



CASA

Court Appointed Special Advocates

FOR CHILDREN

**THE NATIONAL COURT APPOINTED
SPECIAL ADVOCATE ASSOCIATION**

CASA/GAL Pre-Service Volunteer Training Curriculum

Pre-Work Handouts

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER 3

Pre-Work Handouts

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Pre-Work Instructions

Prior to attending the third session of the volunteer training, please read through the Pre-Work handouts found in this document. Reading this information prior to the session will give you a foundation in understanding child trauma, basic communication and CASA/GAL volunteer work, open-ended vs. closed-ended questions, the CASA/GAL interview and initial case notes for the Black-Smith case.

Shane's Story Video

View Shane's Story video.

Prepare a list of traumatic experiences for the child.

Understanding Child Trauma

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, child trauma occurs when a child witnesses or experiences an event that poses a real or perceived threat to the life or well-being of the child or someone close to the child.

Examples of child trauma could include:

- Witnessing domestic violence
- Being physically or sexually abused
- The death or loss of a loved one
- Being in an automobile accident
- Being present for a life-threatening natural disaster

The traumatic event often causes feelings of fear, helplessness or horror in the child, which may be expressed in a variety of ways. Overall, the child isn't able to cope with the intense feelings and becomes overwhelmed by the event.

Types of Trauma

Trauma may be described in one of four ways. Each describes how often or to what level the person experiencing the trauma is affected.

- **Acute Trauma:** A single incident that is limited in time (e.g., a car accident). The effects may include physical and emotional stress leading to feelings of being overwhelmed.
- **Chronic Trauma:** Repeated traumatic events (e.g., witnessing recurring domestic violence between parents over several years). Because of the recurring and longstanding nature of chronic trauma, the effects can be cumulative and build up over time. Children at this level are often more vulnerable to everyday stress and have diminished ability to cope.
- **Complex Trauma:** Includes both the exposure to chronic trauma and the lasting impact the trauma has on the child's well-being. Complex trauma usually begins when a child is very young (under the age of 5) and often is a part of a child's relationship with a caregiver (e.g., physical abuse by a parent).
- **Historical Trauma:** A personal or historical event that causes emotional and psychological injury and can be transmitted from one generation to the next (e.g., slavery, forced placement in boarding schools).

Understanding Child Trauma, Cont'd.

By the time children are involved in the child protection system, they have often experienced chronic and complex trauma, often at the hands of the people entrusted with their care.

Understanding How Trauma Affects Children

Children are affected by traumatic events they've witnessed or experienced in numerous ways. Two children may have very different reactions to the same traumatic event. The way a child is affected may depend on any or all of the following:

- The child's age or developmental stage
- The child's perception of the danger faced
- Whether the child was a victim or a witness
- The child's relationship to the victim or perpetrator
- The child's past experience with trauma
- The adversities the child faces following the trauma
- The presence/availability of adults who can offer help and protection

NCTSN, Child Welfare Trauma Toolkit, January 2013, Slide 36.

For many children, exposure to traumatic events may have long-term consequences that can affect behavior, school performance, participation in high-risk behavior, health problems and relationship difficulties.

For young children unable to communicate emotions associated with experiencing trauma, the effects may be manifested as physical tension or health complaints.

Cultural Considerations

It is important to understand the cultural background of a child when assessing a child's trauma history. Culture can influence how the trauma is experienced by the child. The way a child or family interprets the meaning of the trauma will influence how they respond to the traumatic stress. Because some families' interpretations

Understanding Child Trauma, Cont'd.

may differ from yours, it is best to ask children and families about what the traumatic experience means to them.

What a CASA/GAL Volunteer Can Do

Exposure to trauma can have lasting impacts on children, affecting their behavior, worldview and sense of safety. In your role as a CASA/GAL volunteer, working with children who have experienced trauma, it is important that you treat them as individuals, rather than seeing them as victims of the traumatic event.

Because the children you will work with may have long histories of trauma, it's important that you consider their past experiences. While your work may initially focus on the event that brought a child into the child protection system, you may consider requesting or recommending that the child have a trauma screening. Consider that what others are seeing as misbehavior or lack of age appropriate development may be trauma related. Trauma screenings or assessments are most often completed by therapists or clinicians to screen for a child's history of exposure to traumatic events and can help all involved understand the child's behaviors in the context of his or her life's experiences. You must have frequent communication with therapists and others involved in the treatment of the child. However, you have to observe boundaries, i.e. the volunteer should not try to provide therapy.

