



Students in Unique Situations: Tips for Completing the 2023-24 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®)



Questions on the 2023-24 FAFSA that may cause difficulty for students in unique situations, such as wards of the court or foster youth, are listed below. **Question and Step numbers** refer to the paper FAFSA. Please note that some questions on the paper FAFSA do not appear on the FAFSA on the Web Worksheet. Answering yes to any question in Step Three on the FAFSA means that you are an independent student and will not need to provide parental information on the FAFSA.

Question #41i Step 2

“Money received, or paid on your behalf (e.g., bills), not reported elsewhere on this form. This includes money that you received from a parent or other person whose financial information is not reported on this form and that is not part of a legal child support agreement.”

Q: I am a single mom with one child and will get free day care for my child (from a grandmother, aunt, or free day care center) while I go to college. Does the value of this free childcare have to be reported on the FAFSA?

A: No, this service is not income and the information is not collected on the FAFSA. However, note that you need to let the financial aid administrator at your college know that you are receiving free dependent care; an allowance for dependent care may not be added to your cost of attendance because it is not an expense you are incurring.

Question #47 Step 3

“Do you now have or will you have children who will receive more than half of their support from you between July 1, 2023 and June 30, 2024?”

Q: I have a child who will be living with me and I will receive assistance from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Do I answer “Yes” to Question #47? Are TANF or welfare benefits considered to be like earned income?

A: TANF benefits count as support that you provide to your child. It is not earned income and it is not reported on the FAFSA. You should answer “Yes” to Question #47, as long as you provide more than half of the child’s support.

Question #49 Step 3

“At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?”

Q: I am a ward of the court who graduated from high school and then went to live with my mother for two months. Did I lose my independent status?

A: A student is considered independent if he or she is a ward of the court, or was a ward of the court, at any time when the individual was age 13 or older. If your ward of the court status changed before you reached age 13, you may be considered dependent on your parent. You should talk about your situation with the financial aid administrator at your college who will help you determine your correct dependency status.

Question #49 Step 3

“At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?”

Q: I am a dependent child of the court of my county. Is this the same as a “ward” of the court?

A: The term “ward” is used to mean “dependent” of the court. You are a ward of the court (regardless of whether this status is determined by the county or state) if the court has assumed custody of you. You should have court ordered documents that designate you a ward of the court.

Question #49 Step 3

“At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?”

Q: I am no longer under the court because my foster parents took legal guardianship of me a few years ago. However, my foster parents do not support me with their own financial resources. They still get a foster care check each month for me. How do I answer Question #49?

A: If you were in foster care at any time when you were 13 or older, answer “Yes” to Question #49

Note: Neither legal guardians nor foster parents are considered parents when completing the FAFSA. This means you do not list their income and household size information on your FAFSA.

Question #49 Step 3

“At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?”

Q: I turned 18 and graduated high school, so my court case was closed. My college is saying I am no longer an independent student because I am no longer a ward of the court. Am I considered dependent or independent?

A: You are considered independent if you were a ward of the court, **at any time**, when you were age 13 or older. This means you should check “Yes” to Question #49, if you were a ward of the court when you were age 13 or older.

Question #50 Step 3

“As determined by a court in your state of legal residence, are you or were you an emancipated minor?”

Q: I was emancipated at age 15 and lived with my aunt and uncle during my last semester of high school. How should I complete the FAFSA?

A: If you have a copy of a court order stating you are an emancipated minor, answer “Yes” to Question #50 and complete the FAFSA as an independent student. The court must be located in your state of legal residence. If the court order is no longer in effect and you have not reached the age of majority for your state of legal residence, answer “No” to Question #50. Complete the FAFSA as a dependent student if you answer “No” to the remaining questions on the paper FAFSA.

Question #51 Step 3

“Does someone other than your parent or stepparent have legal guardianship of you, as determined by a court in your state of legal residence?”

Q: My grandparents are my court-appointed, legal guardians. They have provided support for me all my life. How do I complete the FAFSA?

