



NC DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES**

Division of Social Services

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services STEP Up: Skills Training for Experienced Professionals

Participant Workbook Module Two: Policy, Practice, and Law

June 2026



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Instructions

This course was designed to guide child welfare professionals through the knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed to engage with families in need of child protection services. The workbook is structured to help you engage in the lesson through reflection and analysis throughout each module of training. Have this workbook readily available as you go through each module to create a long-lasting resource you can reference in the future.

If you are using this workbook electronically: workbook pages have text boxes for you to add notes and reflections. Due to formatting, if you are typing in these boxes, blank lines will be “pushed” forward onto the next page. To correct this, when you are done typing in the text box, you may use the delete key to remove extra lines.

Training Overview

STEP Up: Skills Training for Experienced Professionals is designed to strengthen and refine the knowledge, skills, and behaviors of child welfare professionals through structured, practice-focused learning.

Training sessions are intentionally designed to support active engagement, reflection, and application. Each module includes a combination of lecture, guided discussion, individual practical application, and collaborative debrief. This structure allows participants to connect new learning to their existing experience and apply concepts directly to their daily practice.

Attendance and participation are essential to the learning experience. If an emergency prevents attendance, participants are responsible for notifying the trainer and their supervisor as soon as possible and developing a plan to address missed content.

Learning Expectations

STEP Up builds on prior experience in child welfare practice. Participants are expected to:

- Engage actively in discussions and activities
- Reflect on their current practice and identify areas for growth
- Apply learning to real-world scenarios
- Collaborate with peers to strengthen practice and shared understanding

Transfer of Learning

A core component of STEP Up is the application of learning to practice. Throughout the training, participants will engage in structured reflection and practical application activities designed to support transfer of learning.

Participants will:

- Reflect on how new concepts align with their current work
- Identify specific actions to strengthen their practice
- Apply learning between sessions, when applicable

- Engage in peer discussion and collaborative problem-solving
- Supervisors and ongoing professional supports play a critical role in reinforcing learning and supporting continued development in the workplace.

All matters as stated above are subject to change due to unforeseen circumstances, and with approval.

STEP Up Module Two Learning Objectives

Module 2
Policy, Practice, and Law
Upon completion of this course, learners will be able to: • Discuss how the court and child welfare agency work together to achieve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and families. • Identify and analyze data that directly impacts the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families. • Apply social work values as anchored by the core values in the North Carolina Child Welfare Practice Model. • Organize artifacts and information in preparation for court proceedings and hearings according to North Carolina policy and law.

Module Two Agenda

Module Two: Policy, Practice, and Law

Module Timing: 180 Minutes

Welcome

Section 1: Historical and Legal Basis for Child Welfare Services

Section 2: Balancing Act: Managing System Pressures and Ambiguities

Section 3: Court Preparedness and Effective Testimony

Section 4: Practice and Application

Section 5: Debrief and Collaborative Practice

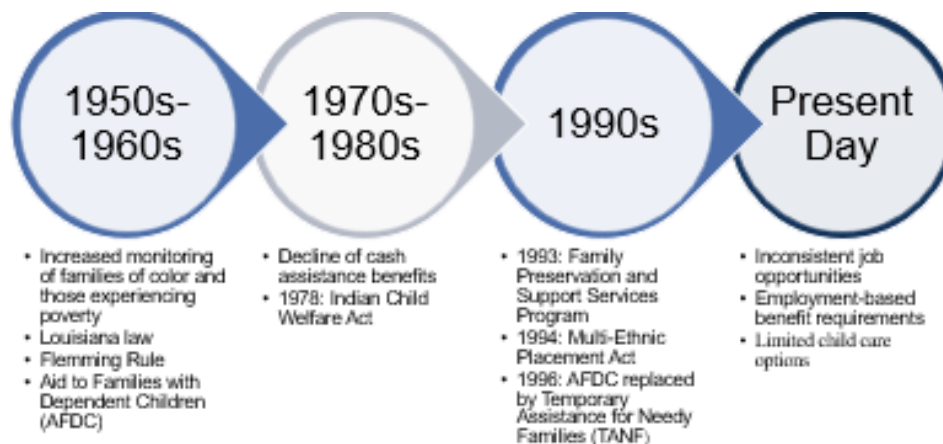
STEP Up: Skills Training for Experienced Professionals: Module Two: Policy, Practice, and Law

