel at the family courthouses that may be able to give you some advice before you go to court. Legal Aid Ontario also provides duty counsel who may assist you on the days that you are scheduled to appear in court for case conferences or motions. Both advice and duty counsel will give you 20 minutes of free advice regardless of whether or not you are eligible for legal aid. However, they will not represent you in court at a trial, settlement conference or trial management conference.

BEFORE YOUR TRIAL: DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION AND INTERPRETERS

- **Disability Accommodation**

All Ontario courthouses have accessibility coordinators for people with disabilities. If you have any questions about a courthouse's accessibility features or if you or one of your witnesses needs accessible court services, contact the **Accessibility Coordinator** at the Courthouse. You should speak to the Accessibility Coordinator as soon as possible and as far ahead as possible before your case begins. You can obtain more information about courthouse accessibility on the Ministry of the Attorney General's website at http://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/english/about/commitment_to_accessibility.asp

- **Interpreters**

If you or one of your witnesses requires an interpreter for a scheduled court date, immediately inform the judge as far ahead as possible and advise the court office where your case is scheduled to be heard. The Ministry of the Attorney General provides interpreters for those people who qualify for a fee waiver, are French-speaking or need visual language interpretation or if the Court orders and interpreter. You can find more information about interpreters on the Ministry of the Attorney General's website at <http://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/english/courts/interpreters/request.asp>

THE FAMILY LAW RULES

It is important that you are aware of the **Family Law Rules** and follow these rules during the trial. Rule 23 of the Family Law Rules is the rule for evidence and trial of a family law matter but there are other Family Law Rules that you need to be aware of when you represent yourself. You should read the rules carefully.

Throughout this Guide, you will be given information about the Family Law Rules and the Family Law Rules forms. You can see the rule and the forms on the Ministry of the Attorney General's website. Go to http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/regis/english/elaws_regis_990114_e.htm for the Family Law Rules and <http://www.ontariocourtforms.on.ca/english/family> for the Family Law Rules forms.

FAMILY LAW LEGISLATION

It is very important that you are aware of the relevant family law legislation that governs your case. The **Family Law Act**, the **Children's Law Reform Act** and the **Child Support Guidelines** are the main pieces of family law legislation. You may find the legislation at <http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/navigation?file=home>

BEFORE YOUR TRIAL: THINGS TO CONSIDER

- **Offers to Settle**

Offers to settle are very important in family law cases. You or the other party may make an offer to settle to the other side at any time in the proceeding. An offer to settle can be about specific claims or all of the claims in the case. In order to be eligible to receive full recovery of your Court expenses, however, an offer to settle must be made at least seven (7) days before the start of the trial.

The offer to settle must be signed by you and your lawyer (if you have one). If the offer to settle is not signed, it may be considered invalid.

The offer to settle may include a time limit. This means that you may state that the offer is no longer valid after a certain date and time. If you are including a time limit, make sure that it is part of your offer. If the offer to settle does not include a time limit, it remains valid until the judge gives a decision about the claim(s) in the offer.

The offer to settle must be kept confidential from the judge hearing the trial (or motion) until the judge has dealt with all the issues in dispute, except for costs.

To accept an offer, a party must serve an acceptance of the offer on the other party. The offer must be accepted before the judge begins to give a decision about the claim(s) in the offer.

There may be costs consequences if a party does not accept an offer to settle and the party who made the offer obtains an order from the judge that is as favourable or more favourable than the offer. In order for this to happen, the offer must be signed, it

must be made at least seven days before the trial, it must not expire or have been withdrawn before the trial begins and it must not have been accepted.

For more information about offers to settle go to rule 18 of the Family Law Rules.

- **Costs**

Costs are also an important part of a family law case. A judge will decide if you and/or the other party should pay the legal costs of going to court. Under the Family Law Rules, the successful party is usually entitled to costs. The judge will consider a number of things when deciding if the successful party should receive costs, including whether or not the person has acted reasonably during the trial. In determining costs, the judge will also consider whether or not a party had made or accepted a reasonable offer to settle the case.

If a party does not appear at court or is not prepared at court, the judge may order costs against that party.

The amount of costs may range from a small amount of the costs to full recovery of the costs of the court process, including the trial.

BEFORE YOUR TRIAL: TRIAL MANAGEMENT CONFERENCE

Before you start a trial, you will have seen a judge a number of times. One of your appearances will be the trial management conference. The **Trial Management Conference** is intended to get everyone ready for the trial.

