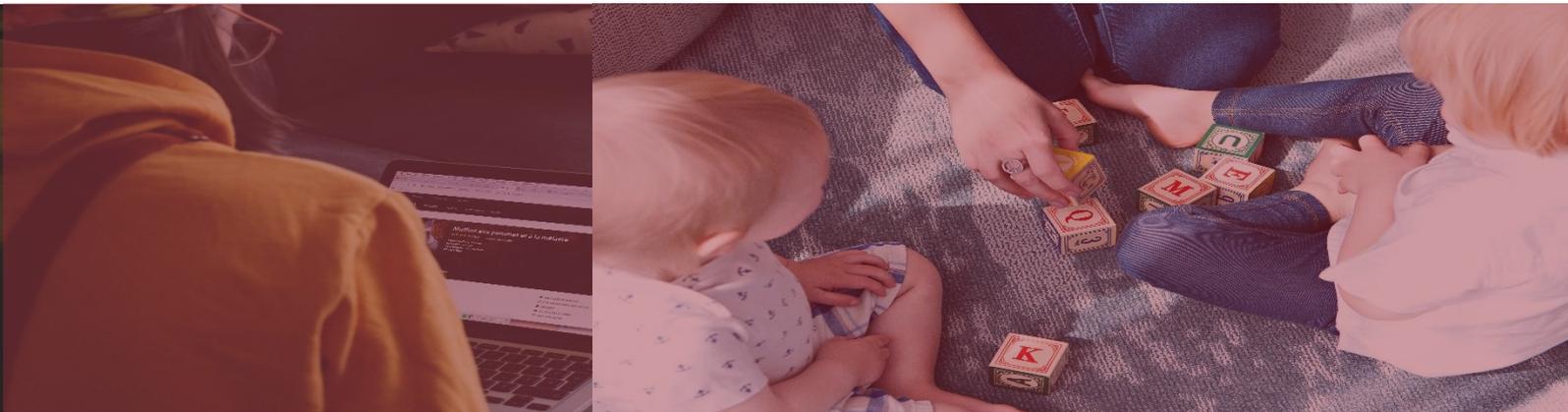


# Study of Virtual Child Welfare Hearings Facilitating Trauma-Responsive Virtual Hearings for Dependency Cases

## April 2022



**Question:** What conditions and practices can dependency courts put in place to facilitate virtual hearings that are responsive to the trauma families and children have experienced?

**Answer:** Through careful considerations of technology, open and clear communication, and realistic expectations, dependency courts can facilitate virtual hearings that not only respond to impacts of past traumas experienced by families involved in the child welfare system, but also avoid creating new traumatic experiences.

**Background:** Most families who come to the attention of the child welfare system have experienced trauma in their lives, and for many, court involvement exacerbates their trauma.<sup>1, 2</sup> Experiences of trauma impact the way individuals interact with and react to the world around them. Individuals who have experienced trauma may experience feelings of anxiety or irritability, have difficulty focusing, or be withdrawn and detached<sup>3</sup>. Court professionals, including judges, are encouraged to learn how trauma

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<sup>1</sup> Katz, S. (2019). Trauma-informed practice: the future of child welfare? *Widener Commonwealth Law Review*, 28, p. 51-83. Available: <https://scholarshare.temple.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12613/6322/Katz-Journal-Article-2019.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

<sup>2</sup> National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Justice Consortium Attorney Workgroup Subcommittee (2017). Trauma: What child welfare attorneys should know. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. Available:

[https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/trauma\\_what\\_child\\_welfare\\_attorneys\\_need\\_to\\_know.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/trauma_what_child_welfare_attorneys_need_to_know.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014. Available:

[https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA\\_Trauma.pdf](https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf)

manifests and practice strategies for interacting effectively and sensitively with individuals who have experienced trauma.<sup>4</sup> Such strategies are grounded in SAMSHA’s Guiding Principles of Trauma-Informed Care: safety, trustworthiness and transparency; peer support and mutual self-help; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues.<sup>5</sup> There are distinct parallels between trauma-informed hearings and procedural fairness. The critical dimensions of procedural fairness – voice, respect, neutrality, and understanding – overlap with the principles of Trauma-Informed Care. Many of the recommendations for how courts can support procedural fairness<sup>6</sup> are similar to recommendations for how courts can become more trauma-informed.

