

# The Court System and Relationship Education: What's the Connection?

In the United States there were 2.1 million incoming juvenile court cases (including truancy, dependency/neglect, and drug offenses) and an estimated 5.7 million incoming domestic court cases (marital dissolution, paternity, custody, support visitation, adoption and restraining orders) in 2008. Learning new skills may help the individuals involved in these cases to function better in society and manage conflict on their own. Marriage/relationship education (MRE) teaches skills that can help individuals communicate more effectively, resolve conflict constructively, recognize healthy boundaries, and grasp the concept of a healthy relationship. Emotional intelligence skills (how to recognize and regulate emotions) are also taught in many MRE curricula.

Juveniles, teen parents, young adults aging out of foster care, adult parents, individuals and couples can all benefit from targeted relationship education. These populations are typically seen in some of the following court cases:

- Marital separation, divorce, child support or child custody
- Child dependency and neglect, where children are being removed from their biological parents and placed in some form of out-of-home care
- Juvenile drug court, truancy or delinquency

Judges may be interested in referring some of these individuals to MRE programs or adding MRE classes to a list of services available to those who have been court ordered to attend a certain number of hours of psychoeducation. Psychoeducation is focused on skill building with the expectation that those skills are



utilized to manage problems individually. It is rooted in psychological theory. This Tip Sheet provides an overview of the United States court system and offers tips for how relationship educators can approach judges and court staff to form a partnership.

## Understanding the court system

Family and child-related law is state law, so in every state you will work with state court judges. Each state, however, decides how its courts are set up and organizes cases differently. Because cases will be assigned to a particular type of court, you need to know what court to look for. Certain types of cases are also called by different names. For instance, divorce or “dissolution of marriage” (the legal term) could be called “Family Law” or “Domestic Relations.” The table below provides an example of how different types of courts can hear the same types of cases. Thus, it is very important to become familiar with your state’s court system.

State	Juvenile Cases are heard in:	Family Law/Domestic Relations are heard in:
Georgia	Juvenile Court	Superior Court
Alaska	Superior Court	Superior Court
Missouri	Circuit Court	Circuit Court
Tennessee	Juvenile Court or General Session Court, for different case types	Circuit Court, or Chancery Court, or General Sessions Courts. Each hears different case types.
New York	Family Court	Supreme Court (dissolution) or Family Court (domestic relations) or Surrogates Court (adoption)
Texas	District Court (some juvenile); Constitutional County Court (other juvenile); County Law Court (some counties)	District Court

It helps to know that in each location, the judges make a decision on how to split cases among them. All family law cases in one county might be heard by one judge, for example. In the next county, the judges may choose to each hear a portion of the family law cases. Every judge then makes an individual decision how to handle cases heard in his or her court. Since each judge is the authority in his or her own court, you can work with judges only on the cases they personally hear. In some states judges are elected; in others they are appointed and removed by higher authorities. Elected judges may be more sensitive to constituents' concerns, but not always.

Every state has an Administrative Office of Courts (AOC), but this office does not make all decisions for the whole state's courts. The role of the AOC varies by state. It is directly affected by what entity the courts are funded through; this can be county or state dollars. In your state, each state court may have a Court Administrator or a County Clerk, or both. These are the professional managers in courts. Court administrators are hired by the judges. States that have County Clerks elect them to keep court records. Some AOC's also provide annual training to Judges.

## Tips

Judges cannot directly order participants to attend specific MRE classes. Instead, they might order individuals to attend a certain number of classes and/or workshops at the individual's own financial expense (unless the classes are free). Then the participants choose from a list of court approved programs and services and decide how to fulfill the order requirements. Judges can also provide referrals. A judge's decision about whether to work with a program is entirely up to him or her. Some judges may not be comfortable with this. They may feel the law is their area of expertise or their only responsibility. Other judges, however, feel a responsibility to make referrals or order participation in social services systems. You might want to sit in on some court sessions to become familiar with the judge and the issues that come up in different cases.

**Know the court system in your state.** To work with the courts, you first need to know what court handles family or juvenile cases in your county. Courts are present in each county, and each state court system is organized differently. Urban and rural courts may also be organized differently. To begin working at the local level, call your county's court information line. Courts also have a main information telephone line. Web research is helpful, too. For information on court structure by state, review this [table](#).

**Talk to the state Administrative Office of Courts and court staff.** Check AOC web sites to see if any initiatives have similar goals to MRE. It is also a good idea to talk with AOC and court staff. Judges often have extremely busy schedules and the staff can refer you to meetings the Judge is part of that relate to your work. They will be familiar with other settings providing opportunities to explain relationship education to judges and others. They can help you understand how different case types

are handled in their district. Most importantly, they may know the judges most likely to be interested in working with your program. You may also want to follow up with them after you have worked with some courts; if they know relationship education is helpful in one location, they might spread the word to other locations. Questions to ask in the first conversation may include:

1. What courts hear juvenile and domestic cases in this state?
2. Which judges handle family law cases or divorce cases?
3. Do any judges currently refer couples to healthy marriage or parenting during legal separation/divorce programs? Which judges do you think might be interested in this?
4. On what days of the week are family cases heard? At what time of day?

### **Offer information on MRE and the consequences of unhealthy relationships.**

Have program information ready in a simple one or two page format. Judges will want to know the skills you will be teaching, the evidence basis for your curriculum and the evidence basis for MRE and teen/adult outcomes. An evaluation report from your program will be helpful too. Judges may want to know your program logistics as well, such as the length of the program and where it is offered. If your program is free, highlight that feature, as the courts often see people who cannot afford to meet their requirements for financial reasons. Although many judges are elected, most feel their commitment is to the law rather than political considerations such as pleasing constituents. Stressing the number of participants your program could serve might be helpful, however.

**Tailor the information to the population the Judge sees in his or her court.**

Talk to judges about the consequences of unhealthy adolescent and adult relationships. Divorcing individuals, or those in a custody dispute, could benefit from learning better conflict resolution skills. Couples who are filing for a legal separation may benefit from attending MRE together or separately. Youth in the justice system frequently have unhealthy home lives and may not know how to spot the signs of unhealthy relationships. Unhealthy adolescent relationships have been linked to criminal behavior, drugs, and problems as adults.

See NHMRC Research Brief [Juvenile Delinquency and Family Structure: Implications for Marriage and Relationship Education](#).

**Provide realistic expectations.** Clarify your program's limitations. Marriage/relationship education is not a domestic violence intervention nor is it an intervention for couples with an open child welfare case. Be sure the judge knows that domestic violence cases typically require specialized services, not simply relationship education. Also ensure the judge knows that MRE is not counseling. Some individuals may need to be in classes that are specialized to their population and not combined with the general community. Encourage judges to ask questions to help them understand and make referrals to your program.

**Referral sheets and certificates of completion.**

Develop a one-page sheet that a judge can use to

track referrals and give information to new referrals. The bottom of the page, containing information about the program, could be torn off and given to a referred person, and the top could be kept in the case file by a judge. Your program should also be prepared to supply a signed certificate of completion that can be shown to the judge.

**Reach out to judges in other ways.** Most areas hold a regional judges' conference. You may be able to attend some sessions so that you can meet judges more easily. The state AOC can give information and advice on this.

More and more judges in courts are getting involved in connecting families and individuals with helpful services. In most locations, the first step is reaching out to judges and their court staff, giving them information about how your program can help, who it can help, and program outcomes. Staff are important gatekeepers. Marriage/relationship education can provide families and individuals in court cases with essential skills to lead healthier and happier lives.

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