The purposes of a trial management conference can be found in rule 17 of the Family Law Rules. There will be specific things that the judge will talk about with you and the other party. These things include who the witnesses will be at your trial, what evidence will be presented at the trial, how much time will be needed for the trial and, possibly, setting the trial date. Therefore, bring a list of your witnesses, what you expect your witnesses to say at the trial and a list of the documents that you will rely on at the trial to the Trial Management Conference. You must also estimate the amount of time that you will need to cross-examine the other party's witnesses.

You will need to fill out a form called a **Trial Management Conference form (Form 17E)** and file it and serve it on the other party before the Trial Management Conference. If you are the Applicant, you must serve the form on the other party and file it with proof of service at the Court at least seven (7) days (including weekend days) before the Conference. If you are the Respondent, you must file and serve the form at least four (4) days (not including weekend days) before the Conference. Bring a copy of the form with you to the Trial Management Conference.

You should be aware that your trial will be limited to what you have asked for in your original documents. For example, if the outstanding issues in your original documents are custody and access, you may not add support as an issue at trial.

If you need an interpreter or accommodation for a disability at trial, make sure that you let the judge know about this at the Trial Management Conference.

Also, if you want to use a medical or other professional report at the trial, you must confirm with the judge at the trial management conference that the report may be used at the trial.

BEFORE YOUR TRIAL: GETTING READY FOR TRIAL

• Your Witnesses

During the Trial Management Conference, you will discuss your witnesses and their evidence with the trial management judge. At this Conference, you must bring your list of witnesses, what you expect your witnesses to say, and the list of documents that your witnesses will bring with them to trial.

When you are preparing for trial and you want a family member or a friend to be a witness, you should ask the family member or friend to come with you. If you want to ensure that your family members, friends or other witnesses come to the trial as witnesses, you will have to fill out Form 23: Summons to a Witness. This form must be served on the witness and filed with the court. If you are using Form 23, you must pay your witness for every day that the witness is required in court. You will find the witness fee in rule 23 of the Family Law Rules. The witness fee must be served on the witness along with Form 23: Summons to a Witness.

You should only call witnesses who have information that will help the judge decide your case and is relevant to the orders that you want the judge to make at the trial. You may also call witnesses who have information that goes against the other party's case.

It is important that your witness tells the truth. With some exceptions, the witness can only tell the court about evidence that they know themselves, not what other people have told them.

You should meet with your witnesses before the trial. You should tell them that they must tell the truth regardless of how the evidence may affect you.

Tell your witnesses to bring documents that support your case with them. If you use Form 23: Summons to a Witness, you should list the documents that you want the witnesses to bring with them. Bring the original and at least four copies of the documents to court. The original document is the one that should be filed with the court.

• Financial Statements

If support or income is an issue at trial, before your trial, you must update your financial statements. Look at rule 13 of the Family Law Rules for the rule about updating your financial statements.

You must file and serve your last three tax returns, your last three notices of assessment and your last three pay stubs from your employer.

If income is an issue, you may be required to bring relevant and necessary documents which support your income. If you are self-employed, you must file and serve your most recent statement of business affairs.

If you are not working, you should file and serve a detailed list of your job search or provide information about why you are not working. The list of your job search should include the date that you submitted your applications, the name of the employers and the address and phone numbers of the employers and the date that they responded, if they did respond.

If you are the applicant, you must serve and file your updated financial statement *at least* seven (7) days before the trial. If you are the respondent, you must serve and file your updated financial statement *at least* four (4) days before trial.

- **Documents**

Documents that you want to use as evidence must be the original document, genuine, necessary and relevant to your case. They also must be true. The documents may include bank account records, report cards, real estate documents, etc. The judge will make a decision about whether you will be able to use the documents at your trial.

It is important that you or one of your witnesses identify the documents that you will use at trial when you or your witnesses testify. For example, one of your witnesses might identify a letter that they received. Once the documents are identified as genuine by your witness, they must then be relevant and necessary to your case.

Do not forget that you must disclose all documents that you want to use at trial to the other party before the trial. If you do not disclose them, you will not be able to use them at the trial unless the judge tells you that you can use them. Rule 19 is the rule about document disclosure in the Family Law Rules.

- **Medical Reports**

In some cases, you may want to have a medical report as part of your evidence at the trial. There are specific rules regarding this. If you want a medical report as evidence in the trial, you must get your doctor to write and sign a report. You must then serve a copy of the report on the other party *at least* ten (10) days before the trial. You must also get permission from the judge to file the report with the court at the trial management conference.