The COVID-19 pandemic created a traumatic experience in itself. General uncertainty, death of loved ones, financial or stability losses, and social isolation caused emotional distress and created barriers to previously accessible coping mechanisms. During the pandemic, many dependency courts adopted virtual hearings as a strategy to keep cases moving forward in a safe and socially distanced way. Because virtual hearings were a new practice to many courts, there was little guidance on how to implement virtual hearings at all, let alone how to do so in a way that was trauma-responsive.

During the pandemic, the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) studied the experience of families, judges, and court professionals in virtual child welfare proceedings in five states. Researchers observed more than 400 virtual hearings and collected information from adolescents, parents, judges, case workers, and attorneys who participated in virtual hearings. This document describes findings from the study through the lens of SAMSHA’s Guiding Principles of Trauma-Informed Care.

## **Analysis    The virtual courtroom can support the psychological, physical, and emotional safety of all hearing participants through judicial engagement practices and the very nature of remote hearings.**

Studies have shown a relationship between judicial engagement of parents and children in hearings and time to permanency.<sup>7, 8</sup> When a judicial officer intentionally engages parents and children, makes them feel welcome in the hearing, and invites them to provide input – either in-person or virtually – the judicial officer is helping to create a psychologically safe environment where hearing participants believe they are free to contribute to a discussion and that their input is valued by the group. The National

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<sup>4</sup> National Child Traumatic Stress Network, NCTSN Bench Card. Available:

[https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/nctsn\\_bench\\_cards\\_for\\_the\\_trauma\\_informed\\_judge.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/nctsn_bench_cards_for_the_trauma_informed_judge.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014. Available:

[https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA\\_Trauma.pdf](https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> LaGratta, E.G. (2015). Procedural Justice: Practical Tips for Courts. Center for Court Innovation. Available:

[https://www.courtinnovation.org/sites/default/files/documents/P\\_J\\_Practical\\_Tips.pdf](https://www.courtinnovation.org/sites/default/files/documents/P_J_Practical_Tips.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Macgill, S. & Summers, A. (2014). Assessing the relationship between the quality of juvenile dependency hearings and foster care placements. *Family Court Review*, 52, 678-685.

<sup>8</sup> Summers, A. & Gatowski, S. (2018). Nevada Hearing Quality Study: Examining the Quality of Child Welfare Court Hearing Practice in Nevada. Carson City, NV: Nevada Court Improvement Program.

Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges defines judicial engagement strategies for in-person hearings in their Enhanced Resource Guidelines.<sup>9</sup> These judicial engagement strategies are very possible to implement virtually, and in NCSC's study of virtual child welfare hearings, researchers observed judges speaking directly to mothers and fathers and addressing them by name in most of the more than 400 hearings observed. Of the 83 parents surveyed, 77% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable enough to say what they really thought in the virtual hearing.

In most cases, an individual's physical safety is protected by the very nature of virtual hearings; they allow for social distancing and for participating in a hearing from a location with fewer triggers and increased access to coping mechanisms. Of the parents surveyed in NCSC's study of virtual child welfare hearings, about 80% participated from their home because their home was either the most comfortable or convenient place for them to participate; however, there were several instances in virtual hearing observations where parties were joining from public spaces, such as public transportation or stores, or from places of employment. For a trauma-responsive hearing, it is important that the parties be in locations where they feel safe and can participate freely and privately, without distraction. Attorneys and caseworkers reported that distractions were one of the most significant drawbacks to virtual hearings for their clients. Judges can support the physical safety of parties by asking where they are joining the virtual hearing from, and whether the individual feels safe and able to meaningfully engage in the hearing from that location. In the study of virtual child welfare hearings, it was extremely rare for judges to inquire about the location of parties, though this simple act can help determine whether a parent or young person is able to meaningfully engage in the virtual hearing.