STEP Up Course Series Outline and Structure



Section 1: Historical and Legal Basis for Child Welfare Services

History of Child Welfare



It is important to recognize that throughout history, families, their networks, and communities have worked together to provide safety, permanency, and well-being for children and families outside of the formal system. There are many instances of relatives and kin caring for children without government or court involvement.

Notes

Handout: History of Child Welfare

1950s-1960s

- Increased monitoring on families of color and those experiencing poverty
- Louisiana law: Louisiana passed a “suitable home” law that denied Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) funding to women who had children outside of marriage. 80-90% of those children were black
- Flemming Rule
- Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)

1970s-1980s

- Decline of cash assistance benefits
- 1978: Indian Child Welfare Act

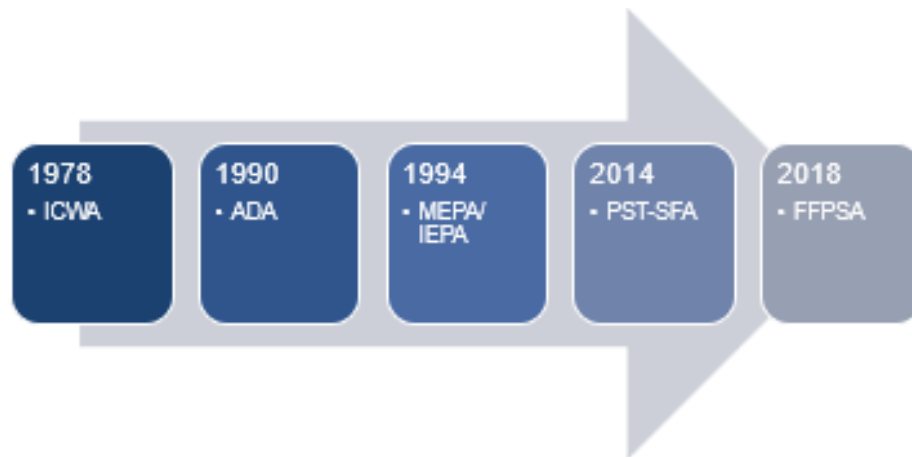
1990s

- 1993: Family Preservation and Support Services Program
- 1994: Multi-Ethnic Placement Act
- 1996: AFDC replaced by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

Present Day

- Inconsistent job opportunities
- Employment-based benefit requirements

Special Legal Considerations



The **Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)** specifically protects Native American children by requiring heightened procedural safeguards, including tribal notification, the right to legal counsel, active state efforts to prevent family disruption, and placement preferences that honor familial and tribal connections, all aimed at preserving cultural identity and tribal sovereignty.

The **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** mandates non-discriminatory access to child welfare services and supports for children with disabilities.

The **Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA)** and its Interethnic Provisions (IEPA) safeguard children in foster care and adoption from discrimination based on race, color, or national origin, ensuring that placement decisions prioritize the child's best interests rather than demographic considerations.

The **Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)** ensure services meet educational and developmental needs.

Additionally, MEPA's IEPA provisions reinforce equitable service access for children across racial and ethnic lines, emphasizing timely and unbiased evaluations for foster care or adoption.

The **Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (PST-SFA)** prioritizes early identification and intervention for youth at risk of exploitation, obligating child welfare agencies to implement comprehensive screening, documentation, and services tailored to protect these children from trafficking and related harms.

The **Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA)** represents a preventive approach, enabling states to allocate federal funding toward mental health and substance abuse programs, parenting education, and kinship support with the goal of reducing foster care placements.

