Do you owe child support?

Author
Northwest Justice Project

Last Review Date
April 9, 2025

Learn how the amount you pay is set, how support can be collected, any deadlines for collecting support, and how to try to change how much you pay.

1. The basics

Who decides how much support I'll pay?

A judge or the Washington State Division of Child Support (DCS) (https://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/division-child-support) decides.

What information does the judge or DCS need from me?

Each parent fills out child support **worksheets.** You put information about your finances and the children's needs. If you're in court, you may also have to fill out a Financial Declaration.

This information gets applied to a child support **schedule**. The schedule sets the support amount based on the parents' income and how many children

you have.

The judge or DCS will usually follow the schedule. They can sometimes consider other things too, though.

> You can find the schedule and worksheets on our page about how child support is set.

How much will I have to pay?

It depends. If your take-home pay is very low, you may only have to pay $50 per child monthly. If a judge (or DCS) decides it would be unjust to order even that little, they can change (can deviate) from the $50 amount to make it even lower.

Before filling out the Worksheets, you can use the DCS Quick Child Support Estimator (https://fortress.wa.gov/dshs/dcs/SSGen/Home/QuickEstimator) to get a rough estimate of the amount of support that DCS might order in your case. For a more accurate calculation, use our Washington Forms Online interview or DCS' Automated Child Support Worksheets (https://fortress.wa.gov/dshs/dcs/SSGen/Home).

> The DCS Quick Estimator may not work if you're asking for a "deviation" from the standard child support calculation. (**Examples:** you might ask for a deviation if you have a 50/50 Parenting Plan, or there are children from other relationships, or each parent has custody of one of the children.)

What's the court process for deciding support?

You'll have court papers delivered to you. The papers will explain how to respond to the court and to whoever filed the case. **You must properly respond** to the papers. The forms you need depend on the type of case it is.

> Answer a few questions on **Get Family and Safety Forms** to get the right forms for your situation.

You'll get notices of important hearing dates. At those hearings, the judge will decide on support and other issues. You must show up and be ready to take part.

> If you don't respond to the case, go to a hearing, or meet a deadline, the judge may give the other party whatever they want, with no input from you.

What's the DCS process for deciding support?

If there's no court order, DCS can set support. DCS may send you a **Notice and Finding of Financial Responsibility (NFFR)**.

It says how much monthly support plus any back support you owe. DCS will also send you a support schedule and worksheets. If you disagree with the NFFR, you must respond.

What's a Notice of Support Owed (NOSO)?

DCS uses a NOSO to set a monthly child support amount when a court orders support but doesn't say how much you must pay. If you disagree with the suggested amount in a NOSO, you should ask for an administrative hearing. You can follow the same steps as if you disagree with a NFFR. **Or** you can schedule a court hearing and notify DCS within 20 days. Try first to settle the amount with your DCS worker.

At the hearing, you must show why DCS' figures are wrong.

How can I get in touch with DCS?

Call their statewide toll-free line at **1-800-442-KIDS** (1-800-442-5437).

Your local office may not be handling your case. The KIDS line will help find which office to call. They can transfer your call.

Do I have rights with DCS for interpretation and translation services?

Yes. Read about interpreters for people with limited English proficiency learn more.

2. If you were never married

We're not sure if I'm the other legal parent. Does it matter?

DCS or a judge must first determine that you're a legal parent before ordering you to pay support.

If you haven't already signed an acknowledgment of parentage, **don't sign one** without getting genetic testing first. You can ask DCS to arrange testing.

If you've already signed an acknowledgment but **now you have doubts**, you can cancel it within **60 days**. After that, you must go to court to challenge the acknowledgment by filing a Petition to Decide Parentage within **4 years** of when the acknowledgment was filed with the Department of Health. Try to get legal help.

If you **don't** sign an acknowledgment of parentage, DCS or the other parent can start a case in court to decide who the legal parents are. You can ask the judge to order genetic testing. The county Prosecuting Attorney's office will represent DCS in court.

We agree I'm the other legal parent. Can we skip going to court?

Yes. You and the other parent can both sign an acknowledgment of parentage and file it with the state Department of Health. Then DCS can set support without filing a court case.

> **Do this only if you're *sure* you're the parent**. Otherwise, let the court decide. Then you can also take care of custody, visitation, and support issues.

3. How payments happen

How should I pay support?

Send your payments to the Washington State Support Registry, P.O. Box 45868, Olympia, WA 98504-5868. This way you'll get proper credit for what you pay. **You may not get credit if you pay the other parent directly.**

If you do pay the other parent directly, or have some other arrangement, keep a written record of payments or an arrangement with DCS to get credit for payments.

()Can they take my pay for child support?

Yes. DCS can take (garnish) up to half of your monthly take-home pay for current support and unpaid back support (called "arrears").

If you get need-based benefits, such as unemployment, Social Security Disability or Workers Comp, DCS can take up to half of that monthly payment.

Can I get DCS to collect less?