The virtual courtroom cut-off the convenient and common practice of meeting face-to-face with clients just prior to a hearing. Attorneys were required to adapt by developing or increasing other methods for communicating with clients before a hearing. This activity can be particularly difficult when families are experiencing housing insecurity or do not have reliable means for communication. For those reasons, it is important to inquire as to whether a client has had the opportunity to speak with their attorney prior to the hearing, and for the court to provide opportunities during the hearing, like breakout rooms, where individuals can consult privately with their attorney. Not all virtual platforms enable breakout rooms, communication between individuals in hybrid hearings can be challenging, and individuals cannot call their attorney if they are using their phone to participate in the hearing; courts must build in opportunities for client and attorney communication and make those opportunities clear to attorneys as well as their clients. Explaining at the beginning of a hearing what an individual can do if they want to talk to their attorney or how they will know that their attorney wants to talk to them will help clarify those opportunities.

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<sup>9</sup> National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. (2016). Enhanced Resource Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases.

Virtual hearings also provide unique opportunities to support the emotional safety of families and cultivate a healing environment. On a virtual hearing platform, all hearing participants take up an equal amount of space on the screen, and the squares are arranged in a way that removes positional power – as opposed to the in-person courtroom where the judge is often on a raised level and the attorneys are on opposing sides. The virtual courtroom supports the ideal problem-solving and non-adversarial nature of child welfare proceedings, where all participants are working together for the best outcome for the children and families. Some of the young people interviewed for the study of virtual child welfare hearings stated that it was easier for them to speak up when they were not in-person and that virtual hearings reduced their anxiety. Virtual hearings also allow for support persons, including professional counselors, to attend hearings with their client to provide real time assistance as needed. Sometimes these support people attend while being physically present with their client, and other times, the support people attend virtually. In some of the virtual hearings observed, judges asked if anyone else was in the room and, depending on the court’s confidentiality requirement, some judges told the individuals on video that no one else was permitted to be with them. Courts are encouraged to consider when a support person may be beneficial for the parent or child and develop protocols for allowing their participation as an accommodation in virtual hearings. When judges allow support people to attend with parents and children and acknowledge and affirm the support people in attendance, they are building an emotionally safe hearing environment and acknowledging the family’s strengths.

#### **Tips for Trauma-Informed Virtual Hearings**

- Prioritize judicial engagement strategies
- Ask parties for their location
- Allow and acknowledge support people
- Explain how an individual can communicate with their attorney during the hearing

**Prior to the hearing, ensure all parties receive clear instructions on how to access and participate in the hearing, and during the hearing, identify all hearing participants and ensure they are able to hear and be heard.**

Trustworthiness and transparency are guiding principles of trauma-informed practice, and ensuring parties know what to expect in virtual hearings is one way to implement these principles in a virtual hearing environment. This transparency starts with the hearing notice; along with the date and time of the hearing, parties should receive step-by-step instructions on how to access the hearing, including the link and password if necessary, how to mute and unmute, and expectations for camera use. The functionality of most platforms differs depending on the device used, so instructions should be clear for those accessing the platform via a computer as well as those accessing the platform via a cell phone. In the study of virtual child welfare hearings, most parents reported receiving instructions for accessing the hearing from their attorney, and most of the older youth reported receiving instructions from their case worker. Courts should develop and disseminate clear instructions for accessing hearings for court professionals to share with their clients so that all families are receiving the same information.

Once the parties have accessed the hearing, the judge or another court professional can increase transparency by acknowledging that although virtual hearings may seem different than in-person hearings, they are official court proceedings, and parties are expected to have the same conduct in the virtual hearing environment that they would in-person. The judge or court professional should also confirm that all parties are present; it is beneficial to request each person announce themselves by their name and their role to confirm that everyone can hear and be heard. Allowing each person to announce themselves also helps to provide transparency for those who may be joining by audio only, as it allows them to hear each person's voice. Another way to promote transparency in the hearing is to have each participant change their name to include their first and last name and role in the case. There are several parties in the dependency process, and this provides the opportunities for both families and professionals to learn who is involved in the case. Some courts hold a judicial assistant responsible for this task and can also change phone numbers of people who join only by audio to their name and role. This can be difficult in hybrid hearings; in some of the hybrid hearings observed for the study of virtual child welfare hearings, courtrooms were not equipped with the technology required for parties in-person to see all of the virtual participants. This can lead to confusion and lack of transparency. In those situations, it is especially important that all participants can hear and be heard and are aware of everyone who is in attendance. To that end, part of the introduction should include instructions for how an individual can speak up to alert the court that they have missed part of the discussion, either because they were unable to hear or due to technical difficulties.