Child Maltreatment Defined

Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA)

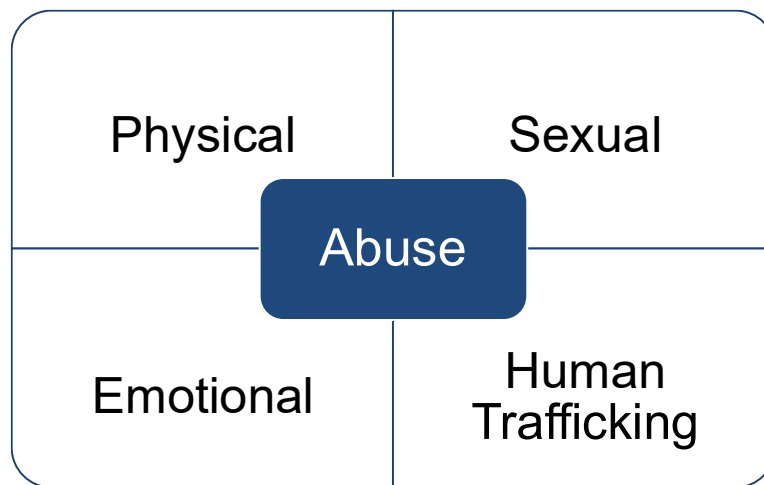
Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation..., or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm" (42 U.S.C. 5101 note, §3).

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

A preventable act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent, caretaker, or other person in a custodial role that results in harm, potential harm or threat of harm to a child.

What commonalities do you see between these definitions?

Major Types of Child Abuse



Handout: Major Types of Abuse

The Child Welfare Information Gateway offers the following definitions:

Physical abuse is a nonaccidental physical injury to a child caused by a parent, caretaker, or other person responsible for a child and can include punching, beating, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking, hitting (with a hand, stick, strap, or other object), burning, or otherwise causing physical harm. Physical discipline, such as spanking or paddling, is not considered abuse as long as it is reasonable and causes no bodily injury to the child. Injuries from physical abuse could range from minor bruises to severe fractures or death.

Sexual abuse includes activities by a parent or other caretaker, such as fondling a child's genitals, penetration, incest, rape, sodomy, indecent exposure, and exploitation through prostitution or the production of pornographic materials.

Emotional abuse (or psychological abuse) is a pattern of behavior that impairs a child's emotional development or sense of self-worth. This may include constant criticism, threats, or rejection, and withholding love, support, or guidance. Emotional abuse is often difficult to prove, and, therefore, child protective services may not be able to intervene without evidence of harm or mental injury to the child.

Human trafficking is considered a form of modern slavery and includes both sex trafficking and labor trafficking. Sex trafficking is recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining someone for a commercial sex act, such as prostitution, pornography, or stripping. Labor trafficking is forced labor, including drug dealing, begging, or working long hours for little pay. Although human trafficking includes victims of any sex, age, race/ ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, children involved in child welfare, including children who are in out-of-home care, are especially vulnerable

