



CASA OF WEST CENTRAL ILLINOIS

CASA in Practice

“The Do’s and Don’ts of being a CASA.

What to Do

- Have an appreciation that none of us have the correct way to deal with every situation that can arise when dealing with children who have experienced abuse and neglect. There isn't a book full of all the right answers or flow charts that can be followed. CASA training is designed to get you to think on your feet and become self-aware about ideas and events that may be completely foreign to you.
- Think about the end of the process first, the end being achieving permanency for the child.
- Be proactive and focus on what is in your control.
- Understand how to "triage".
- Become adept at "reading the room" and picking up on social cues. Comply with the courtroom observation requirement.
- Understand the importance of filing your court report in advance and the procedure to supplement the report if additional information should surface.
- Understand where to stand in court, how to address the parties and the judge.
- Understand what it means to be "child focused".
- Clearly understand confidentiality rules and obligations.
- Make sure to communicate with the child in their native language. Make sure you have the appropriate resources to effectively communicate.
- Before you interview a child, be prepared. Read all the documents. Research and learn as much as you can from other people associated with the child about the child. Learn as much as you can about what brought the case into court. If a specific type of abuse is alleged, make sure you familiarize yourself with the subject area beforehand, i.e. Munchausen's Syndrome.
- Research and learn all you can about the child's culture, where they come from and family traditions. Check your biases about parenting, culture, and ethnicity at the door.
- Treat every person with dignity and respect.
- Plan out your visit in advance, it should be at a time when the child isn't stressed out or short on time. Be mindful of a child's school responsibilities and extracurricular activities. Try not to interfere with events that a child may be looking forward to, sibling visits, birthday parties, time with friends.
- Make sure you know where the child lives and how to get there. Dress professionally for visits, court and all meetings.
- Introduce yourself in a professional way. Have your CASA business card on hand.
- If possible, interview the foster parent in advance of the visit to see the child. This will allow you to give the child your undivided attention.
- Make eye contact with the child and engage them.

- Ask the child how they would prefer to be addressed (i.e. Stephen may want to be called Stevie). Explain your role to the child in an age-appropriate way.
- Practice your "poker face". There are going to be times when you will be hearing disturbing details about what the child endured or how they are feeling about themselves.
- Watch your body language. Watch your facial expressions.
- Ask the child if they understand your role and if they have any questions. Remind the child that they can ask you questions.
- Be empathetic, not sympathetic.
- There may be times when the child does not wish to talk, that is alright. Find a way to build rapport with the child.
- There may be situations when you should not talk to the child about the abuse they suffered. Depending upon the facts of the case, the child may have been through several forensic interviews already. Get a copy of those reports before interviewing the child again. If a child is interviewed too many times about the same facts, they can be re-traumatized and think that they need to change their story. Children are used to accommodating and pleasing authority figures especially if they have been in dramatic situations.
- Find a comfortable place to interview the child, but do not be alone with a child in a small closed-door setting.
- Be mindful of appropriate physical boundaries that need to be maintained between you and the child. Hugging, kissing, touching, patting, rubbing, a child is not appropriate and can send very bad messages to the child. Each child has the right to their own space.
- Be friendly, but serious.
- Be an active listener, don't interrupt.
- Be honest, don't be afraid to say you don't know the answer. It is alright to explain to the child that you need to gather more information in order to provide them with an answer.
- Explain to the child that their wishes are valued and that their wishes, desires, requests become part of the court report. Also explain to the child, that you must also consider what is in their "best interests" and that recommendation will also be made part of the court report. Explain the difference in a common-sense way that the child can understand.
- While CASA mandates that you see a child at least monthly, there may be occasions where you will be required to make more frequent visits. For example, if a child is placed in a psychiatric facility, if a child is moved frequently, if a child is experiencing problems at school, etc.
- Each time you visit a child, make sure you ask about their immediate safety. Abuse in placement is very common. Ask about potential abuse by other children in the home.
- Ask the child "what is new" since the last time we met.
- Ask the child if there is anything they need, anything that they have been asking for, but no one seems to be able to address. i.e. "I need new glasses; I can't see the board at school. I want to go on a school outing, but my foster parent told me that they don't have the money, I have been asking to see my brother for months, no one cares."
- You can explain to the child that you will ask the caseworker immediately about these things, without making promises. Make sure you follow up with the child.