A third way to ensure transparency is for the court to be intentional about camera placement. Most of the judges in the study of virtual child welfare hearings used the cameras on top of or in their devices so a front view of their face could be seen clearly; however, other courtrooms were not equipped in the same way. In those courtrooms, judges used overhead cameras or cameras positioned across the room, sometimes through a plexiglass protective barrier. These configurations limited the ability for parties to see the judge's face or read lips which can be a challenge for engagement and for

accessibility. Of course, this line of sight is also limited when the judge is required to wear a mask because others are in the room. In situations where the judge must wear a mask, it is especially important that they sit directly in front of the camera, close enough for the participants to see their eye movements.

#### **Tips for Trauma-Informed Virtual Hearings**

- Courts should develop and disseminate clear instructions for all parties.
- Confirm all hearing participants can hear and be heard.
- Be intentional about camera placement
- Change names on screen to include first and last name and role in the case

## **If possible, offer parties a choice of how they would like to participate in the hearing.**

Empowering individuals by offering the opportunity for them to provide input and make choices related to how their case will proceed reflects a guiding principle of trauma-informed care – empowerment, voice, and choice. Judicial engagement strategies such as asking individuals if they understand and if they have questions about the hearing is one way to promote voice and choice. Giving families options about how they would prefer to participate in the hearing is another way. Early in the pandemic, many jurisdictions were under strict orders to adopt virtual hearings in order to support social distancing. As the restrictions were lifted, some courts were able to offer options, such as hybrid hearings where some parties appear in-person while others appear virtually. Some jurisdictions are crafting court rules to dictate which hearing types are appropriate for virtual or which hearing types must be in-person. Ideally, these court rules would provide for the opportunity for families to have options for how they would participate, when appropriate. For example, some Family Treatment Courts plan to use the option of virtual appearances as incentives, and other jurisdictions plan to conduct in-person hearings only when requested by the parties.

Many judges and court professionals have anecdotally reported an increase in parents appearing in virtual hearings. Although this study of virtual child welfare hearings did not compare appearances before and after the pandemic started, 72% of the 142 attorneys who responded to the survey and 70% of the 260 case workers reported that parents were much more likely or somewhat more likely to appear in virtual hearings than in in-person hearings. It may be that different parents are able to attend virtually than are able to attend in-person; for example, parents who were previously unable to attend hearings in the courthouse due to transportation, employment, or childcare needs are better able to attend virtually, while others who were able to attend in-person are limited in their ability to participate virtually. A limitation of the study of virtual child welfare hearings is that parents who did not attend virtual hearings did not participate in the survey. Providing a choice to parents as to how they participate in a hearing can support engagement for parents with various life experiences.

Most (70%) of the parents who responded to the survey stated that virtual hearings were better or no different than participating in in-person, while most attorneys and case workers stated that their preference for in-person versus virtual depended on the type of hearing. Nearly all respondents stated that courts should continue to use virtual hearings at least sometimes. The most common benefits noted for parents and court professionals was reduction in travel time and travel cost. Court professionals had the added benefit of being able to participate in multiple hearings in different courtrooms or jurisdictions on the same day. Older youth were less likely to prefer virtual hearings, however, they also noted the benefits of not having to travel to the courthouse.