Child Neglect

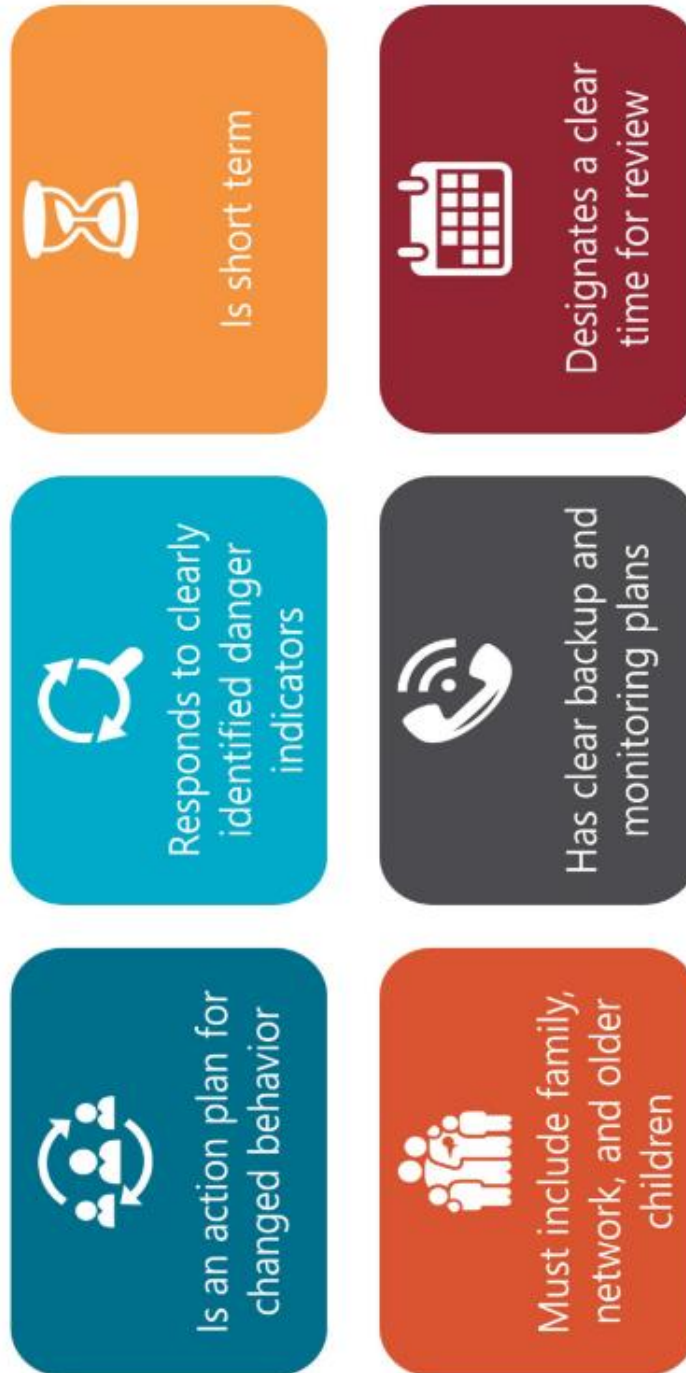
The failure of a parent or other caretaker to provide for a child's basic needs.

Neglect is by far the most prevalent form of maltreatment reported both nationwide and in North Carolina. In 2020, over 85 percent of CPS Assessment cases responded to neglect. Child neglect is the inability of a parent or caretaker to meet a child's basic needs, potentially placing the child at risk of serious harm. Maltreatment can be the commission or omission of an act. Neglect is more commonly an omission and, therefore, can be more difficult to identify and define appropriately.

Notes

Safety Planning

Handout: A Safety Plan

A SAFETY PLAN . . .

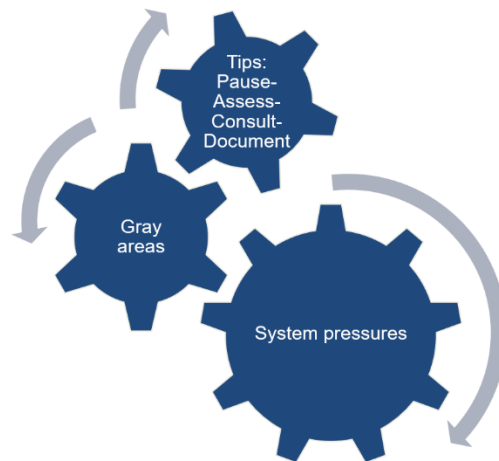
Three Things to Remember about Safety Plans



What happens as a system when we all understand that safety and services are not the same thing as danger indicators and safety planning?

