

Information for Families



What is the Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC)?

The Family Drug and Alcohol Court helps families where children are put at risk by the substance misuse of their parents, or substance misuse and domestic abuse. FDAC works with the whole family and keeps children at the centre of everyone's thinking.

The FDAC court is different from other courts. It is all about trying to solve the problems that have led the local authority to bring you to court. To do this, the same Judge reviews your child's case every fortnight. There is an independent team of workers to support the Judge and to help you and your family.

Parents who join FDAC are given what we call 'a trial for change'. This involves working with the FDAC team and with other services to give you the best possible chance to overcome your difficulties. At the same time, FDAC tests whether you can make enough change in time for what your child or children need. We find that most parents welcome this chance to prove themselves. It also gets parents and professionals working together in a way that means everyone is clear about what must be done, why this needs to happen, and when this should be achieved by.

FDAC gets much better results than when parents go to court in normal care proceedings. This is what a research study at Brunel University has found.

- More parents had solved their problems by the end of their care proceedings.
- 40% of FDAC mothers were no longer misusing drugs and alcohol, compared to 25% of the mothers in normal care proceedings.
- 25% of FDAC fathers were no longer misusing drugs and alcohol, compared to 5% of the fathers in normal care proceedings.
- More children are able to live with their parents at the end of FDAC proceedings.
- This was so for 35% of FDAC mothers, compared to 19% of the mothers in normal care proceedings.
- When children go home, there is less neglect or abuse by parents who have been in FDAC.
- A year or more after proceedings had finished in 56 % of families there was further neglect or abuse of the children who had been through normal care proceedings. This figure was 25% of FDAC families.
- The research said that parents were overwhelmingly positive about the FDAC team. The team motivated and engaged parents. They listened to them and did not 'judge' them. They were honest with them and were both 'strict' and 'kind'. The team gave parents practical and emotional support, and they made sure that everyone was helping parents stick with their plan of work.
- You can read more about the research if you click on this link: <https://bura.brunel.ac.uk/handle/2438/5909>

We believe that the best result is that families overcome their difficulties and raise healthy and happy children. Sometimes that is not possible, and then we have to try to help children find a different home to grow up in. We also help parents keep going to try to overcome their difficulties. We hope this will help them stay involved with their children if possible.

Why have you been invited to join FDAC?

The local authorities look at all the cases that they are taking to court to see which ones are suitable for FDAC. A case might be suitable:

1. Because parental substance misuse or substance misuse and domestic abuse is the local authority's main worry, or one of their main worries.
2. Or because parents are showing real signs that they want to make changes to their life.

Do parents get a choice about joining FDAC?

Yes, it is up to you. You can join FDAC right away. Or you can say you want your case to go into normal care proceedings. Or you can take a bit of time to decide what to do. Your solicitor will give you advice about all of this. At the first court hearing, the judge will ask if you want to do the first FDAC assessment. If you say yes, you will start your journey with the FDAC team.

What happens next?

Between the first and second court hearing you will have an assessment day at the FDAC office, and you have a meeting with us that we call the Intervention Planning Meeting. This is where the FDAC team will work with you to agree on a plan of work. We call this the Intervention Plan. The assessment and the Intervention Plan are written up as a report, and you can discuss this report with your solicitor and any other person.

When the Plan is agreed upon, the judge will say this is what everyone is going to follow. This usually happens at the second court hearing, two weeks after your case starts in court. The judge then expects everyone to do their best to follow the intervention plan. To show that you are committed to your actions in the plan, the judge will ask you to sign an agreement to be open and honest with the team and the court and be agreeable to sharing information.

After the second hearing, the 'trial for change' begins. As part of this, you will have a meeting at court every fortnight with the FDAC judge. The FDAC team will write a short report to brief the Judge before you see them. These meetings are to encourage you in your work, to see how things are going, and to check that the Intervention Plan is still right for you. This is also the time to solve any problems along the way and to make decisions about the best plan for your child, and to do so as quickly as is possible.

What happens if you say 'no' to FDAC?

If by the second hearing of FDAC you are not happy with what FDAC is offering you, you can opt-out and your case will go into normal care proceedings instead. If you have any questions, you can talk to your solicitor or the FDAC team.

Who will I see at court?

At court

The same judge, or one of a small team of judges, oversees what happens on your case. The FDAC judges are trained to help families stay motivated and get better at taking charge of their lives and solving problems. There will be some court hearings with your solicitor and other solicitors involved but you will also have regular meetings at court (every fortnight) without any of

the solicitors. This sort of hearing is called a Progress Review. It is your chance to talk to the Judge for up to 15 minutes each time, about what is going well and not so well with the Intervention Plan, and what to do about any problems you are having. Once parents get used to this, most find that it is a good way of having their say and feel in control of what is going to happen next. A member of the FDAC team will support you at these meetings too.

The FDAC team

You will get help from the FDAC Intervention Team who assessed you and helped to develop your Intervention Plan. The team includes people with different skills, which is why it is called 'a multidisciplinary team'. It has a Child Protection Social Worker, Substance Misuse worker, and Mental Health Worker, in the future there will be Parent Mentors. There is also a Psychiatrist and Psychologist who work with the FDAC team to enable us to offer you the support you need.

