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A PLAIN-LANGUAGE GUIDE

Courts aren't all the same

A plain-language introduction to some courts and tribunals people encounter in Victoria, and the questions to ask when you need help. An independent prototype by Lejacie.

INDEPENDENT PROTOTYPE BY LEJACIE · DRAFT 3 · NOVEMBER 2026

THIS GUIDE IS FOR YOU IF

- You have received a letter that names a court or tribunal
- Someone has mentioned VCAT, the Family Court or the Children's Court and you are not sure what it is
- You want to understand why different courts or tribunals might be involved
- You are helping someone work out what a document is about

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Draft 3, 4 November 2026. This is an orientation guide, not a tool for choosing where to lodge an application. A situation that sounds like yours may involve different rules, deadlines or steps. Adapted from Victoria Law Foundation's guide Victoria's Legal System, with current court and tribunal information from their own websites. Not commissioned or endorsed by Victoria Law Foundation or the organisations named. Not yet legally reviewed or tested with readers.

START HERE

"Court" might make you think of someone being charged with a crime

But courts and tribunals also deal with disputes about homes, money, children and government decisions. They do not all have the same powers or follow the same processes. You do not need to memorise the system. This guide uses made-up situations to explain some important differences. It is an orientation guide, not a tool for choosing where to lodge an application. A situation that sounds like yours may involve different rules, deadlines or steps.

ALREADY HAVE A LETTER OR HEARING DATE?

Go to page 5. Keep the document and any dates available when asking for help. You do not need to read all the examples first.

1 "My rental provider won't fix the problem. Is that a court matter?"

Sam's situation

Sam has reported a problem with their rental home. It has not been resolved. Someone mentions "VCAT", but Sam does not know what it is, or whether contacting it means starting a court case.

What this helps explain

VCAT stands for the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal. It makes decisions about certain disputes, including renting disputes. It is a tribunal, not a criminal court: a rental dispute is not the same thing as someone being prosecuted for a crime.

A hearing is not necessarily the first step. Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria, a free service offered by VCAT, helps resolve many disputes about repairs, bonds and rent increases. If it cannot resolve an issue, it can help people move towards a VCAT hearing where needed. The appropriate pathway depends on the dispute.

> **A question you could ask.** "What kind of renting dispute is this? What steps apply before a hearing, and is there anything urgent I need to do?"

Current information about resolving renting disputes: **consumer.vic.gov.au**, under Housing and renting.

Source Victoria's Legal System [1]; VCAT, Residential tenancies [2]; Consumer Affairs Victoria, Resolving renting disputes [3]

2 "We've separated. Does one court sort out everything?"

Alex's situation

Alex wants to understand divorce, arrangements for the children and how property will be divided. Alex assumes a divorce application deals with all three.

What this helps explain

The Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia deals with family law matters including divorce, parenting and property. But these are different legal questions. A divorce legally ends a marriage; it does not itself decide parenting arrangements or divide property.

Nor does separation automatically mean there must be a contested court hearing. The Court explains that proceedings should be a last resort and that people should make genuine attempts at dispute resolution where appropriate. **If you are worried about safety, pressure or contacting the other person, raise that before discussing negotiation or dispute resolution.**

> **A question you could ask.** "Which issues do I need advice about separately? What options are available before court, and do any deadlines or exceptions apply to me?"

The Court's family law role: **fcfcoa.gov.au/fl**.

Source Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia, Divorce overview and Family law pages **[4]**

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3 "I'm frightened of my former partner. Is that the same as a parenting case?"

Priya's situation

Priya is worried about her former partner's behaviour. She also needs to understand arrangements for their children. She is unsure whether "family court" deals with both concerns in the same way.

What this helps explain

A family violence intervention order and a parenting order serve different purposes.

The Magistrates' Court deals with family violence intervention orders, which aim to protect people from family violence by placing conditions on another person's behaviour. The Federal Circuit and Family Court deals with parenting matters.

An intervention order is a civil matter. Breaching its conditions can become a criminal matter. That distinction helps explain why the same circumstances can involve different legal processes.

> **A question you could ask.** "Do I need help with both a protection order and parenting arrangements? How might they affect each other?"

This guide cannot explain how particular orders interact. That needs advice about the circumstances. **If you are in immediate danger, call 000.**

Source Magistrates' Court of Victoria, Family violence intervention orders **[5]**; Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia **[4]**

4 "The letter says Children's Court. Is that where separated parents go?"

Jordan's situation

Jordan receives paperwork mentioning the Children's Court and assumes it concerns an ordinary disagreement between separated parents about where a child will live.

What this helps explain

The Children's Court and the Federal Circuit and Family Court have different roles.

The Children's Court's Family Division deals with care and protection matters involving children and young people. Its Criminal Division deals with young people accused of offences. The Federal Circuit and Family Court deals with family law parenting disputes.

The word "children" in a court's name does not tell you everything about the kind of case it hears.

> **A question you could ask.** "What kind of proceeding is this document about? What does it require me to do, and where can I get advice?"

Source Victoria's Legal System **[1]**; Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia **[4]**; Children's Court of Victoria **[6]**

5 "Does a higher court mean my problem matters more?"