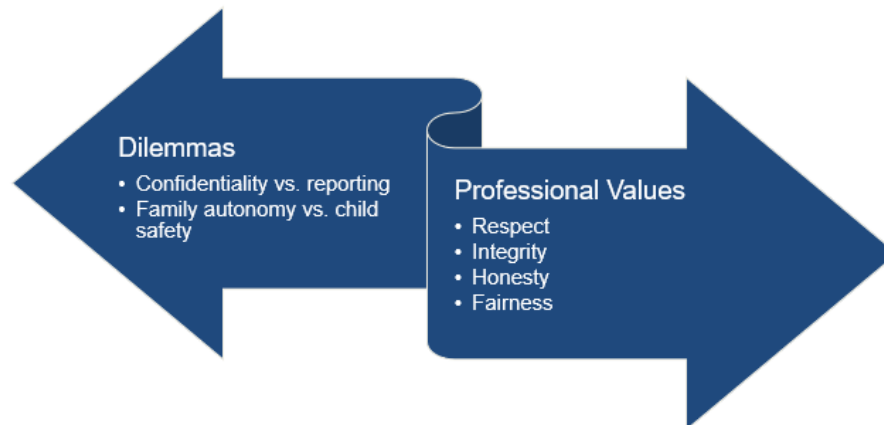
Section 2: Balancing Act: Managing System Pressures and Ambiguities

Responding to System Pressures and Navigating Gray Areas in Practice



You receive a conflicting report about a child's safety. How would you proceed?

Ethical Dilemmas and Professional Values



Ethics in child welfare are about balancing compassion with accountability. Always keep the child's safety and the family's humanity in view. Ethical dilemmas are a part of daily life in child welfare. They happen when our professional responsibilities, agency policy, and our own values don't perfectly align. The key is learning how to navigate those tensions with clarity and professionalism.

Think of an ethical dilemma you've faced in the past year. Which professional value guided your decision? What would you do differently now?

Core Value: Engaging Families as Partners



Work with families, not
against families.



"Partnership is not a
technique-it is a stance of
humility and respect
toward the families we
serve."

-Jordan Institute for Families, Family-
Centered Practice Framework

Core Values: Principles of Partnership

Partnership is the foundation of Family-Centered Practice. Partnership means collaborating with families, not imposing solutions.

- Everyone desires respect
- Everyone needs to be heard
- Everyone has strengths
- Judgments can wait
- Partners share power
- Partnership is a process

Notes

Strategic Choices: Two-Level Decision-Making Process



Two-level decision making helps to ensure safety, policy compliance, and support for the caseworker's professional development. You and your supervisor work together through case staffing and two-level decision-making. This collaboration helps ensure safety, policy compliance, and support for your professional development

Notes

Maintaining Structures for Decision-Making Processes



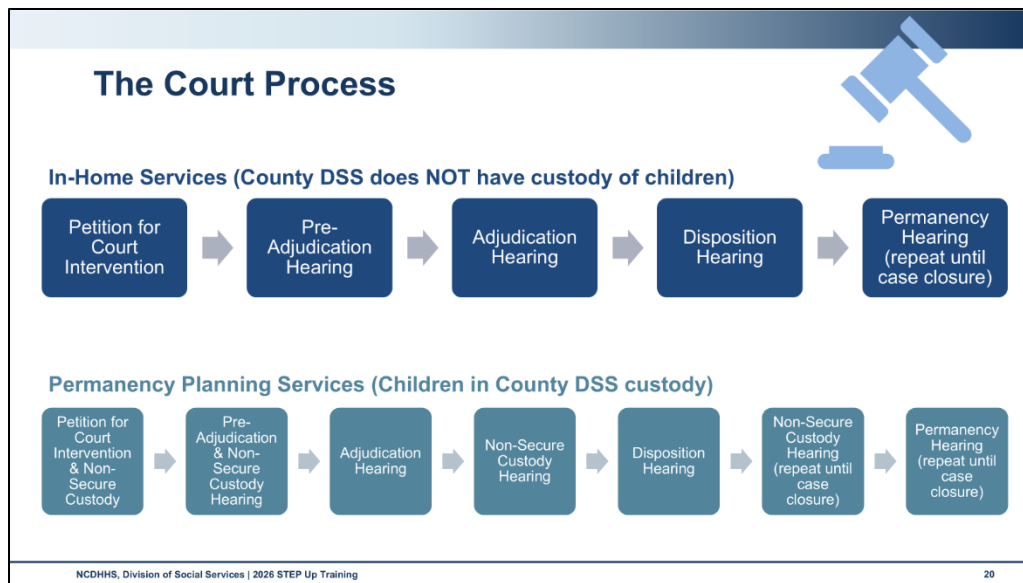
Case staffing can occur in various forms. The focus of case staffing is to ensure that the child welfare worker follows North Carolina's child welfare policy, addresses family needs, and monitors risk, safety, and family progress. Supervision provides coaching and support. To ensure that every case includes all required documentation and two-level decision-making, each county agency should have a process in place to indicate supervisory review of a case for compliance with policy and protocol.