Maybe. You must prove that collecting half of your monthly pay doesn't leave enough to cover your basic needs, or your family's.

Can DCS take my welfare benefits to pay for support?

No. DCS **can't** collect support from SSI, TANF, or Refugee Assistance. But your back support grows every month that you don't pay support. If you get any of those benefits and your support payment is based on a much higher income, you can ask DCS to review your child support case for modification.

> **If you get veterans' benefits, Social Security disability, or L & I disability**, these agencies should directly pay your children support. Ask your DCS worker how to get credit for those benefits payments. If they aren't happening, ask how to get them started.

My employer has been taking support from my paycheck but hasn't sent it to DCS. What can I do?

Ask your DCS worker to take action against your employer. If your DCS worker won't help, ask DCS in writing to try to collect this money.

If that doesn't work, write or ask to speak with your DCS worker's supervisor. Send a copy of your paystubs showing the amount being taken. Keep a copy of the stubs you send in.

4. If you get behind

> **If the children have been on public assistance**, you might owe back support to the state instead of the other parent. You can ask DCS for a Conference Board (https://www.dshs.wa.gov/faq/what-if-

i-disagree-decision-made-division-child-support-dcs) to cancel (to waive) or lower some of the back support you owe the state.

What's a Notice of Support Debt (NSD)?

DCS may send you this Notice. It may claim you owe accumulated support under a court order that sets a monthly support amount.

If you disagree with an NSD, you can ask for a Conference Board (https://www.dshs.wa.gov/faq/what-if-i-disagree-decision-made-division-child-support-dcs). You could also try to change your child support order in court. Going to court is probably better. Only a court can change a court order.

How long can they collect support from me?

DCS has 10 years from the date your youngest child in the order turns 18 to collect unpaid support.

What if DCS wants more time to collect support from me?

They might ask you to sign a **Waiver of Statute of Limitations form** (https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/ESA/dcs/documents/09-508.pdf). This lets them collect unpaid support indefinitely.

If you don't have a lot of money and you owe a lot of support, you might want to sign. You may get lower monthly payments. Then it will be easier for you to pay back support.

Each case is different. Make sure you know exactly what DCS agrees to before signing anything. Don't sign before negotiating with DCS.

> If a DCS worker wants you to sign the waiver form before talking about lowering how much they're taking from you, ask to talk to a supervisor.

I'm in WorkFirst. Can they still collect support from me?

Yes. You must sign a form giving the State longer to collect child support from you. In exchange, they'll lower any back support payments you owe.

What if I owe back support but the children have been living with me?

If DCS set your child support amount, you can limit back support if you're currently caring for your children. Contact DCS to tell them about the change of circumstances.

If a judge set your support order in court, you must go back to court to change it. Try to file for a change of support as soon as you can. The judge can only change support that comes due **after** you file for a change.

5. If you disagree with an NFFR

If you disagree with a **Notice and Finding of Financial Responsibility (NFFR)** from DCS, follow these steps:

1. **Send in an objection and/or hearing request on time.**

   If you disagree with what the NFFR says you owe, ask for a hearing (called an **adjudicative proceeding**). There should be an "**Objection – Request for Blood Test or Adjudicative Proceeding**" form with the papers you got. In that form, put why you're appealing. Deliver or mail it back to the DCS office that sent it.

   The address should be on the form. If not, send your appeal to DSHS Board of Appeals, P.O. Box 45803, Olympia, WA 98204-5803.

   You have 20 days from the day you get the NFFR to send in your appeal. (If the twentieth day falls on a weekend or holiday, you have until the next regular business day.) If you appeal within 20 days, DCS can't collect support from you until the appeal is over. If you file an appeal **after** the 20-day period, DCS can start collecting support from you. If you wait more than a year to ask for a hearing, you must have had good cause for the delay.

   > Keep a copy of everything you send DCS.

2. **Try to settle the matter before the hearing.**

   A Claims Officer will represent DCS. They might agree to a resolution that works for everyone. Then you won't need a hearing. If your income is different than what DCS says, have proof of your income handy.

3. **Go to the hearing if you can't agree.**

   An administrative law judge (ALJ) conducts the hearing. It's less formal than court. This hearing can be in-person or by phone. The ALJ decides how much support you'll pay after listening to you, the other parent, and the Claims Officer.

   Take at least 2 copies of any documents you want the ALJ to see. If your hearing is by phone, call the ALJ's office to ask how to send the ALJ your documents. If DCS thinks you make more than you do, bring copies of your tax return, W-2 statement, pay stubs, and bank statements.

   The ALJ can also consider any support you've already paid. You can show receipts for clothes, medical bills, or other expenses you've paid for the child. You can have a witness who has helpful information about your ability to pay support.

   The ALJ uses the support schedule to set support. The ALJ might set it higher or lower than ("deviate from") the basic amount. For example, if you're responsible for children from another relationship that isn't part of this case, the judge may set your obligation in this case lower.

   The ALJ writes an Initial Decision after the hearing. If you disagree with that decision, you can appeal to superior court.