

Commenced: Monday 31 August 2026

Carers often know a child better than most. You understand their routines, their worries, how they are going at school and the people who matter to them.

The Every Child Matters reforms give carers a stronger voice in court decisions about the children they look after. This fact sheet explains what the changes mean for you, and what happens if you would prefer not to take an active role.

## What is changing

Under Section 94 of the *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007*, if a child has been in your care for more than 8 months, you will automatically be recognised as a party to relevant court proceedings about that child.

Being a party means you are formally involved in the court matter. It gives you the right to be heard, so you can share what you know about the child and help the Court understand their day-to-day life.

You do not need to apply for this or be approved for it. Once a child has been in your care for more than 8 months, you become a party automatically under the law. The Department of Children and Families (DCF) will advise you of any scheduled court matters about a child in your care and provide you with the relevant court documents. If you have questions about a court matter, you can also contact the relevant court registry directly.

## Why it matters

Carers often hold valuable knowledge about a child, particularly after caring for them for a long time. The reforms recognise that experience and give you a real voice when the Court is considering significant decisions about a child's future.

Your knowledge can help the Court understand:

- information relevant to their ongoing safety, stability and care
- the child's day-to-day needs and wellbeing
- the relationships and connections that matter to them
- how the child is developing and what they have experienced while in your care.

The Court will consider this alongside evidence from DCF, the child, their family and other relevant parties when making decisions in the child's best interests.

## What being a party means for you

If the reforms apply to you, we will contact you and explain what happens next. As a party to proceedings you have legal rights, along with some responsibilities. You may:

- receive court documents
- attend hearings, mentions and mediations
- provide information or evidence to the Court
- make submissions to the Court
- respond to evidence provided by other parties.

Being a party gives you a voice in the proceedings, but it does not make you the decision-maker. The Court decides what is in the child's best interests after considering the evidence from everyone involved.



Taking part is your choice. You choose how actively you want to participate in proceedings, and if you decide not to take part the matter will continue without you.

If you do take part, court follows a formal process, and the Court may give directions about how a matter runs. If you are ever unsure what is expected of you, contact the person named in the documents sent to you, or seek independent legal advice.

We know court may be unfamiliar and that you will have questions. DCF is working to put practical arrangements and guidance in place to support you so please reach out if you have any concerns.



## What if I don't want to participate?

We understand that taking part in court is not something every carer will want to do, and that is okay.

Because the change happens automatically, you are recognised as a party to proceedings from the start. You cannot choose to opt out of being a party to the proceedings. However, the decision about taking an active role is your choice.

If you would prefer not to take an active role, please speak with your case worker. They can provide information and guidance relevant to your circumstances.

If you need some help, please reach out to your case worker, Foster and Kinship Carers Association NT or an Aboriginal Carer Service in your area.

You will remain a party to the proceedings and must comply with any court directions or requirements that apply to you.



EVERY  
CHILD  
MATTERS

# Carers and the new laws

## Looking after confidential information

As a party, you may be trusted with court documents that contain sensitive and personal information, not only about the child but about their parents, family members, witnesses and others. This can include information about health, education, family circumstances, family and domestic violence, alcohol and other drug use, or abuse.

Because this information is highly sensitive, you are required to keep any court documents secure and confidential. Unless the law or the Court allows it, this means not:

- sharing, copying or publishing the documents
- discussing their contents with people who are not authorised to see them
- leaving documents where children or other people could come across them.

Please don't discuss sensitive information from court documents with the child in your care before speaking with their case worker. If anything you read is distressing or hard to understand, your case worker or relevant carer support organisation is there to support you.

While you may be provided with the court documents, we understand that reading them may be distressing for you and so it is important to make it clear there is no requirement for you to keep or read them. If you decide you do not wish to read and or keep court documents provided to you, you can return them to your case worker or local DCF office, where they will be securely disposed of.

## Who you can talk to if you are party to proceedings

Your case worker will keep working with you on the child's day-to-day care and support.