You can serve the other party with a "Request to Admit" (Form 22 of the Family Law Rules) along with the doctor's report when you give a copy of the medical report to the other party. If you do this, and the other party does not serve a Response (Form 22A) within 20 days, the facts in the Request to Admit are deemed to be true, and you may be able to avoid calling the doctor as a witness to tell the court that the report is real and written by the doctor.

For other professional reports, you should refer to the Ontario Evidence Act for the law regarding these types of documents. You can find the Ontario Evidence Act at <http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/navigation?file=home>

- **Trial Record**

Up until your trial, you and the other party will have used a continuing record for the documents. You may not use the continuing record for the trial. Instead, you must prepare a trial record. You will find details about how to prepare a trial record in rule 23 of the Family Law Rules.

Please note that if you are the applicant, the trial record must be served on the other party and filed in the courthouse at least thirty (30) days before the start of the trial. If you are the respondent, you may add any documents that are not already in the trial record to the trial record and serve these additional documents on the applicant and file them with the court at least seven (7) days before the start of trial.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I CAN'T ATTEND COURT ON A SCHEDULED DATE?

Once the court sets a trial date, you are expected to go ahead with your trial. Asking the court to change a scheduled date is called an adjournment. Adjournments will only be allowed in exceptional circumstances. If you need to change the date of your trial, you need to fill out a form called a 14B Motion form, serve it on all the parties and file it at the courthouse. If the other party agrees with an adjournment, you can say this on the form. You should be aware that the judge may not agree to the adjournment even if the other party agrees to it. If the other party has not agreed to the adjournment, you or your lawyer must go to court on the date that was originally scheduled and explain why you need an adjournment. It is important that you know that a judge may order costs against you or the trial may proceed without you, if you fail to appear in court on the scheduled day and time.

If there is an emergency that prevents you from attending court, contact the courthouse as soon as possible so that the court staff can tell the judge that there is an emergency and that you are asking for an adjournment.

WHAT SHOULD I BRING WITH ME TO MY TRIAL?:

You need to bring the trial record and any documents that you added to the trial record with you to trial, including your updated financial statements. Look at rule 13 of the Family Law Rules for the rule about updating your financial statements.

Bring enough copies of every document with you to trial so that every person and the judge has a copy of them. The original should have been filed with the court. If the original was not filed with the court, bring it with you.

Bring several pens and lots of paper with you.

Bring your witnesses with you.

YOUR TRIAL:

- Always be respectful and polite to everyone in the courtroom, including the other party.
- When you address the judge, use either "your Honour" or "Justice" before the judge's last name. For example, you can say, "Justice Smith" or "Your Honour".

- You must stand when a judge enters or leaves the courtroom. When you are speaking to the judge, you should also stand.
- When you are speaking to a witness, you should use either "Mr.," "Ms." or "Doctor" and not use their first names. For example, "Mr. Smith" but not "Joe".
- Court is usually open from 10:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. The court usually takes a break for lunch at 1:00 p.m. There will also be a break in the morning and in the afternoon. These hours may change. The judge will determine if your case starts earlier or later or ends earlier or later. Please make sure that you and your witnesses are on time for your trial.
- Make sure that you return to court on time after the breaks.
- You should take notes during court so that you may respond to any issues raised by the other party when it is your turn to speak to the judge.
- When you want to speak during the trial, talk to the judge. Do not talk to the other party. Do not interrupt when the judge or the other party is speaking. Only one person is allowed to speak at a time. If you disagree with something that the other party tells the judge, write it down. Do not speak to the other party and tell them that you don't agree. The judge will give you time to disagree but only when it is your turn to speak.
- If you object to the other party's questions to witnesses, besides writing down your objection, you should stand up. This tells the judge that you have something to say.
- However, don't stand up if you disagree with the other party's or the other party's witnesses' answers to questions or if you think that the other party or their witnesses are lying. Just write it down.
- If you can't hear a witness, the other party, a lawyer or the judge, you should let the judge know.
- The judge cannot give you any legal advice because the judge must be fair and impartial when hearing the trial. You should consult a lawyer or duty counsel at your local courthouse. If you have any questions about court procedure during your trial, however, you may ask the judge.
- You may not record your trial unless you first obtain permission from the judge.
- There should be no surprises about the evidence at the trial!