Parents within the system will often have their own unresolved trauma histories, which may have contributed to their circumstances. It may be appropriate for the parent to undergo a trauma screening as well. Viewing the parent's behaviors and/or the child's reactions in the context of their trauma histories is integral to having compassion and understanding for their situation.

The following questions can help you determine whether to recommend an assessment for a child or parent:

- Has the child experienced early and repeated exposure to overwhelming events in the context of a caregiver/family setting or in the community?
- Is the child having difficulty regulating or controlling behavior, sometimes appearing hyperactive, engaging in risky behaviors or having difficulty complying with rules?
- Is the child having difficulty with sustaining attention, concentration or learning?

Understanding Child Trauma, Cont'd.

- Is the child showing persistent difficulties in relationships with others? Does the child have difficulty regulating bodily states and emotions, including problems with sleep, eating, sensory processing and/or identifying/expressing feelings?
- Does the child have multiple mental health diagnoses without any one sufficient diagnosis explaining his/her problems?

*From the National Child Traumatic Stress Network website:
www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/complex-trauma/assessment.*

Communication and CASA/GAL Volunteer Work

You will come into contact with many people as you gather information and monitor a child's case. Relationships characterized by respect and credibility will assist you in doing your job. Respect is earned as others on the case see your commitment to the child and to your role as a CASA/GAL volunteer. Credibility is established when you do what you say you will do in a timely manner, when you make recommendations built on well-researched and independently verified information, and when you maintain your proper role as the child's advocate.

Effective communication is critical to your ability to advocate for children. Good communication requires:

- Self-awareness
- Sensitivity
- Skills

Understanding the basic elements of communication can increase your skills in gathering the information you need to successfully advocate for a child.

The Basics of Communication

Effective communication is critical to your ability to advocate for children. Communication is defined as an interchange or an exchange of thoughts and ideas. Often the message a person intends to send is not the message that is received. What is said can be interpreted differently depending on the receiver's understanding of the words and the nonverbal cues that accompany the words.

Communication has three components:

1. The **verbal** component refers to the actual words spoken.
2. The **nonverbal** component refers to gestures, tone of voice and other unspoken means of conveying a message. The nonverbal code can easily be misread.
3. The **feelings** component refers to the feelings experienced as a result of the communication.

Communication and CASA/GAL Volunteer Work, Cont'd.

While the verbal and nonverbal can be observed, feelings are not easy to observe. Whenever there is a discrepancy between the verbal, the nonverbal and the feelings components of a message, the receiver of the message will tend to believe the nonverbal.

As a CASA/GAL volunteer, you will communicate with children, their families and professionals involved in the case, among others. It is important that you deliver messages that are consistent in all three components of communication. You must also train to listen for meaning, which requires three sets of ears—one set for receiving the spoken message, one for receiving the silent message(s) conveyed, and one for receiving the feelings of the sender.

Adapted from “Learning to Listen to Trainees,” Ron Zemke, and “Learn to Read Nonverbal Trainee Messages,” Charles R. McConnell.

Cultural Considerations

There are differences in nonverbal communication from culture to culture. Hand and arm gestures, touch, proximity and eye contact (or lack of) are a few of the aspects of nonverbal communication that may vary depending upon cultural background. For example, in some cultures:

- Pointing with one finger is considered to be rude.
- Patting a child’s head is inappropriate.
- Eye contact is thought to be disrespectful.

Open-Ended vs. Closed-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions invite others to engage in a dialogue with you. In your work as a CASA/GAL volunteer, using open-ended questions allows children and adults to give more thoughtful answers since these questions cannot be answered with a simple yes, no or one-word answer. Sometimes open-ended questions are phrased as a statement that requires a response (for example, “Tell me about...” or “Describe for me...”).

Examples of open-ended questions:

For child: *“Please describe what your morning is like from the time you wake up until you go to school.”*

For adult: *“How did your family come to be involved with the court system?”*

Closed-ended questions are useful when you are trying to obtain factual information. They can be answered with a simple yes or no, or with a single word or short phrase.