Notes

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Section 3: Court Preparedness and Effective Testimony

The Court Process



Notes

Handout: The Court Process

Proceeding	Timeframe	Overview
Petition	Initiates court process	Your agency must file a petition requesting adjudication of abuse, neglect, and/or dependency: When safety-related circumstances necessitate the need for immediate removal. Due to the family's unwillingness to accept critically needed services, and those services are necessary to keep the family intact. When, despite agency efforts to provide services, the family has made no progress towards providing adequate care for the child, and those services are necessary to keep the family intact.
Adjudicatory hearing	No later than 60 days from the filing of the petition, unless continued for cause	At the adjudication hearing, the court decides whether CPS can prove the allegations in its petition. The child welfare agency's attorney will present evidence through the testimony of the social worker, law enforcement officers, or other witnesses, including any experts. Documents such as medical records or photographs also may be entered into evidence. The attorneys for the parents and the child will have the right to question or cross-examine the witnesses and to present evidence. The parents may testify, as may other family members or neighbors who have knowledge of the facts alleged in the petition or of the care the parents provided their children.
Dispositional Hearing	Immediately following adjudication. If not, it shall be concluded within 30 days of the adjudication hearing	At the dispositional hearing, the judge decides what the best plan is for the child and what services will be ordered. For example, the court may enter an order that mandates counseling and rehabilitative services. The judge will

		also decide where the child will live, whether there are any relatives that can help take care of the child, and what type of visits the parent will have with their child. The judge may also order each parent to receive certain services, such as substance abuse treatment, parenting classes, or domestic violence counseling. Essentially, the dispositional hearing determines what will be required to resolve the problems that led to CPS intervention.
Initial Reviews	Within 90 days of the dispositional hearing	The review hearing is an opportunity to evaluate the progress that has been made toward completing the case plan and any court orders and to revise the plan as needed. At each review hearing, the judge is given information about what each parent has been doing, how the child is doing, and whether there are any needs that haven't been addressed. The court must decide if the plan that was made during disposition is working and if any changes are needed. Review hearings should guide the case to permanency for the child. Review Hearings occur for cases where children remain in their homes and are not in DSS custody.
Ongoing reviews	At least every 6 months after the initial review	Same as the initial hearing outlined above.
Permanency Planning Review Hearings	Initial within 90 days of dispositional hearing and ongoing every 6 months thereafter	Proceedings held for children in out-of-home placement. Much like the Review Hearings outlined above. Additionally, permanent plans are set and reviewed through this process. Permanency Planning Review Hearings cease after TPR if the court determines

		there is no longer a need for concurrent planning.
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While the court process follows a prescribed path, there is nuance as to the timeframes depending upon when a child enters custody.

It is possible that DSS initiates court proceedings during In-Home Services by filing a juvenile petition without filing for non-secure custody. When this occurs, the process is followed as outlined. It is possible that during the disposition or at a subsequent review hearing, the court may order that the child enter foster care. When this occurs, the case continues in the established court process, and the review hearings become “Permanency Planning Review Hearings.”