In virtual hearings, individuals without technology limitations also have the choice as to how they will appear – by video or by audio only by calling into the hearing or keeping their video off. In the study of virtual child welfare hearings, mothers, fathers, and children appeared by video more than half of the time, while court professionals including attorneys and caseworkers appeared by video more than 80% of the time. It was not clear whether parents were choosing to keep their video turned off or if they did not have video capabilities; however, more than half of parents reported accessing the hearing by smartphone, so it can be assumed that they did have the ability to join by video but chose not to or did not know how to use the video function on the hearing platform. Only one of the courts that participated in the study of virtual child welfare hearings required parties to have their cameras turned on if possible, and that expectation was pinned in the chat box on in the virtual hearing platforms. Other courts did not require videos to be turned on, although judges would occasionally encourage parents to turn their videos on if they were speaking.

There are different viewpoints as to whether parties should be required to appear by video in virtual hearings. On one hand, when individuals appear by video, they can see everyone present, identify who is speaking, and pick up on important contextual and non-verbal clues. Many judges prefer parties to have their cameras on, especially during testimony, to assess whether others are present. There is also scientific evidence that people remember visual stimuli better than auditory stimuli<sup>10</sup>, thus parties who participate in a virtual hearing by video may be better able to engage and more likely to remember next steps. On the other hand, there are equity concerns with requiring cameras be used. Some individuals may not have technological capability to be on camera or may feel self-conscious about their appearance or uncomfortable showing their home environment. While this concept has not yet been studied in dependency courts, there have been studies in the field of education that describe students of color being more than twice as likely to avoid using their camera in online classes due to concerns about what others may see in the background.<sup>11</sup> There is also scientific evidence that overuse of cameras in virtual meetings can lead to feelings of fatigue which can impact engagement<sup>12</sup>; this finding has implications for judges and attorneys and their ability to remain diligent and attentive while on camera in virtual hearings for multiple hours per day. A balanced approach would be the judge encouraging parents to use the camera by stating the benefits of seeing one another but honoring that an individual may not feel comfortable on camera. Court professionals should be encouraged to turn their camera off for breaks between hearings.

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<sup>10</sup> Cohen, M.A., Horowitz, T.S., & Wolfe, J.M. (2009). Auditory recognition memory is inferior to visual recognition memory. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the United States of America*, 106(14), 6008-6010.

<sup>11</sup> Castelli, F.R. & Sarvary, M.A. (2021). Why students do not turn on their video cameras during online classes and an equitable and inclusive plan to encourage them to do so. *Ecology and Evolution*, 11(8), 3565-3576.

<sup>12</sup> Shockley, K.M., Gabriel, A.S., Roberston, D., Rosen, C.C., Chawla, N., Ganster, M., & Ezerins, M.E. (2021). The fatiguing effects of camera use in virtual meetings: A within-person field experiment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 106(8), 1137-1155.

A final way to provide voice and choice and promote trauma-responsive virtual hearings is to ask participants for feedback on the virtual hearing process. By collecting information from parents and court professionals on the process for accessing virtual hearings, their experience operating the virtual hearing platform and communicating with others during the hearing, and barriers to participation, courts can identify opportunities for improvement that can result in broader access to quality hearings. Several virtual platforms have a confidential polling functionality that can easily be used to collecting this information.

### **Tips for Trauma-Responsive Virtual Hearings**

- Give families options for how they would like to participate in the hearing.
- Encourage camera use but understand limitations.
- Collect information from hearing participants.

## **Summary**

There are several ways to facilitate trauma-informed virtual hearings. Judges are encouraged to prioritize traditional judicial engagement strategies such as referring to family members by their name and giving them opportunity to provide input and ask questions. These strategies may help to better engage parties over the virtual platform. All parties should receive clear instructions on how to access and operate the virtual platform as well as expectations for conduct, dress, and video use. During virtual hearings, judges should be aware of from where individuals are appearing and ensure that they are able to meaningfully engage in the hearing with privacy and test audio capabilities to ensure all participants can hear and be heard. The courtroom technology should be intentionally set up so that all hearing participants clearly see the judge's face. Finally, as courts consider rules for how to use virtual hearings in child welfare cases moving forward, they should integrate voice of families, by asking for their feedback and input on the virtual hearing platform or allowing them to choose how to appear in their hearings. By following these practices, child welfare courts using virtual hearings can support psychological, physical and emotional safety; promote transparency and trustworthiness; and empowering individuals through giving them voice and choice.

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