In the courtroom, a judge sits on a dais. It is a platform that sits at the front of the courtroom. Also, there will be a court clerk and a court reporter in the courtroom. Please be aware that a family law case is open to the public. You may see people walking in and out of the courtroom. Also, please be aware that everything is recorded in the courtroom.

There are two tables in front of the judge for the applicant and the respondent. These are called counsel tables. Usually, the parties sit there with their lawyers. If you do not have a

lawyer and you want to bring someone to sit with you at these tables, make sure that you ask the judge for permission to do this. However, if that person is going to be a witness, the judge won't allow that person to sit with you. You should try to choose someone who is not going to be a witness.

- **Be on Time!**

It is very important that you and your witnesses show up on time for your trial. Show up at the court room at least fifteen minutes ahead of time. If you do not show up on time, the trial could go ahead without you.

- **Proving Your Case**

You must prove your claims in your application (the form that you used to start the case) or your answer (the form that you used to provide a response to the application). The judges use a test called the "balance of probabilities" to see if you have proven your claims. This means that your claim must be more probable (more than 50%) than the other party's claims.

- **Excluding Witnesses**

Excluding witnesses during a trial occurs when one or both parties ask the judge to order that all of the witnesses stay outside the courtroom until they are called to come into the courtroom and give their evidence. The request to exclude witnesses happens at the beginning of the trial and is done to ensure that a witness does not change his or her testimony after hearing another witness. If a judge decides to order that the witnesses be excluded from the courtroom, ensure that you do not speak to the witnesses about any of the evidence that has been presented at trial before they testify. You do not have to leave the courtroom when other witnesses testify even if you intend to testify yourself.

- **Your Opening Statement**

Most judges will require both parties to give an opening statement at the beginning of the trial. The purpose of an opening statement is to give the judge a roadmap of the issues and the evidence that you will be presenting to the court. It is not the time to give evidence. You should only give the judge a summary of what you will be doing and the orders that you want the judge to make.

The applicant (the party that started the case) gives her or his opening statement first. If you decide to give an opening statement, you should make it as short as possible. You should outline the orders that you want the judge to make, your most important issues, how you intend to support your claims, the witnesses who you will be calling, and the documents that you will be presenting to the court.

If you are the respondent, you may give your opening statement after the applicant's opening statement or after the applicant has completed their case.

Do not be argumentative or dramatic during your opening statement. You want to be seen as reasonable and calm during your trial.

Do not interrupt the other party when they give an opening statement to the judge. You will be given a chance to present your case when it is your turn.

It is very important to remember that your opening statement is not evidence!

- **Your Evidence**

After your opening statement (if you choose to make one), the judge will start to hear evidence. Your evidence may come from you, your **witnesses** or your **documents**.

If you are the **applicant**, you will go first. You can call your witnesses or testify yourself. You must also produce your documents at this time for the witnesses to identify or that you may identify. These documents, which can include such things as affidavits (sworn statements), financial statements, letters, photographs, receipts, or reports, are called "**exhibits**".

If you are the **respondent**, you will go after the applicant finishes giving their evidence to the judge. You can call your witnesses or testify yourself. You may also produce your documents at this time for the witnesses to identify or that you may identify. These documents, which can include such things as affidavits (sworn statements), financial statements, letters, photographs, receipts or reports, are called "**exhibits**".

Every witness will be asked to **swear an oath or affirm** that he or she will tell the truth. Lying under oath is called "perjury" and is punishable by up to 14 years in jail.

Let your witness tell their own story.

You can decide the order of your own witnesses.

If you decide to **testify on your own behalf**, usually you will be the first witness when it is your turn to give evidence. If you don't testify on your own behalf, the other party may still call you as a witness for their case. If you testify on your own behalf, you may be questioned by the other party (questioning by the other party is called cross-examination).

The other party may **cross-examine** each of your witnesses. You may cross-examine each of the other party's witnesses.

After the other party has cross-examined your witnesses, you may **re-examine** the witness to clarify matters raised by cross-examination. However, you may not raise new issues that were not raised during the cross-examination.

Once you or your witnesses testify, you can usually sit down.

- **Expert Witnesses**

There is a difference between expert witnesses such as doctors and therapists or counsellors and other kinds of witnesses such as friends and family. Expert witnesses can give an opinion based on their expertise. For example, they can give an opinion about a medical diagnosis. Your friends and family cannot give an expert opinion.