Once proceedings begin, some questions about the legal process may be best answered by your lawyer or nominated representative. Your case worker can explain how DCF internal processes work, though they cannot give you legal advice.

You can also contact the relevant court registry directly with questions about a court matter. Registry staff can explain court processes, but they cannot give you legal advice.

| Region        | Address                                                                         | Email                                                                                |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Darwin        | Darwin Children's Court, Ground Floor, TCG Building, 80 Mitchell Street, Darwin | <a href="mailto:Darwin.ChildrensCourt@nt.gov.au">Darwin.ChildrensCourt@nt.gov.au</a> |
| Katherine     | Court House, First Street, Katherine                                            | <a href="mailto:Katherine.LocalCourt@nt.gov.au">Katherine.LocalCourt@nt.gov.au</a>   |
| Tennant Creek | Court House, 53 Paterson Street, Tennant Creek                                  | <a href="mailto:TCLC.Registry@nt.gov.au">TCLC.Registry@nt.gov.au</a>                 |
| Alice Springs | Parsons Street, Alice Springs                                                   | <a href="mailto:ASLC.CivilRegistry@nt.gov.au">ASLC.CivilRegistry@nt.gov.au</a>       |

## Independent legal advice

You do not need to have a lawyer simply because you become a party to proceedings. You can participate and provide information to the Court yourself. However, being a party gives you legal rights and responsibilities. You may choose to seek independent legal advice or representation if you are unsure about your circumstances or what is expected of you.

DCF and our lawyers cannot provide you with legal advice or represent you as our lawyers represent the Chief Executive Officer. If you choose to engage a lawyer, you will need to arrange and pay for your own legal advice or representation.

To find a private lawyer, visit [nt.gov.au/law/processes/get-legal-advice/how-to-find-a-private-lawyer](https://nt.gov.au/law/processes/get-legal-advice/how-to-find-a-private-lawyer)

The reforms also strengthen the child's own voice. In long-term and permanent care order applications, the child must have their own independent legal representation. We will provide this support. This means the child's interests are represented separately in these proceedings, alongside the information you and others provide to the Court.

## Practical support

Taking part in court can create practical challenges. You might need time away from work, care for other children or family members, or respite for a child with additional needs.

If taking part is difficult in practical terms, talk to your case worker as early as you can. We are working through options that may help carers take part.

## More information

We are working with the Court, carers, legal services and other partners to finalise practical arrangements for these changes.

More information will be provided as these arrangements are progressed, including guidance on court processes, handling confidential information and practical support.

If you have a question or concern, you can reach out to your case manager or your relevant carer support service:

- [Foster and Kinship Carers Association of the Northern Territory](https://fkca.org.au/) (fkca.org.au/) | call 1800 367 837
- [Larrakia Nation](https://larrakia.com/) (larrakia.com/) | Call 08 8997 2111 or email [minbanibebe@larrakia.com](mailto:minbanibebe@larrakia.com)
- [Kalano Community Association](https://kalano.org.au/) – Katherine (kalano.org.au/) | Call 08 8918 6130 or email [kalanokinship@kalano.org.au](mailto:kalanokinship@kalano.org.au)
- [Yalu Aboriginal Corporation](https://yalu.org.au/) – Galiwinku (yalu.org.au/) | Call 08 8970 5155 or email [intake@yalu.org.au](mailto:intake@yalu.org.au)
- [Tangentyere](https://tangentyere.org.au/) – Alice Springs (tangentyere.org.au/) | Call 08 8951 4222 or email [kinshipcare@tangentyere.org.au](mailto:kinshipcare@tangentyere.org.au)
- [Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council](https://npywc.org.au/) – Alice Springs (npywc.org.au/) | Call 08 8958 2308 or email [cap.teamleader@npywc.org.au](mailto:cap.teamleader@npywc.org.au)
- [Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation](https://julalikari.org.au/) – Tennant Creek (julalikari.org.au/) | Call 08 8962 2699 or email [cfss@julalikari.com.au](mailto:cfss@julalikari.com.au)