Examples of closed-ended questions:

For child: *“Is your aunt still living nearby?”*

For adult: *“How many times has Johnny been to the emergency room this month?”*

Clarifying questions are used to gather additional details or clear up any confusion.

Examples of clarifying questions:

“I didn’t understand the phrase you just used. Could you explain it?”

“You mentioned someone named James. What is his relationship to the child?”

Do not ask **leading questions!** A **leading question** is one that suggests a desired answer.

Example of a leading question:

“Your favorite weekends are spent with your dad, right?”

Leading questions are never appropriate in any CASA/GAL volunteer interview.

Open-Ended vs. Closed-Ended Questions, Cont'd.

More Examples

Closed-Ended Question:

- (For a child): Do you want to live with your mother or your father?

Open-Ended: Question:

- Who would you like to live with?
- Who do you think you'd be happiest living with?

Closed-Ended Question:

- (For a parent): You seem unhappy lately. Are you?

Open-Ended Question:

- How have you been feeling lately?
- How are you doing emotionally?

Closed-Ended Question:

- (For a child): Does your mom leave you alone at night a lot?

Open-Ended Question:

- Tell me what it's like at home at night.
- Who is around when you're at home at night?

Closed-Ended Question:

- (For a parent): Do you understand the difference between a CASA/GAL volunteer and a caseworker?

Open-Ended Question:

- Tell me your understanding of my role as a CASA/GAL volunteer.
- How do you think my role is different from that of the caseworker?

The CASA/GAL Interview

In your role as a CASA/GAL volunteer, you will have the chance to interview many people related to a case: the child, the parent(s), other relatives, the child's teacher, medical professionals, the caseworker and so on. Because you may have a limited amount of time to seek information and interview everyone you deem necessary before your first hearing or report is due, it is important that you make the best possible use of interview time by determining what information is needed and crafting questions to ask ahead of time.

The interview is a powerful tool in your CASA/GAL volunteer toolbox and should be controlled by you, the fact gatherer. CASA/GAL volunteer interviews are neither friendly chats nor inquisitions. The structure of the interview should be non-threatening. Start with comfortable material and lead to more sensitive areas. You may face the tendency to turn the interview into a personal conversation, but keep in mind that it is possible to make someone feel at home and to show an interest in him or her while still presenting yourself as the one in charge, the professional. It is rarely appropriate to discuss your personal life or your past experiences. Never discuss your own attitudes or biases. Your goal is to gather enough information, in a respectful manner, to produce a factually sound, insightful report and recommendations for the court.

Basic Tips for a Productive CASA/GAL Interview

1. Display empathy and concentration. Portray an accepting, believing, non-judgmental demeanor.
2. Observe gestures, expressions and other forms of nonverbal communication.
3. Make notes about the environment. Does the room contain family photos, toys and so on?
4. Prepare questions beforehand, but be flexible, asking clarifying questions as needed.
5. Do not ask leading questions. A leading question assumes a point of view on your part.
6. Listen to understand. Do not interrupt.
7. Do not expect to gather all the information needed in one session.
8. Encourage subjects to keep talking with phrases such as, "Okay," "Go on," or "Please continue," or allowing five seconds of silence. Do not be afraid of silences.

The CASA/GAL Interview, Cont'd.

9. Check to make sure you understand what the speaker is trying to convey, using phrases such as “What I’m hearing is . . .” or “It sounds like you are saying . . . Is that right?”
10. Do not preach or teach. Avoid arrogance.

Interviewing Children

As a CASA/GAL volunteer, you do not directly ask a child about incidents of abuse. A professional forensic interviewer, trained social worker or police officer will handle those inquiries as a part of an investigation. A badly conducted interview of a child-victim can alienate and upset the child. The Center for Problem-Oriented Policing (POP) website states that common errors interviewing children include reinforcing certain answers, relaying what others believe about the allegation and asking complicated questions. They advise the following:

1. Make the interview setting child-friendly.
2. Recognize the developmental capabilities of children of different ages.
3. Exercise patience.
4. Avoid “why” questions and focus instead on clear, open-ended questions.
5. Make efforts to offset any guilt the victim may experience for “causing trouble.”

Your role as a CASA/GAL volunteer is to get a sense of a child’s past and current circumstances and how the child is doing presently. Some children can talk about their situations and their wishes, but other children do not have sufficient verbal and developmental skills sufficient to express themselves. For that reason, fact-based observations about a child are important to your role in gathering information about a case.

