

PLAIN-ENGLISH GUIDE

Family Law in Ross County

A plain-English map for divorce, dissolution, custody, support, and adoption in Chillicothe and across Ross County. Learn which court handles your case, what to file, what it costs, and when to get help.

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- 01** See how Ross County handles family law across the Common Pleas Court.

 - 02** Know the difference between dissolution, divorce, juvenile custody, and probate adoption.

 - 03** Find the right form, the deposit, and the local rules that trip people up.

 - 04** Pick a next step that fits your budget, your timeline, and how much conflict there is.

START HERE

Use this guide like a map, not a rulebook.

Family law gets easier once you name a few things: the court, the path, the paperwork, and your next step. This guide is built on those questions for Ross County.

01

Which court handles this?

Married couples file divorce or dissolution in the Common Pleas Court. Unmarried parents file custody in the Juvenile Court. Adoptions go to the Probate Court. One judge leads both Juvenile and Probate.

02

Do we agree, or is there a fight?

Agreement changes everything. Dissolution and uncontested filings run on signed paperwork. If someone disagrees, misses deadlines, or safety is a worry, plan for a more protective path.

03

What should I gather first?

Gather any current orders and your income records. Add insurance details, the kids' birth certificates, school and parenting-time notes, and a short list of what you want the court to decide.

THIS GUIDE IS INFORMATION, NOT LEGAL ADVICE

It explains how things usually work in Ross County. It cannot cover the facts of your case. Reading it, downloading it, or contacting Gavvl Law does not make you a client. Only a signed engagement agreement does that. For advice about your own case, talk with a licensed Ohio attorney.

A REQUIRED PARENTING CLASS

In a divorce or dissolution with minor children, both parents must take the Families in Transition class within 60 days of filing. It is a single evening session and costs \$20.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Four parts: Domestic Relations (divorce and dissolution), Juvenile (unmarried parents), Probate (adoption), and how Gavvl can help. The full contents are on the next page.

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QUESTION ONE

Which court is actually handling your case?

One family can touch more than one court. In Ross County they are parts of the Common Pleas Court at 2 N. Paint Street in Chillicothe. Start with the relationship, and with what you need a judge to decide.

MARRIED OR FORMERLY MARRIED

Common Pleas Court

Divorce, dissolution, legal separation, annulment, spousal support, and dividing property and debt.

WHO HEARS IT

Judges Michael M. Ater & Matthew S. Schmidt.

PARENTS NEVER MARRIED

Juvenile Court

Custody, parenting time, parentage, and child support for unmarried parents. Also abuse, neglect, and dependency.

WHO HEARS IT

Judge J. Jeffrey Benson.

ADOPTION

Probate Court

Stepparent, kinship, and adult adoption, plus name changes and guardianships.

WHO HEARS IT

Judge Benson, same as Juvenile.

One Common Pleas Court, three roles

Divorce and dissolution are heard in the Common Pleas Court, before Judges Ater and Schmidt. Unmarried-parent custody and adoption both run through the combined Probate and Juvenile Court under Judge Benson. All sit at 2 N. Paint Street. File with the right one for your case.

PART ONE

Divorce and dissolution run through the Common Pleas Court.

If you are married, ending the marriage runs through the Common Pleas Court. The first real question is simple: can both spouses sign a full agreement?

DIVORCE	DISSOLUTION	WHERE YOU FILE	RESIDENCY
\$400	\$350	Clerk of Courts	6 months in Ohio

QUICK PATHFINDER

Do you agree on everything?

If yes, dissolution may fit, and it costs a bit less to file. If no, divorce is the safer or required path. Agreement means more than wanting the case over. It means signed terms on property, debt, support, and parenting.

Dissolution is built on agreement.

Both spouses file together as co-petitioners. They ask the court to approve a signed Separation Agreement. The court holds a hearing 30 to 90 days later. Both spouses must appear and confirm the agreement.

Divorce is a lawsuit.

One spouse files against the other. Use it when you do not yet agree. Use it when you cannot find your spouse, or when you need the court to decide something.