- **Questioning Witnesses**

There are very **specific rules involved in questioning witnesses**. First, the applicant will question their own witnesses (examination in chief), the respondent then cross-examines the same witness, and then the applicant can re-examine the witness. When it is the respondent's turn, the questioning of witnesses will happen in the same order. When each of you finishes questioning the witness, the judge may ask questions of the witness, as well.

If you question a witness that you have called, this is called **examination in chief**. You may not ask "leading questions" in examinations in chief. Leading questions are questions that have the answer in the question – for example, a leading question could be, "The car was red, wasn't it?". If you ask questions that start with who, what, where, when, why, how, or please describe, it will help you to avoid asking leading questions.

When you question the other party's witnesses, it is called **cross-examination**. You do not have to cross-examine a witness. However, if you decide to do this, you may ask leading questions. You should remember that the purpose of cross-examining a witness is to test the truthfulness of the witnesses' answers and bring out evidence that is favourable to you.

During the cross-examination, you should ask questions about the witnesses' ability and opportunity to observe the things that he or she is telling the court. As well, you can question the witness about their ability to give an accurate re-telling of what he or she has seen and heard and whether the witness has any reason to be biased or prejudiced or has an interest in the outcome of the case.

If a witness has made a sworn statement before the trial (called an affidavit) and is saying something different at the trial, you should cross-examine the witness about their prior statement. Also, if the witness has said something good about you in the prior statement, you should ask the witness about that, too. To do this, you should ask the witness if they remember making the statement and swearing that the statement was true. Then, you should read the prior statement. Ask the witness if the statement is true. If the witness says the statement is not true, this will show the judge that the witness is not believable.

After a witness is cross-examined, the party that called the witness may **re-examine** their witness. Re-examining a witness means asking the witness additional questions to explain answers that the witness gave during the cross-examination. This is not the time to introduce new issues that did not come up during the cross-examination or to bring up issues that you forgot. You may only ask the witness questions to clarify what they said during the cross-examination.

You should remember that questions are not evidence; rather, it is the witnesses' answers to the questions that are evidence.

Usually, witnesses can only testify about what they have personally seen, heard or did. There are some exceptions to this such as when a witness is an expert.

Always allow a witness to finish answering your question before you ask the witness another question.

Never argue with a witness.

- **Objections:**

During the questioning of witnesses, you have the right to object to the questions that the other party asks a witness or you can object to the introduction of documents that a witness has identified. If you object to a question or to the introduction of a document, stand up. The judge will ask you why you are objecting. The judge will listen to both you and the other party about the objection and will decide whether your objection is valid.

- **If you testify:**

Since you are representing yourself at trial, the judge may ask you questions during the examination in chief. You should think about what you want to say. You should write it out before you come to the courthouse but you should not expect to read your notes when you are a witness. If you made notes at the time that something occurred, you must ask the judge for permission to look at those notes. You will need to tell the judge why you need to look at these notes.

If you decide to testify yourself, you must only say what you personally saw, heard or did.

- **Your Closing Statement**

After all of the witnesses have been called to testify, the judge will require that both parties make closing statements. During closing statements, you are allowed to address the judge and tell the judge what you believe the judge's decision should be, based on the evidence – your witnesses and your documents. At this time, you may also point out the problems with the other party's evidence.

The applicant makes his or her closing statement first. Then, the respondent makes his or her closing statements.

Your closing statement cannot include issues that have not been introduced by the evidence.

- **The Judge's Decision**

After the parties make their closing submissions, the judge will either make a decision or he or she will "reserve" their decision. In most cases, the judge will release their written decision in six months. When the judge releases their decision, he or she will explain what the decision is and why he or she has chosen to make their decision.

OPENING STATEMENT

- Applicant gives opening address
- Respondent can give the opening address here or wait until they start presenting their case.

Applicant's Case

Applicant's Witnesses

- 1) Direct examination
- 2) Cross-examination
- 3) Re-examination (clarify evidence that arose on cross-examination)

Respondent's Case

Respondent's Opening Statement

This is only if the respondent has not already given an opening statement

Respondent's Witnesses

- 1) Direct examination
- 2) Cross-examination
- 3) Re-examination (clarify evidence that arose on cross-examination)

Applicant's Reply (Optional)

To address evidence that arose during respondent's case

Applicant's Witness (Optional)

- 1) Direct examination
- 2) Cross-examination
- 3) Re-examination

CLOSING STATEMENT

- 1) Applicant gives closing address
- 2) Respondent gives closing address
- 3) Applicant (only to respond to Respondent)