- Ask about support systems known to the child at every visit. It is not uncommon for relatives, teachers, family friends to become a resource for the child as these people learn about the child's removal from the home.
- See the child more often if unsupervised visits have begun and when overnight visits are taking place. It is not uncommon for the parent to return to negative behaviors during the visit due to stress, etc. Also, if the perpetrator of the abuse has been ordered out of the home, it is not unusual for that person to resurface, they often tell the child not to report the interaction.
- Be clear about the importance of your personal safety as a volunteer. Fully understand the safety plan provided to you by your local program. Familiarize yourself with the child's Bill of Rights (see attached).
- Each child should be told that they have the right to be safe, free from harassment, and understand that a child may be able to speak to the judge in camera.
- Understand that it is not uncommon for a child to recant their statements pertaining to abuse and neglect. If a child chooses to recant, give them their space.
- Your court report must be fact- based, succinct, free of biases and prejudices, and must follow a template which gives the judge and the parties the most important information first. Please see attached examples.
- When interviewing witnesses, parties, medical professionals, ask the interviewee if you can take notes. Explain why note taking is so important, that you want to be sure, you are being accurate. It also gives you a chance to go back to your notes and verify what the interviewee has stated is accurate. People get nervous during interviews, and it is important for them to be given the chance to explain and add information.
- Be upfront with the interviewee, tell them that the information will be contained in your court report.
- If for some reason the interviewee does not want you to take notes, immediately write notes afterward. Sit in your car and immediately write your notes. Consider using one notebook per child's case so that you can be sure all notes are kept together.
- Highlight areas in your notes that need to be followed up on and areas that are inconsistent.
- Highlight facts that are cause of concerns.
- When transcribing notes, be mindful of your biases and prejudices. For example, "the parent who is a known pedophile told me that he is cured, what a joke (pedophiles cannot be cured, everyone knows that)."
- Use exact quotes as much as possible.
- Maintaining appropriate boundaries with the child, their family members and witnesses is extremely important. It is common to think that you will be able to fix all the problems that exist in a child's life, but you cannot.
- Understand that you should focus on whether the child is safe, if they are thriving in their current placement and if the parties to the case are moving toward permanency for the child whether it be returning home to his/her parent or remaining in placement with a solid plan.
- If a child expresses suicidal or homicidal ideations during your visit with them, call your supervisor immediately and follow their plan. Most likely a SASS referral will have to be made. Remain with the child until a plan is in effect that will ensure the child's safety.
- Inquire about who the child sees as support systems.
- Be clear about your role when meeting other people associated with the case.

- Understand that it is your duty to seek out family strengths.
- Become well-versed in child development.
- Seek out and become acquainted with the experts in the field.
- Expect that you will be an important part of each meeting that is held regarding the child. This is especially true with regard to school meetings. If the child has an individualized educational plan (IEP), make sure you are at those meetings. These meetings tend to be very comprehensive, and you want to be a part of any actions that are taking place.
- Expect that you will be called upon to have professional working relationship with the other people associated with the child's case. Find a way to establish a good working relationship with them, the old adage, "you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar" is very true in this situation. Just because you disagree with a person's position or opinion doesn't mean that person should not be treated with respect.
- Be creative, be solution driven, be willing to meet someone more than half-way if it will benefit the child.
- You should view yourself as the "bridge" or "facilitator" between the parties. You can be effective in the role without violating confidentiality. The information you possess may be the missing link.
- When feeling overwhelmed by what you may perceive as only "bad solutions" for the child, change your view, go out into the field, revisit roadblocks, ask for advice. Sometimes there isn't a perfect solution.
- Understand that there isn't a way to plan for every scenario or fact pattern. You are dealing with human beings that are going through very stressful situations.
- Be self-aware. How is your role affecting you, personally and professionally?
- Ask for help, don't feel that you are alone. Share how you are feeling with your supervisor and or fellow volunteers. Your supervisors and ED are very experienced and can step in to help at any time.
- Ask for time off from the case if you feel you are not being effective for whatever reason, there is nothing wrong with asking for a break.
- Communicate, communicate, and communicate.

What Not to Do

- Do not put your personal safety in jeopardy.
- Do not put yourself in a situation where you feel threatened due to the physical environment or due to the attitude or comments of the person you are meeting with.
- Do not take a chance with your personal safety or with the safety of the child you are interviewing. Do not leave a child in an environment that endangers their immediate health or safety.
- Don't think that you will be able to successfully negotiate with someone who is volatile, angry and or agitated.
- Do not remain in a situation if the person you are interviewing is talking about guns or shooting.
- Do not remain in a home if you see a gun.
- Do not touch a child on any part of his/her body, including face.
- Do not put any part of your body too close to the child, keep a respectful distance.
- Do not kiss a child.