THE DEPOSITS

A divorce costs \$400 to file and a dissolution \$350. A divorce filed with a restraining order is \$410. Part of each deposit funds the county's mediation program. One spouse must have lived in Ohio six months.

DISSOLUTION

The dissolution packet, step by step.

Dissolution uses the Ohio Supreme Court forms plus a few local ones. Sign the Separation Agreement in front of a notary first. Then build the rest of the packet around it.

A FREE TOOL CAN HELP

The Clerk offers a free online tool called LegalAtoms that builds dissolution paperwork in plain language, in English or Spanish. The hearing is 30 to 90 days out, and both spouses must appear and affirm the agreement.

FORM	WHERE TO GET IT	WHAT IT'S FOR
Petition + Waiver (SF 17) https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ohio Supreme Court forms	Both spouses sign; opens the joint case
Separation Agreement (SF 19) https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Filed as its own document	Your signed terms; notarize this first
Affidavits 1 & 2 https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ohio Supreme Court forms	Income/expenses and property/debt
Parenting plan (SF 20 or 21) https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ohio Supreme Court forms	With children; shared or sole plan
Affidavits 3 & 4 + worksheet https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ohio Supreme Court forms	With children; parenting and support
Decree of Dissolution (SF 18) https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ohio Supreme Court forms	The judgment the court signs

REQUIRED**Families in Transition**

In a case with children, both parents take this class within 60 days of filing. It is one evening session, costs \$20 in cash, and you register ahead by phone. The certificate is good for a year.

IF YOU STOP AGREEING

A dissolution only works if both spouses agree all the way through the hearing. If you cannot agree, you can proceed by divorce instead so the court can decide the open issues.

DIVORCE

Filing a divorce when you do not agree.

Divorce is filed with the Common Pleas Clerk of Courts. Ross uses the Ohio Supreme Court forms, and you can ask for orders while the case runs.

FORM	WHERE TO GET IT	WHAT IT'S FOR
Complaint for Divorce https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ohio Supreme Court forms	Starts the lawsuit; with or without children
Affidavit of income & property https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ohio Supreme Court forms	Your financial picture
Parenting Proceeding Affidavit https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ohio Supreme Court forms	With children; the UCCJEA affidavit
Child support worksheet https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ohio Supreme Court forms	With children; the support math
Affidavit for Temporary Orders https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domestic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ohio Supreme Court forms	File if you want orders during the case

A restraining order option

You can file a divorce with a mutual restraining order for an extra \$10. It keeps both spouses from things like hiding assets or removing the children from Ohio while the case runs.

DON'T FORGET THE CLASS

A divorce with children also requires the Families in Transition class within 60 days of filing. File your certificate before the final hearing so the case is not delayed.

TEMPORARY ORDERS

Getting orders while the case runs.

A divorce can take months. Temporary orders set the rules in the meantime — things like temporary support or a parenting schedule.

The 14-day rule

You ask for temporary orders by affidavit under the civil rules, in your complaint or by motion. The court can rule without a hearing. The other spouse then has 14 days from service to file counter-affidavits.

Who has the kids until then

Until the court issues a temporary order, the children stay with the parent who had physical custody when the case was filed. After an order is journalized, either parent can ask in writing to change it.

EMERGENCIES

If your situation involves a child's safety or domestic violence, a protection order may be the faster track. A divorce restraining order is not the same thing. If anyone is in danger right now, call 911.

CHILDREN

Custody, the class, and child support.

Ohio uses specific words for custody. Ross County requires a parenting class and handles support through the county agency.

SOLE CUSTODY

Residential parent and legal custodian

One parent is the residential parent and legal custodian. The other parent usually has parenting time. Ohio does not use the words “full” or “primary” custody.

SHARED PARENTING

A shared parenting plan

Both parents share rights and duties under a written plan. Shared parenting is not the same as equal time. The schedule is whatever the plan or order says.

The parenting class

Families in Transition is required in a divorce or dissolution with children, and in custody-change motions. It is a single three-hour evening session for \$20 cash. The certificate is good for one year and covers Ross and Pike Counties.

