



## Students in Unique Situations: Tips for Completing the 2025-26 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®)



Questions on the 2025-26 FAFSA that may cause difficulty for students in unique situations are listed below. **Question numbers** refer to the paper (PDF) FAFSA.

### Question #5: Student Personal Circumstances

“The student has children or other people (excluding their spouse) who live with the student and receive more than half of their support from the student now and between July 1, 2025, and June 30, 2026.”

**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 indicate I have a child in Question #5? Are TANF or welfare benefits considered 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 indicate you have a child living with you on Question #5, as long as you provide more than half of the child's support.

“At any time since the student turned 13, they were a 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 they are a ward of the court, or were 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.

“At any time since the student turned 13, they were a 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 as a ward of the court.

“At any time since the student turned 13, they were a 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, even if your status changed later. This means you should indicate that on Question #5, if you were a ward of the court when you were age 13 or older.

## Question #5: Student Personal Circumstances (continued)

“At any time since the student turned 13, they were in foster care.”

**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 #5?

**A:** If you were in foster care at any time when you were 13 or older, indicate that on Question #5.

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

“The student is or was a legally emancipated minor, as determined by a court in their state of residence.”

**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, indicate that on Question #5 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, then do not indicate legal emancipation on Question #5. Unless other statements/questions make you independent, you will complete the FAFSA as a dependent student.

“The student is or was in a legal guardianship with someone other than their parent or stepparent, as determined by a court in their state of 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, indicate that in Question #5 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, then do not indicate that on Question #5. Unless other statements/questions make you independent, you will complete the FAFSA as a dependent student.

If your documentation indicates “custody” instead of “legal guardianship,” you may be considered dependent. You should talk about your situation with the financial aid administrator at your college who will help you determine your correct dependency status.

## Question #6: Student Homelessness

"At any time on or after July 1, 2024, was the student unaccompanied and either (1) homeless or (2) self-supporting and at risk of being homeless?"

If the answer is "Yes," did any of the following determine the student was homeless or at risk of becoming homeless? Select all that apply."

**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, 2024, that you were unaccompanied and were (1) homeless or (2) self-supporting and at risk of being homeless.

"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.

If you are not sure you have a determination, but you believe you are unaccompanied and homeless or are unaccompanied and providing your own living expenses and 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.

"At any time on or after July 1, 2024, was the student unaccompanied and either (1) homeless or (2) self-supporting and at risk of being homeless?"

If the answer is "Yes," did any of the following determine the student was homeless or at risk of becoming homeless? Select all that apply."

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

**A:** You are considered an independent student if you received a determination any time on or after July 1, 2024, that you were unaccompanied and were (1) homeless or (2) self-supporting and at risk of being homeless.

If the emergency shelter made a determination that you were homeless or at risk of being homeless, indicate that in Question #6, where it gives the option to select "Director or designee of an emergency or transitional shelter, street outreach program, homeless youth drop-in center, or other program serving those experiencing homelessness."

If you are not sure you have a determination, but you believe you are unaccompanied and homeless or are unaccompanied and providing your own living expenses and 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.

### Question #6: Student Homelessness (continued)

“At any time on or after July 1, 2024, was the student unaccompanied and either (1) homeless or (2) self-supporting and at risk of being homeless?”

If the answer is “Yes,” did any of the following determine the student was homeless or at risk of becoming homeless? Select all that apply.”

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

**A:** You are considered an independent student if you received a determination any time on or after July 1, 2024, that you were unaccompanied and were (1) homeless or (2) self-supporting and at risk of being homeless.

If the transitional shelter made a determination that you were homeless or at risk of being homeless, indicate that in Question #6, where it gives the option to select “Director or designee of an emergency or transitional shelter, street outreach program, homeless youth drop-in center, or other program serving those experiencing homelessness.”

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

### Question #9: Family Size

“How many people are in the student’s family?”

**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 #41: Parent Consent, Approval, and Signatures

Consent and approval to transfer federal tax information from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS)

**Q:** I filled out the FAFSA as an independent student because of my personal circumstances. Do I need my parents’ consent, approval, and signature? I do not live with them, but I see them sometimes.

**A:** No. If any of the personal circumstances criteria in Question #5 on the FAFSA apply to you, you are considered an independent student and do not have any other required contributors. Therefore, a parent’s consent, approval, and signature is not required.