During the initial part of the interview, focus on helping the child feel comfortable and relaxed. Introduce yourself and explain your role and why the interview is taking place. This is a good time to play an age-appropriate game. It is important to remember that what you observe may raise questions about the child and the child’s life. Be careful not to misinterpret a child’s play or take their words literally. As a CASA/GAL volunteer, you do not want to reach conclusions based on any one piece of information. Information that emerges in play needs to be corroborated by other sources.

The CASA/GAL Interview, Cont'd.

In the article “Interviewing Children,” Rosemary Vasquez suggests that since you cannot “interview” infants, CASA/GAL volunteers should consider the following:

- What does direct observation of the child tell you?
- What do you observe about the child relating to parent(s), caregiver, siblings and strangers?
- What is the infant’s affect?
- Does the baby make eye contact or avoid eye contact?
- How does the parent relate to the child and vice versa?

This type of “interview” with an infant and parent should provide you with a sense of whether the parent provides the child with appropriate stimuli, enhances the security of the child and meets the child’s physical and emotional needs.

Tips for Interviewing Children

1. Ask a child a question or two to which you know the answer. Such questions can help you determine the competence level of a younger child and/or an older child’s willingness to tell the truth.
2. Establish parameters to obtain more accurate information. For example, you might ask a child, “Was it bigger than a football?” “Did it happen before the school bus came?” or “Was there snow on the ground?”
3. Break questions down into parts to help a child remember more detail. Just asking a child, “What happened?” may not elicit a useful answer.
4. If you think a child has been coached, you may want to end the interview with this question: “Is there anything else you are supposed to tell me?”
5. Let the child tell his/her story.

Adapted from Lucas County, Ohio CASA/GAL.

Initial Case Notes for the Black-Smith Case (for Pre-Work)

CPS Case File

Last Name of Case:			Black/Smith	
Legal Number(s):			3AN-15-154/155	
Child(ren)'s Name	DOB	Age	Ethnicity	Sex
Tammy Black	9/1	6	White	F
Grace Smith	8/19	4 months	White	F

Current Placement	Address	Phone
Foster Parents: Linda and Dave Gilbert	4206 Front Street	555-4413

Attorneys for	Attorneys	Phone Numbers
Mother	Megan Miller	555-9894
Father	Ben Bryant	555-1337
CPS	Heather Stafford	555-7344

Case History

Sept 15: Six-year-old Tammy made a call to 911 due to domestic violence in the home. Police found two children on the scene (Tammy, age 6; Grace, 4 months) and removed the children from the home based on evidence at the scene, including parents too inebriated to provide a safe home for their children and mother's bruises and bleeding as a result of a fight between her and her husband. The father, Mr. Alan Smith, was arrested on DV charges. CPS was notified and the children were placed together in emergency foster care.

Sept 22: Tammy and Grace were moved from the emergency foster care placement and placed with licensed foster parents Linda and Dave Gilbert. Foster parents reported that upon arrival, Tammy cried the first six hours and was inconsolable.

Sept 25: Due to where the new foster home is located, Tammy moved to a new school. Linda reported this change has been very difficult for Tammy.

Sept 29: Following an initial hearing, parents were ordered to receive drug/alcohol screenings, attend any recommended substance abuse treatment programs, and provide random urinalysis. The biological father of Tammy is deceased. Mr. Smith, Grace's biological father, was ordered to attend a domestic violence program. The mother, Francis Smith, was ordered to attend domestic violence survivor's program.

Nov 29: Parents stipulated to adjudication, thereby acknowledging the issues are substance abuse, physical abuse and anger management.

CASA History: Case Initially Assigned to:	You and your team	Date Assigned:	Today
		Date assigned:	N/A
Current CASA volunteer:	You and your team	Date terminated:	Today
Date Terminated:	Jessica Clarkson		
CASA/GAL Program Coordinator:	Sarah Griffin	Date assigned:	9/15
Initial CPS Social Worker:	Becky Howard	Date assigned:	10/20

Case History, Cont'd.

Court-Ordered Services

For the Children:

Educational needs met as appropriate

For the Father:

Drug/alcohol screening and substance abuse treatment

Anger management classes

For the Mother:

Domestic violence survivor's program