If the child enters foster care by way of a non-secure custody order, a separate court process is enacted. This process can occur at either the CPS Assessment or In-Home Services stage of the child welfare process.

Proceeding	Timeframe	Overview
Non-Secure Custody Order	Initiates entry into foster care	Accompanies a petition alleging abuse/neglect/dependency and immediate safety needs of the children
Initial Hearing/Non-Secure Custody Hearing	Within 7 days of non-secure. May continue up to 10 business days with the consent of the parent and GAL, if appointed	The main purpose of the initial hearing is to determine whether the child should be placed in substitute care or remain with or be returned to the parents pending further proceedings. The critical issue is whether measures can be put in place to ensure the child's safety.
Second Hearing on Continued Non-Secure Custody	Within 7 business days of the initial non-secure hearing	Determine the need for continued non-secure custody. Inquiry as to the location of parents, engagement of relatives to provide placement, the safety of children who remain in the removal parents' home, MEPA, and ICWA
Subsequent Non-Secure Custody Hearings	Occur at least every 30 calendar days after the	Same as the second hearing outlined above.

	second hearing until the dispositional hearing Subsequent hearings can be waived only with the consent of the parents and GAL.	
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Termination of Parental Rights

The Involuntary Termination of Parental Rights process follows a similar court process outlined above.

Proceeding	Timeframe	Overview
TPR Petition	Initiates TPR proceedings Within 60 days of the hearing setting adoption as the permanent plan If a child has been in out-of-home placement for 12 of the most recent 22 months if no exception exists	Outlines reasonable efforts to reunify with parents, continuation of safety threats, and the ways in which TPR is in the best interest of the child.
TPR Hearing	No later than 90 days from filing the petition or motion	A termination of parental rights (TPR) hearing is divided into two stages, adjudication and disposition. At adjudication, the party requesting TPR must prove to the judge by clear and convincing evidence that grounds exist for termination. If the judge decides that grounds do not exist, the judge will dismiss the case. If the judge decides that the grounds do exist, the judge moves to the disposition stage and must decide whether TPR is in the child's best interest.
Post TPR Hearing	Within 6 months after the TPR order has been entered and ongoing every 6 months thereafter	Ensure that every reasonable effort is being made to finalize the permanent plan for the child.

Foster Care 18-21 Program

When a young adult enters the Foster Care 18-21 program by signing a Voluntary Placement Agreement (DSS-597), court reviews continue. The initial court review hearing occurs within 90 days of signing the VPA, and additional hearings occur at the discretion of the court, although the young adult or DSS may request additional hearings at any time. No GAL is appointed for Foster Care 18-21 cases.

The Workers' Role in Court Proceedings**Video: Getting Ready for Court**

Watch the video: Getting ready for court part 1: Tips for Child Welfare Professionals

Activity: The Worker's Role in Court Proceedings

Purpose: To encourage reflection on how you see your role in court, your strengths, and opportunities for growth

What do you see as your role in court?

What are your strengths as it relates to court involvement?

Where are there opportunities for growth in regard to working with the courts?

For guidance before, during and after court, access pages 51-57 of

Enhanced Resource Guidelines: Child Welfare Caseworkers' Companion Guide

Section 4: Individual Practice and Application

Practice and Application- Ethical Dilemmas

Activity: Practice and Application

Reflect on an ethical dilemma you've encountered in your work. You'll consider how your values, legal responsibilities, and supervisory support influenced your decision-making.

- Recall an ethical dilemma you faced in your role.
- Write a brief summary of the situation.
 - What was the dilemma?
 - What options did you consider?
 - What decision did you make?
 - What influenced your decision?

Notes

Reflect on what you learned and how you might approach it differently.

Map Your Expertise

Practice and Application-Map Your Expertise

Review the UNC Child Welfare System Overview document.
Highlight sections that describe your role.
Mark your position on the continuum map.
Identify two roles you collaborate with and note connections.
Reflect on: • How does your role influence court readiness and collaboration? • What data do you use? • How do your values show up in your work?
Summarize your position and influence.

