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HOW TO BECOME A FAMILY LAWYER

INTRODUCTION

Are you thinking of becoming a family lawyer? This article will take you through what qualifications and training you need and what to expect from the many different roles and areas of family law expertise.

A career in family law is a challenging and stimulating field. Your personal involvement with clients and the ability to provide legal guidance to those who are in distress can be immensely rewarding. A family lawyer will provide legal advice for family and relationship issues. Family law relates to very personal and sensitive areas of a client's life so for this reason it can be one of the most emotive areas of law.

Family law is also remarkably diverse so although you will read about core topics (such as children, marriage and divorce) studying family law makes for many varied areas of learning.

Family lawyers deal with all aspects of family law which include:

- Divorce and relationship breakdown
- Financial disputes relating to marriage, civil partnerships divorce or relationship breakdown, provision for children, division of personal assets and business assets
- Issues concerning children including parental disputes, grandparents' rights, adoption, surrogacy, and child abduction
- Prenuptial and postnuptial agreements
- Civil Partnerships
- International family law

WHAT KIND OF PERSONALITY SUITS A CAREER IN FAMILY LAW?

It is crucial that you have the right temperament for family law due to the nature of dealing with children and adults in distressing situations. The following soft skills make the difference between an adequate candidate and an ideal candidate:

- **People skills and communication skills** — you are dealing with clients who are facing very difficult times, you need to be a good listener to hear what is and isn't spoken
- **Social skills** - along with a sharp legal mind you also needs social skills like tact and empathy and compassion (ie abuse cases) and an appreciation of many different sides of human nature
- **Professionalism and objectivity**— ability to detach yourself on a personal level (children and adults in distressing situations) while still acknowledging the difficulties client is facing
- **Hard work ethic and positive attitude**

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- **Patience and ability to stay calm** — with clients, opposing counsel, court personnel, the system, emotional outbursts
- **Resilience and confidence**

WHY DO PEOPLE SPECIALISE IN FAMILY LAW?

Most people specialise in family law because they are deeply interested in the human aspect of law and how the law can help people at some of the most vulnerable periods of their lives – family issues and relationship breakdown.

A good family lawyer can demonstrate empathy and inspire confidence that they will guide clients through this very difficult period, remaining focused always but also ensuring they give the best possible legal and strategic advice.

WHAT EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS DO YOU NEED?

There are now many different routes to qualification as a lawyer which require different levels of educational qualifications. All will require GCSE and A-Level qualifications (or equivalent qualifications).

Some law firms offer Legal Apprenticeships to students who have finished their A-Levels but not yet completed a degree which include a combination of studying and experience leading to qualification as a lawyer in around 6 years. There is also the option to qualify as a Chartered Legal Executive lawyer which also involves both studying and practical experience over a period of a minimum of 5 years.

The SQE route (see below) requires an undergraduate level degree and then further professional qualifications and practical training following that. The degree can be in any subject; it does not have to be a Law degree.

WHAT PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AND PRACTICAL TRAINING DO YOU NEED?

Solicitors Qualification Examinations

The SQE route was implemented by the Solicitors Regulation Authority in September 2021. It requires the following:

1. A degree in any subject;
2. Two years of full time qualifying work experience;
3. Passing both stages of the new Solicitors Qualifications Examinations; and
4. Passing the SRA's character and suitability requirements.

This route takes a minimum of 5 years, but is likely to take 6 years following completion of A-Levels, potentially 7 years (depending on the degree undertaken).

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You should look carefully at the courses offered for your undergraduate degree to determine the extent the course they are offering will prepare you for the SQE. This may highlight the advantage of undertaking a law degree to maximise your chances of passing the SQE (as opposed to undertaking an entirely unrelated undergraduate degree).

In addition there are SQE preparation courses that can be undertaken in order help prepare candidates.

The preparatory courses are not a mandatory requirement. The SRA's view is that your education and training in the qualifying work experience will provide you with the knowledge and skills you need to pass the assessments.

However, preparation courses are still available (and in effect replace the courses under the previous route). These may assist you in passing the SQE Assessments.

Here are some links that may be useful in helping that decision making process:

List of Training Providers:

<https://www.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/training-provider-list/>

BPP Courses

https://www.bpp.com/courses/law/postgraduate/sqe?gclid=EAlaIQobChMI7viD4vbS9gIVCLrtCh2jCAgZEAYASAAEgLLevD_BwE&gclidsrc=aw.ds

University of Law

<https://www.law.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/sqe/courses/>

This route removes the GDL, LPC and PSC courses which were requirements of the old route to qualification. Instead, it introduces two new standard examinations known as the Solicitors Qualifying Examinations (SQE's) which need to be passed. They are divided into two stages and candidates must pass stage 1 to be able to move on to stage 2.

Stage 1

Stage one assesses functioning legal knowledge as well as ethics and professional conduct. It consists of 2 examination papers both containing 180 multiple choice questions and each is 5 hours long. The assessment is closed book (meaning candidates cannot take any notes, books or study materials into the exams).

Stage 2

Stage 2 tests the professional skills required in practice such as client interviews, advocacy, case analysis, legal research and drafting. These areas are assessed over 5 half days as follows; written exams over 3 half days and oral exams over 2 half days. This stage involves 14 hours of exams in total.

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Qualifying work experience

The qualifying work experience aspect is much more flexible under the SQE route. It still requires 2 years of full time work but the experience can now be gained with up to 4 different employers across the 2 years. The work can be paid or unpaid and can include paralegal experience, time spent advising in a student law clinic, volunteering at a law centre or Citizens Advice Bureau or any placements undertaken during a degree.

There is also still the option to complete 2 years with just one employer in the traditional way. It is important to note that law firms are still able to determine how they wish to offer training and how to accept any previous experience. It is thought that many firms will initially still require candidates to complete a 2 year period of qualifying work with the firm to qualify there.

All qualifying work experience will need to be signed off by a solicitor who will review the work and provide feedback. The SRA is giving more autonomy to employers in respect of the training but provide that the experience must offer a candidate the opportunity to develop the competencies and skills required in practice.

IS WORK EXPERIENCE PRIOR TO AND DURING UNIVERSITY IMPORTANT AND DO YOU NEED RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE?

Yes, work experience will always help your progress. Having general work experience in a professional environment where you are dealing with other colleagues, customers and clients, is always valuable.

Specific options to consider are:

- Formal work experience at a firm that specialises in family law – this is invaluable
- Completing a vacation scheme <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/law-sector/law-vacation-schemes>
- Completing a mini pupillage that allows you to shadow a barrister working on a family law case
- Marshalling (shadowing) a judge that is sitting on a family law case
- Entering/winning prizes in family law essay competitions at university, showing your interest in the field
- Taking part in family pro bono work in legal clinics

If you are interested in hearing more about a career in law and the routes to qualification you could also listen to the Rayden Podcast series by two of our juniors, Kendra Jefferies and Emma Smith. Just scan the QR code below:



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