

# Family Court Tips



Thousands of dads make their way through the City's Family Court system each year. It is a process that can be confusing and frustrating. So, NYC DADS sat down with support magistrate (and NYC dad) Thomas Quinones to get a better idea of what's the best way to represent oneself in Family Court. Although there are many reasons you may need to go through the court system, we'll be focusing on Quinones's specialty: child support. Still, even if you are not managing child support issues, much of what we'll cover here could still apply to you.

In fact, everyone should listen to Quinones's most important advice of all; "show up," he says. He estimates that a quarter of dads don't make it to their court appointments with him, and that it's likely that they end up paying a higher price because of their absence.

Here are some more of his tips:

- 1) Dress appropriately. "I had one guy come in with a mesh tank top and I thought, 'that's how you come to court? What does that communicate to me?'" Quinones says. "Be presentable. I notice the folks who dress impeccably. They are respecting the system, and they are respecting me."
- 2) Don't bring your girlfriend. "You wouldn't believe the guys who come in with their new girlfriends," Quinones says. "What's that going to do?" You're not going to win over a magistrate by showing off or provoking your ex—he or she will see this as an invitation for trouble.
- 3) If you bring an attorney, make sure it's a good one. Quinones approximates that 5% of his cases include a lawyer. "The lawyer better know his stuff," Quinones says. "I am not obligated to help the lawyer, but I am obligated to help you get through the process."
- 4) Be prepared. If you are going to claim to make a certain amount of money per week, then bring in the appropriate pay stub. If you have particular expenses that are relevant, bring documentation. "If you want to confound me, come to court and bring me everything I ask for," Quinones says. "Then I have to do my job."
- 5) Don't pretend it's all going to disappear. Some guys try to duck their responsibility, assuming they can escape paying support. But if those dads have any hope of improving themselves, and, for example, buying a house one day, they should address their child support issues and avoid getting hit with a gigantic arrears bill that could stall all of the progress they've made.
- 6) Remember that child support is not punishment. The government doesn't have it out for you because you have a kid. Child support is simply a formal mechanism that ensures that your obligation to supply for your child is met. Is the actual amount you pay unfair? "That's what the law provides," Quinones says. "And if you took care of these issues on your own. You wouldn't have to come to me."
- 7) Not happy? Make an appeal. Any decision made by the court can be appealed. You need to file an "objection" to the decision made.

It's important to remember that a support magistrate is going to get about 40 cases in a day, so he can only spend so much time with you. If you respect the court, then you might find yourself in a better position. "I won't give them more, but you might get a further adjournment," Quinones says. "Or some words of wisdom on how to address the challenges you're facing. You'll always get the minimum from me—what you're entitled to—but you might get more."

And to any dad reading this who shakes his head and says, "this guy doesn't understand me," well, actually he does. Quinones pays child support from a previous marriage (he is now remarried with another daughter) as was mandated by the Family Court in Queens.

Does he feel like his support payment is fair?

"It was the proper application of the law," Quinones says evenly.