CHILD SUPPORT RUNS THROUGH THE CSEA

The Ross County child support agency, run through county Job and Family Services, handles support. Support is set under Ohio's guidelines, collected by income withholding, and paid through the state.

THE REST OF A DIVORCE

Spousal support, property, and other paths.

Beyond custody and child support, a divorce sorts out spousal support and divides what you own and owe.

Spousal support

The court can order one spouse to support the other for a set time. Ohio weighs income, the length of the marriage, health, and other factors. There is no fixed formula.

Property and debt

Ohio divides marital property and debt fairly. Fair does not always mean a 50-50 split. Property you brought into the marriage may count as separate.

Legal separation and annulment

Both are filed in the Common Pleas Court for the same \$400 deposit. Legal separation sets terms without ending the marriage. Annulment is rare and has narrow grounds.

A note on dividing retirement

If a divorce divides a pension or retirement account, it usually takes a separate order to split it with the plan. Getting the wording right matters, and a mistake can cost real money later, so many people use a lawyer for this step.

AFTER THE DECREE

Changing or enforcing a Ross County order.

Life changes after a case ends. Post-decree motions stay in the same Common Pleas case that issued your decree.

POST-DECREE MOTION**\$200**

To modify custody, support, or another order

PARENTAL RIGHTS (CUSTODY/SUPPORT)**\$250**

To set custody or support in a new matter

AGREED ENTRY**\$200**

When both sides agree to the change

Modifying and enforcing

To change custody or support, or to enforce an order, you file a post-decree motion for \$200. A custody-change motion also triggers the parenting class again. Support changes can also start through the county agency.

THE CLASS CAN COME BACK

A motion to change custody or parenting time requires the Families in Transition class again unless you took an equivalent class within the past two years. File the certificate so the case is not delayed.

HELP ALONG THE WAY

Mediation, GALs, and the class.

Ross County offers ways to settle disputes. It also offers ways to give the court good information about the children.

Mediation

The court offers mediation to help parents reach an agreement, funded in part by a fee built into each filing. It is never used for a domestic violence case or to decide a protection order.

Guardians ad litem

The court can appoint a guardian ad litem to look into the children's needs in a contested case. Each party deposits \$400 toward the guardian's fees.

Families in Transition

This required class, one evening session for \$20 cash, teaches parents how to lower conflict. Register ahead by phone, and finish within 60 days of filing.

NOT SURE WHERE TO START?

Two minutes to a clear next step.

Gavvl's Find My Service quiz gives you a recommendation and your payment options. Or talk with our team about full or limited-scope help in Ross County.

Find My Service · gavvl.com/find-my-service

Get started · gavvl.com/start

Call · (844) 694-2885

Email · support@gavvl.com

PROTECTION ORDERS

When safety comes first.

A domestic violence civil protection order can order someone to stay away. It can also set temporary custody and support. Your safety drives the timeline.

FILING FEE	ADULT CASES	EX PARTE ORDER	FINAL ORDER
\$0 to petitioner	Common Pleas	Same day	Up to 5 years

How it works here
 An adult protection order is filed in the Common Pleas General Division under R.C. 3113.31, with no fee. The court can issue a same-day ex parte order, then hold a full hearing. Mediation is never used for a protection order.

If the other person is a minor
 A protection order against a minor is filed in the Juvenile Court instead, using its own forms. For an adult case, the Clerk can help with the petition; call (740) 702-3010 to confirm the intake desk.

IF YOU ARE IN DANGER NOW
 If you or your children are in danger right now, call 911. A protection order is a civil court process, not an emergency response.

PART TWO

The Juvenile Court is for parents who were never married.

Were the parents never married? Then custody, parenting time, and child support are decided in the Juvenile Court, before Judge Benson.

Parentage comes first

In Ohio, the mother of a child born outside marriage is the only legal custodian until a court says otherwise. So a father usually has to prove he is the father first. You can do that by a signed form, through the child support agency, or by a court case.