- Do not hug a child. (Be mindful that the child's placement may have a protocol regarding when it's alright to hug a child, ask what it is.)
- Do not tell a child that you love them. If a child tells you that they love you, redirect the conversation to something else "positive" in nature.
- Do not let the child sit on your lap. Do not hold hands with a child.
- Never meet a child or anyone else associated with the child's case in an unprofessional location, e.g. Bar, Store.
- Never "spy" on a child or anyone associated with the case.
- Never record a child's statements.
- Never take pictures of a child unless it is the one picture for the file. First get permission from your supervisor. The photo should be taken with a plain backdrop so that the child's placement cannot be detected.
- Do not participate in any type of surveillance.
- Do not be combative, argumentative, or belligerent with anyone involved with the case. Do not be spiteful or hold a grudge against anyone associated with the case.
- Never follow a child or anyone associated with the case. Never trespass unless it is an absolute emergency.
- Never look through windows of a house or a car.
- Do not interview neighbors unless the reason for the interview is discussed with your supervisor.
- Do not go to a parent's place of employment when the parent is working. The caseworker should be verifying employment.
- Do not destroy your notes, files, etc. unless they have already been made part of the official report and your supervisor approves ahead of time.
- Do not keep information to yourself. It is better to err on the side of full disclosure.
- Do not bring gifts to the child or anyone associated with the case.
- Do not give money to the child or anyone associated with the case.
- Never supervise visitation.
- Never transport the child.
- Do not give the child you are assigned to your personal phone number or address, use the CASA number.
- Do not make any statements about remaining on the child's case "forever". The child will learn to trust you once you prove yourself to them by showing up, listening, and advocating for them.
- Do not assume that the child will always have a positive response to you in your role as a CASA Volunteer. Do not show displeasure toward the child if they appear detached, unfriendly, or upset with you.
- Never interview a child in a room with the door closed/locked.
- Never take the child to your home.
- Do not multitask while you are with a child.
- Do not give advice to anyone on the case.
- Do not tell a child you feel "sorry" for them, or that you pity them.
- Never tell a child to "snap out of it" or "put a smile on their face" when they are feeling sad or depressed.

- Do not talk about your personal life with the child or anyone else associated with the case.
- Do not discuss your personal feelings about abuse, or neglect.
- Do not discuss any abuse or neglect you may have suffered with the child or anyone else associated with the case.
- Do not cry in front of the child you are interviewing. Do not introduce a child to anyone in your family.
- Do not allow anyone else to accompany you on the visit or to interview a witness (unless prior approval has been given by CASA Supervisor).
- Do not make promises to anyone on the case.
- Do not use trickery or bribery to get a child to talk.
- Do not "pinkyswear".
- Do not tell a child that you are going to keep "their" secret.
- Do not talk about your political leanings with the child or anyone associated with the case.
- Do not ask a child about their sexuality unless they bring it up or unless it is an issue regarding resources e.g. an LGTBQ child may want to discuss services and placement issues. Do not ask a child if they are pregnant.
- Do not speak negatively about a child's parent, relative, friend, etc.
- Do not put down a parent for their behavior in front of the child. Do not tell a child that their child is "bad" or is a "bad person".
- Do not discuss abortion with the child.
- Do not discuss religion unless the child brings it up as a request to practice a religion or asks to go to a certain place of worship.
- Do not discuss your religious beliefs with the child or anyone associated with the case.
- Do not have ex-parte communications with the judge.
- Never discuss the child's case or situation to anyone in public. Do not pre-judge a situation.
- Do not steer services toward a specific entity or agency unless it is collaboration with the caseworker. Do not take the word of a person who has been accused of sexually abusing the child (ever), verify.
- Do not assume that the relative foster parent is keeping the child away from the abuser.
- Do not assume that the child's parent isn't living in the placement.
- Do not take off any part of a child's clothing. Do not take off a child's diaper.
- Do not view a child in the bathtub/shower. Do not sit on a child's bed.
- Do not look in drawers or cabinets unless it is relevant to the case, and you have been invited to by the owner of the property.
- Do not speak negatively about a caseworker to anyone related to the case, especially the child. Do not divulge information about other children to the child you are interviewing.
- Do not violate HIPPA laws.
- Do not suggest medication or provide medication to the child or anyone associated with the case.
- If a criminal case is pending against one or both parents or any party to the case other than the child, do not attend the criminal court hearing. This creates bias and

can greatly affect the parents' willingness to accept services. (If there is an overriding reason to do otherwise, discuss with your supervisor and ED).

- If you obtain information that is criminal in nature, make sure the prosecuting attorney be made aware of the information. It is not uncommon for the child to divulge information about the parent that is criminal. A new hot-line call should be made, and the caseworker should be informed of the information immediately. E.g. Child states that his sibling died while the family was living in a different state or that a parent is in prison in another state.
- Do not be afraid to "go up the chain of command" if you are not having success getting a caseworker to return your calls.
- Do not allow the child to sleep in an agency's office because the caseworker cannot find a placement.
- Make sure the judge is aware that it is the caseworker's intentions to have the child sleep in their office.
- Do not follow a child's case if they have been placed out of State unless the case is very close to closure.