Parent mentors

FDAC have access to volunteers called Parent Mentors. They have overcome drug or alcohol problems in their lives, and some have been involved in care proceedings. Increasingly some will have been through FDAC. Parent Mentors can provide parents with support, encouragement, and reassurance when they are at court, or being assessed, or working on their Intervention Plan.

What help will I get from FDAC?

The FDAC team will do a series of assessments about your family's strengths and any concerns.

1. The initial assessment is completed in the first two weeks of proceedings. It helps identify the timescales for your children, develop your goals, and what intervention and support you will get in the next 4 to 8 weeks to achieve these goals. This will be reviewed each time you go to court or have a Review Intervention Planning Meeting with FDAC Judge and team.
2. Every two weeks the team writes a short review report about what is going well and not so well in your case. It will comment on things like your attendance for intervention sessions and the results of drug and alcohol testing, and what else may need to happen to help you stay on track.
3. During the first 8 weeks of FDAC, our Child and Adolescent Psychologist will have a meeting with parents, foster carers, teachers, social workers, guardians, and others. This is to better understand your children's needs.
4. Where the FDAC assessment identifies a parent's experiences difficulties with their mental health they will have a psychiatric screen to help identify appropriate support.
5. An assessment of a parents' relationship with their children and their ability to meet their children's needs will be done once parents have been abstinent for some months and have made some progress with their own problems.
6. By the time of the third Intervention Planning Meeting (normally 18 weeks into the case) the FDAC Intervention team will say whether parents have made enough progress for their child to live with them permanently. The team will report on this assessment no later than week 19 of the case. The court will then hold an Issues Resolution Hearing (normally week 20) to decide when to bring the proceedings to an end. This might need a contested court hearing. If so, that would be before week 26. Or the team might recommend to the court, that the case should continue beyond 26 weeks if, say, time is needed to check on children who have recently been returned home.

7. If a case goes beyond 26 weeks there will be extra hearings and review Reports, with a final report completed for the final hearing.

What sort of interventions and support will be written into my Intervention Plan?

This will depend upon what kind of help and support you and your family need. The FDAC team will work with you and with services in your area. The interventions will involve working on the four following areas of your life.

1. **Abstinence:** Parents get support and advice on becoming and maintaining a drug and alcohol-free life. This will include working with your existing drug and alcohol treatment service in your area and may include community programs that provide individual and group education and advice about what triggers this behaviour, and how to manage these situations better to help you stay drug and alcohol-free.
2. **Understanding & repair:** Parents get support, advice, and interventions to help them understand the problems that might be causing substance misuse, domestic abuse, and mental health difficulties. Nearly all parents who use FDAC need help to find safer ways of dealing with how difficult life events have affected them.

Many children need help to make sense of the disruption to their life that is caused by their parents' difficulties and have led to care proceedings. Some parents and children need support managing mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, or posttraumatic stress disorder. This may involve working with your GP and other local services in your area, for example, support groups or counselling services. The FDAC team will support your engagement with these services and help you to overcome barriers to accessing the help you need.

3. **Strengthening relationships:** Parents are supported to be more sensitive and responsive with their children and to strengthen their relationships with other adults, such as their partner, the child's other parent, and the wider family.

4. **A lifestyle where the child is at the centre:** Families are helped to develop a lifestyle that enables parents to give high priority to the needs of their children. This might include help to find education and training that enables parents to care for their children and be engaged in other meaningful activities.

How long does FDAC take?

The FDAC work must fit with two different timescales. One timescale is about what is right for each child and the other is about what the court process requires.

The very best result from your time in FDAC is that you overcome your problems in time to meet your children's needs. The question is how long your children can wait for the situation at home to improve. The answer is that we can't wait too long as your children may miss out on the second-best result. This might be getting settled with a member of your wider family, or being adopted, or living with foster carers.

When we talk about 'the children's timescales' we mean the time by when a decision must be made for your child, based on their age and needs. The court also has a timescale. A limit of 26 weeks has been set for finishing care proceedings. This is what is expected for those FDAC cases where children will not be returning home to their parents. If families are making good progress in

FDAC the court will usually allow proceedings to go on beyond 26 weeks to test out plans for children to return to parents' care.

What will be expected of me if I join FDAC?

We believe that no parent wants to cause their child to suffer and that every family experiencing difficulty wants their life to get better. Parents can struggle to know how best to sort things out themselves and can be afraid that if they ask for help, they will be judged badly and punished. We find that things work best when everyone is open and honest. This means families and professionals alike.

We know that we must earn a parent's trust and respect. We find it helps if everyone knows exactly what to expect and what they have to do. So, we tell parents and professionals what they can expect from us and what we expect from them. Under FDAC, families have achieved amazing things. This is because they have discovered how to reach out for help and how to work as part of a team and be honest about their struggles.

We want to take your wish for something better and tell you: "You are not alone now, you can do it, and we will help you do it". At the same time, the Judge will be saying: "You have to do it, whatever you do there will be consequences".

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