Lee's situation

Lee sees a diagram with the Supreme Court above the County Court and Magistrates' Court. Lee wonders whether being in a "lower" court means a matter is less important.

What this helps explain

A court hierarchy describes different powers and responsibilities, not how much someone's problem matters to them.

The source guide explains that courts deal with different types of matters, levels of seriousness, amounts of money and appeals. The Magistrates' Court hears many everyday matters; the County and Supreme Courts have other responsibilities, including more serious criminal cases and particular civil matters.

The term for a court's legal authority to hear a matter is **jurisdiction**. That authority, not simply the building's location or a person's preference, helps determine where a case belongs.

> **A question you could ask.** "Why is my matter in this court? Is this a first hearing, a trial or an appeal?"

Source Victoria's Legal System, courts and tribunals section **[1]**

NEXT STEPS

If you have a letter, notice or hearing date

You do not have to understand the whole court system before asking for help.

6 Use the document to start a conversation

> **A question you could ask.** "This document names a court or tribunal. I do not understand what the matter is about or what I am expected to do."

Keep these details available if you can:

- The name of the court or tribunal.
- The document's title and case number.
- Any hearing, response or other date.
- The part you do not understand.

For questions about that court's procedures, use its official website or contact details. For advice about your legal position or options, seek legal assistance.

Victoria Legal Aid's Legal Help service provides legal information and referrals and can assess whether it can provide advice. **Call 1300 792 387**, Monday to Friday, 8 am to 6 pm, excluding public holidays. Ask for an interpreter if needed. Online: legalaid.vic.gov.au/speak-to-us.

Source Victoria Legal Aid, Speak to us and Help in your language **[7]**. Contact details checked 22 October 2026. The words to say are our suggestion **[8]**

7 If you cannot get help straight away

When contacting another service, mention any approaching date at the beginning. Ask:

> **A question you could ask.** "Can you help before this date? If not, where else should I try?"

If you are referred elsewhere, check who makes contact:

> **A question you could ask.** "Will you send the referral, or do I need to contact them myself?"

If a suggested step is not possible, explain why, for example you cannot use the online form, access a document or safely receive a callback, and ask whether another option is available.

Source Fallback steps are Lejacie's addition **[8]**

8 Write down what is clear, and what still needs checking

Not everything will be resolved in one conversation. Write down what you know, and what you still need to check.

WHAT I KNOW, OR STILL NEED TO CHECK	
The court or tribunal named on my document is	
The date shown on my document is	
The matter is about	
The next step is	
I need to do it by	
The person or service helping me is	
Who will make the next contact?	
I still need to check	
If that does not work, I will contact	

Source The record is Lejacie's addition **[8]**

REFERENCES AND ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Where this guide comes from

An independent demonstration translating selected explanations from Victoria Law Foundation's guide Victoria's Legal System, particularly its courts and tribunals section, into made-up scenarios. The supplied guide states that it was accurate at June 2022. Current official information supplements the renting, family law and intervention order examples, checked on 22 October 2026. The scenarios and preparation prompts are additions. Not commissioned or endorsed by Victoria Law Foundation or the organisations named.

	DOCUMENT	WHERE TO FIND IT
[1]	Victoria Law Foundation, Victoria's Legal System (guide), courts and tribunals section. The guide states it was accurate at June 2022.	victorialawfoundation.org.au
[2]	Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, Residential tenancies (case types), web page.	vcat.vic.gov.au
[3]	Consumer Affairs Victoria, Resolving renting disputes (including Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria), web page.	consumer.vic.gov.au
[4]	Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia, Divorce overview, and Family law (court role and dispute resolution), web pages.	fcfcoa.gov.au/fl
[5]	Magistrates' Court of Victoria, Family violence intervention orders, web page.	mcv.vic.gov.au
[6]	Children's Court of Victoria, About the Court: Family Division and Criminal Division, web pages. To be checked against the Court's current information before publication.	childrenscourt.vic.gov.au
[7]	Victoria Legal Aid, Speak to us, and Help in your language, web pages.	legalaid.vic.gov.au
[8]	Rupasinghe C, Safe to Say, Safe to Reach, Safe to Use: Practice Standard, consultation draft, Lejacie, 2026.	lejacie.com

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The scenarios, the questions you could ask, the fallback steps and the record are Lejacie's additions. The factual explanations come from the sources listed above, with a source note under each one. The people in the scenarios are made up.

This is a selective introduction, not a complete account of courts and tribunals. It does not determine jurisdiction, eligibility, deadlines or the right procedure for an individual matter. It is a prototype, not a validated or final publication.

BEFORE IT IS PUBLISHED AS FINAL

- Legal review, including whether the dispute resolution explanation in Alex's example needs a fuller statement of safety exceptions
- Check the Children's Court description against the Court's own current information
- Accessibility review and user testing
- A named maintenance owner and a process for checking links, pathways and legal changes

VERSION

Draft 3, 4 November 2026: the Draft 2 content of 22 October 2026, set in Lejacie's current design. Draft 2, 22 October 2026. Draft 1 was reviewed and revised the same day. Information checked 22 October 2026. Lejacie is an independent applied research and design practice. Chami Rupasinghe, admitted Australian lawyer (non-practising), Founder. Feedback to **info@lejacie.com** with the page number.