Filing for custody as an unmarried parent

FORM	WHERE TO GET IT	WHAT IT'S FOR
Complaint for Parentage and Custody https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domes-tic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ross Juvenile Division	Sets parentage, custody, parenting time
Parenting Proceeding Affidavit https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domes-tic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ohio Supreme Court forms	Required with a custody filing
Child support worksheet https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domes-tic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Ohio Supreme Court forms	Required when support is at issue
Application for Child Support https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/forms/all-forms/domes-tic-relations-and-juvenile-standardized/1	Juvenile Court or CSEA	Sets up the support case with the agency

COSTS AND FILING

A paternity, custody, or visitation complaint costs \$115, plus \$75 if a home investigation is ordered. The Juvenile Court is at 2 N. Paint Street, Suite A, (740) 774-1177. The parenting class applies here too.

AFTER A JUVENILE ORDER

Changing orders and CPS cases.

Juvenile orders can change as children grow. Some cases move fast.

Modifying a juvenile order

To change custody, parenting time, or support, you file a motion to reopen the case, which costs \$100. Support changes can also start through the county child support agency.

Abuse, neglect, and dependency

These CPS cases are heard in the Juvenile Court. The court can appoint a guardian ad litem to speak for the child. To report a concern about a child's safety, call the Juvenile Division at (740) 774-1177. For danger, call 911.

A NOTE ON THE PARENTING CLASS

The Juvenile Court requires the same parenting class in parentage, custody, and visitation cases. Plan to take Families in Transition and file your certificate so your case is not held up.

PART THREE

Adoption is handled by the Probate Court.

Stepparent and kinship adoptions go to the Probate Court, before Judge Benson, who also leads the Juvenile Court. Here is the basic shape.

A FLAT DEPOSIT BY TYPE

A stepparent or kinship adoption deposit is \$250, filed on the Probate side at 2 N. Paint Street, Suite A, (740) 774-1179. Confirm your adoption type and the current fee with the court.

1

File the petition in Probate

File the Ohio Petition for Adoption of a Minor. Add the child's birth certificate. For a stepparent, add the marriage certificate too. The court has an adoptions page with the forms.

2

Address consent

The other parent usually must consent. A court can excuse consent in some cases, such as a year of no contact or support without good reason. A child 12 or older also consents.

3

Complete the home study

Ohio law usually asks for a home study. A stepparent or kinship case can be simpler. Ask the Probate Court what your adoption type needs.

4

Attend the hearing

If the court finds the adoption is in the child's best interest, Judge Benson signs a final decree of adoption. A new birth record can follow.

PART FOUR

How Gavvl Law can help in Ross County.

Gavvl is a modern Ohio family-law firm serving all 88 counties. We pair skilled lawyers with easy-to-use tech and clear pricing. You choose how much help you need.

FULL REPRESENTATION

An attorney handles the whole case

From the first consult through final orders: strategy, every filing, all court dates, and negotiating. Best for contested, complex, or high-conflict cases. Billed as a retainer plus hourly fees.

LIMITED-SCOPE (FLAT FEE)

Hire us for specific tasks

Pay a flat fee per service — drafting and filing, one hearing, advice, or document review. Best for uncontested cases and tighter budgets. Not built for high-conflict cases that need steady advocacy.

Ways to pay

Your options depend on the service model. Limited-scope work has the widest range: pay in full, Affirm, Klarna, or PayPal Pay Later. Gavvl Direct is an in-house plan with no credit check. Financed amounts carry 19% annual interest, compounded monthly. We work out your exact payment when you enroll.

START IN TWO MINUTES

Take the Find My Service quiz at gavvl.com/find-my-service. You get a recommendation and your payment options. Or call (844) 694-2885. Consultations are low-cost.

BEFORE YOU GO

Important disclosures.

Please read these notes about how to use this guide.

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FEES AND PROCEDURES CHANGE

The court information in this guide was verified as of June 15, 2026 from official court sources. Court fees, forms, and procedures change. Always confirm current fees and requirements with the Ross County courts before you file.

AWARDS AND REVIEWS

Any awards, ratings, and reviews reflect the experiences of other clients and the opinions of rating organizations. They are not a guarantee or prediction of the outcome of your case. Every case is different.

JURISDICTION AND RESPONSIBILITY

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