



Can the Family Court order me to attend a parenting program?

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When parents separate, disagreements about parenting can sometimes escalate. The Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia and the Family Court of Western Australia (“the Family Court”) focus on the [best interests of children](#) when determining parenting disputes.

One way the Court emphasises that aim is by ordering a parent, or both parents, to complete a parenting program. These programs are not a punishment. Each program is different; however, generally they are designed to give parents practical tools to help them improve communication, reduce conflict and keep the best interests of the children at the centre of decision-making.

Guiding principles when making parenting orders

The Family Court has broad powers to make parenting orders that it considers appropriate to secure a child’s best interests. That can include ordering counselling or education, such as a post-separation parenting program.

The Court relies on the core principles that children should be protected from harm, encouraged to have a meaningful relationship with both parents where safe, and supported by adults who can communicate and make decisions in a child-focused way.

When the Family Court orders a parenting program

The Court usually considers a parenting program where there is evidence that education or skills training will reduce risk of harm or improve outcomes for the child.

Some of the common scenarios where the Court may order parents to complete a parenting program include:

persistent conflict between parents in the presence of children;

poor or hostile communication that undermines day-to-day arrangements;

concerns about a child's emotional or behavioural well-being after separation;

allegations or findings of [family violence or coercive control](#);

limited insight into the impact of conflict on a child's development and wellbeing;

a need for parents to learn practical co-parenting strategies.

Types of parenting programs

Each parenting program will have different content and different intended outcomes. However, you may find that there are a number of organisations that offer the same program (e.g. [the Circle of Security parenting program](#)). The Family Court may refer to community organisations, Family Relationship Centres or private practitioners with suitable qualifications.

Typical options include:

post-separation parenting programs that cover child development, routines and transitions;

high-conflict courses dealing with triggers, boundaries and de-escalation;

family violence education where safety planning and risk are a priority;

communication and co-parenting skills workshops, sometimes delivered online.

What a parenting program usually involves

Most programs are skills-based and practical. Parents can expect content such as:

understanding how different ages experience separation and conflict;

techniques for calm and respectful communication;

how to respond to challenging behaviours more effectively;

strategies to reduce conflict during [child handovers](#) and decision-making;

ways to support a child's emotional needs; and where relevant,

information about identifying and responding to family violence.

Attendance and completion are usually confirmed to the Family Court by the provider of the program. This is usually through a Certificate of Attendance.

Interim orders and timing

Parenting programs are often ordered on an interim basis so parents can build skills early rather than waiting for a final hearing. Completing a program before mediation or a family report can also help narrow disputes and create more workable proposals, particularly around routines, holidays, communication and dispute resolution clauses.

Further reading

- [Interim hearings and interim orders in family law matters](#)
- [Family Reports in parenting proceedings](#)
- [What is Family Dispute Resolution \(FDR\)?](#)

Is attendance mandatory?

If the Family Court orders you to attend a parenting program, it is a binding parenting order. Much the same as if you were ordered to complete alcohol/drug testing or seek a psychiatric assessment. You must make genuine efforts to enrol, attend and complete the requirements.

If access is difficult due to cost, distance, or capacity, you should propose an equivalent program and keep records of your efforts.

Consequences of not complying with Court orders

Failure to comply without a reasonable excuse can lead to serious outcomes. The Court may:

adjourn the case until you complete the program;

order your attendance at a different or additional program;

vary parenting arrangements to reduce risk to the child;

consider your non-compliance when assessing your willingness to support your child's relationship with the other parent;
and, in more serious cases,

make costs or enforcement orders.

You can read more about non-compliance in our earlier blog, ["Breaching Family court orders – what can I do?"](#)

How parenting programs can help your case

Completing a program can demonstrate insight, cooperation and a child-focused approach. Parents who engage meaningfully often report practical improvements, including:

calmer communication and clearer boundaries;

reduced conflict around pick-ups, drop-offs and decision-making;

better consistency of routines across households;

a stronger focus on the child's needs instead of adult grievances;

more workable [parenting plans and consent orders](#).

Costs considerations

Some community programs are free or low-cost. Private providers may charge fees. In most cases, each parent is responsible for paying their own program fees.

If you cannot afford to attend the program or are unable to take time off work, you should speak to your lawyer as soon as possible. Acting early increases your chances of being able to find an alternative rather than possibly delaying your matter.

Safety considerations

It is not recommended that you and the other parent attend the same program at the same provider. This will allow both parties the freedom to express themselves in a safe and non-judgmental environment.

Where family violence is an issue, safety is the priority. The Court may also order other protective measures, including [supervised time](#), communication limits, safety planning and referrals to specialist services.

You should provide a copy of any intervention order or no-contact condition to ensure any program attendance complies with those orders.

Frequently asked questions: Court-ordered parenting programs

Do both parents have to attend the same program?

Not always. The Court decides based on what best supports the child.

Can I complete a parenting program online?

Yes, many programs offer online options for safety or convenience.

Will the provider tell the Court what I said?

Providers usually only confirm whether you attended and completed the program. They may report serious safety or compliance concerns if required.

What if I cannot get into the named program in time?

Show evidence of attempts to enrol and suggest a suitable alternative. Seek directions from the Court if delay is unavoidable.

Get help from a family lawyer

The Family Court can order parenting courses where doing so supports a child's best interests. While it may feel confronting to be sent to a program, many parents find the skills practical and confidence-building.

Early engagement, honest effort and evidence of completion can improve outcomes for children and help resolve parenting disputes more quickly. If you are unsure about your obligations or which program to choose, seek legal advice from a family lawyer

experienced in parenting matters.

The information contained in this article is of general nature and should not be construed as legal advice. If you require further information, advice or assistance for your specific circumstances, please contact us.