In this activity, you will use the UNC School of Government's overview of the North Carolina Child Welfare System to better understand where your role fits within the broader system. You'll examine how your work connects to others, supports court collaboration, and is influenced by data and shared values.

Instructions for Review

- Review the UNC Child Welfare System Overview found here: https://www.sog.unc.edu/sites/default/files/2025_AND_01_Overview_of_the_North_Carolina_Child_Welfare_System_2025.pdf
- As you read, highlight or note sections that describe responsibilities similar to your own role
 - Look for descriptions of duties, decision-making responsibilities, and interaction with families or the court system
- The excerpt below (pages 1.15 – 1.16 of the UNC Child Welfare System Overview) is an example of sections that may be specific to your role. Review the entire document and highlight additional sections that describe your role.

Protective Services

DSS's responsibility for protective services include

- Screening reports of suspected abuse, neglect, or dependency
- Performing assessments
- Providing casework services
- Providing other counseling services to parents, guardians, or other caretakers to help those individuals and the court prevent abuse or neglect; improve the quality of childcare; be more adequate parents, guardians, or caretakers; and preserve and stabilize family life

Intake and Screening

DSS has the duty to screen reports of suspected child abuse, neglect, or dependency to determine whether the facts reported, if true, meet the statutory definitions of abuse, neglect, or dependency.” (UNC Child Welfare System Overview page 1.15 – 1.16)

Continued Activity Instructions

- Where does your role fit within the overall lifecycle of a child welfare case?
- Identify two roles you collaborate with and note connections.

Notes**How does your role influence court readiness and collaboration?****What data do you use?****How do your values show up in your work?**

Summarize your position and influence.

Section 5: Debrief and Collaborative Practice

Activity: Gallery Walk Discussions



What common themes emerged across rooms?

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How do these insights connect to your role and responsibilities?

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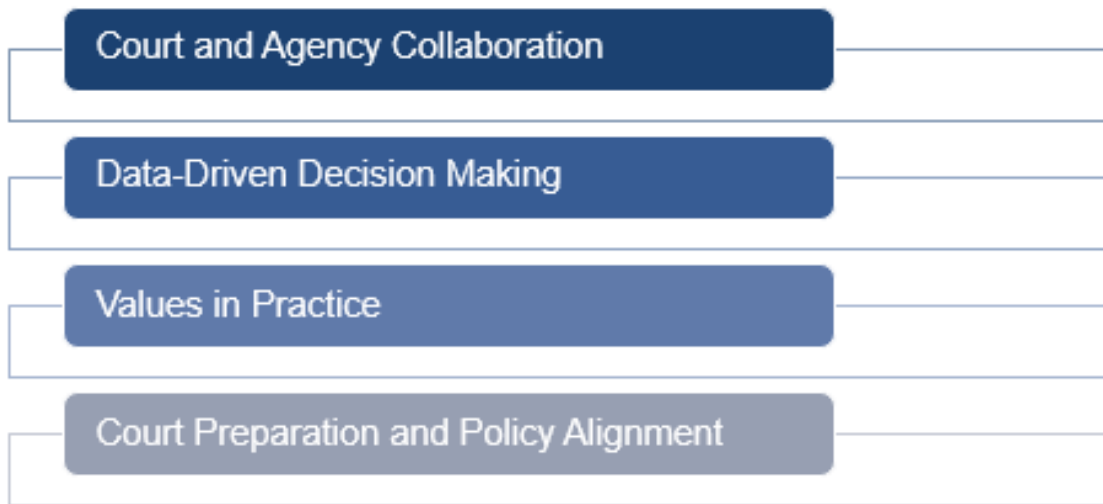
What strategies can strengthen collaboration and ethical practice?

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How can data and values inform decisions across the continuum?

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Key Takeaways



Notes

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