A: If you have a copy of a court order stating you are in a legal guardianship, answer “Yes” to Question #51 and complete the FAFSA as an independent student. The court must be located in your state of legal residence. If the court order is no longer in effect and you have not reached the age of majority for your state of legal residence, answer “No” to Question #51. Complete the FAFSA as a dependent student if you answer “No” to the remaining questions on the paper FAFSA.

Question #52 Step 3

“At any time on or after July 1, 2022, did your high school or school district homeless liaison determine that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless or were self-supporting and at risk of being homeless?”

Q: I became homeless during my senior year in high school. Am I considered an independent student?

A: You are considered an independent student if you received a determination any time on or after July 1, 2022, that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless. The financial aid administrator at your college may require you to provide a copy of the determination or other documentation.

If you are not sure you have a determination, but you believe you are an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or are an unaccompanied youth providing your own living expenses who is at risk of being homeless, contact your high school's homeless liaison for assistance. Contact your college's financial aid office for assistance if your high school's homeless liaison did not make a determination.

“Youth” means that you are 21 years of age or less or are still enrolled in high school as of the day you sign the FAFSA.

“Unaccompanied” means you are not living in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

“Homeless” means lacking fixed, regular, and adequate housing, including living in shelters, motels, cars, and temporarily with other people because you have nowhere else to go.

Question #53 Step 3

“At any time on or after July 1, 2022, did the director of an emergency shelter or transitional housing program funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development determine that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless or were self-supporting and at risk of being homeless?”

Q: I lived in an emergency shelter last year. How do I complete the FAFSA?

A: Answer “Yes” to Question #53 if you received a determination any time on or after July 1, 2022, that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless. The financial aid administrator at your college may require you to provide a copy of the determination or other documentation.

If you are not sure you have a determination, but you believe you are an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or are an unaccompanied youth providing your own living expenses who is at risk of being homeless, contact the director of the emergency shelter for assistance. Contact your college's financial aid office for assistance if the shelter director did not make a determination.

“Youth” means that you are 21 years of age or less or are still enrolled in high school as of the day you sign the FAFSA.

“Unaccompanied” means you are not living in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

“Homeless” means lacking fixed, regular, and adequate housing, including living in shelters, motels, cars, and temporarily with other people because you have nowhere else to go.

Question #54 Step 3

“At any time on or after July 1, 2022, did the director of a runaway or homeless youth basic center or transitional living program determine that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless or were self-supporting and at risk of being homeless?”

Q: My mom died a few years ago and I have no contact with my dad. I am in a transitional living program. How do I complete the FAFSA? Am I an independent student?

A: Answer “Yes” to Question #54 if you received a determination any time on or after July 1, 2022, that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless or at risk of being homeless. The financial aid administrator at your college may require you to provide a copy of the determination or other documentation.

If you are not sure you have a determination, but you believe you are an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or are an unaccompanied youth providing your own living expenses who is at risk of being homeless, contact the director of the youth center or transitional housing program for assistance. Contact your college’s financial aid office for assistance if the director of the youth center or transitional housing program did not make a determination.

“Youth” means that you are 21 years of age or less or are still enrolled in high school as of the day you sign the FAFSA.

“Unaccompanied” means you are not living in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

“Homeless” means lacking fixed, regular, and adequate housing, including living in shelters, motels, cars, and temporarily with other people because you have nowhere else to go.

Question #90 Step 5

“How many people are in your household?”

Q: I live with my foster parents and their children. Are they my “family members?”

A: No. If you are considered independent (for example, because you are in foster care), and you have no dependent children of your own, you are a family of **one** (yourself).

Question #100 Step 7

Signatures

Q: I have filled out this form as an independent student because I am a ward of the court. Do I need my father’s or mother’s signature? I do not live with them, but I see them sometimes.

A: No. Because of your status as a ward of the court, you are considered an independent student and a parental signature is not required.