

Section Two

COMMUNICATING AS A CASA VOLUNTEER

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Communicating as a CASA Volunteer

You will come into contact with many people during your investigation and monitoring of 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 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.



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The Basics of Communication

Communication is a two-way street. It 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 nonverbal cues that accompany the words. Communication experts suggest that words and their dictionary meanings are only one-third of any speaker's message.

Communication has three components:

1. **Verbal:** The verbal component refers to the actual words spoken, the elements we traditionally think of as language and refer to as “communication.”
2. **Nonverbal:** The nonverbal component refers to gestures, body movements, tone of voice, and other unspoken means of conveying a message. The nonverbal code can be easily misread.
3. **Feelings:** This component refers to the feelings that are experienced in the course of an interaction. While the verbal and nonverbal components can be directly observed, the feelings component is not easy to observe.

Ideally, these three components match—that is, there is no conflict between what people say, what they convey through body language, and what they feel. Sometimes, however, people send mixed messages. 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. Given all the variables involved, it is easy to see why misunderstandings occur between people.

As a CASA volunteer, you will communicate with children, their families, caseworkers, and others involved in a case. It is important that you understand how to convey your message consistently using all three components of communication—verbal, nonverbal, and feelings. It is also essential that you learn to observe whether people's verbal and nonverbal messages match or are congruent. It is important to “hear” the silent messages. Listening for meaning requires three sets of ears—one set for receiving the message that is spoken, one for receiving the message that is conveyed silently, 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.*



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Language and Cross-Cultural Communication

Culture and language are very closely related. As a CASA volunteer, you will need to interact effectively with people who speak English but have different cultural backgrounds from yours. You may also need to communicate with families who speak limited English or none at all. Whether you speak the same language as the child and his/her family or must use a translator, it is important that you use plain language without professional jargon.

Speaking a language different from the mainstream has a strong effect on family and individual development. Language is a powerful vehicle for communicating culture. It can be the glue that holds a cultural group together, and at the same time it can be a barrier to gaining access to needed resources such as education or jobs. Many immigrants eager for citizenship and full acceptance strive to acquire English while maintaining their own language. Language also influences a family's connections with the larger community, as those who do not speak English often feel isolated and excluded from the community. If children are the first to learn English, as often happens in immigrant families, the balance of power can shift as parents and grandparents rely on children to translate and interpret information from agencies and others in the community.

Adapted from Empowerment Skills for Family Workers, Christiann Dean, Cornell Empowering Families Project, August 1996. Used with permission.



Communicating Effectively with Others on the Case

Effective communication requires that CASA volunteers be aware of what attitudes and behaviors they bring to the setting. It is also important to understand something about the family, and the attitudes and behaviors they bring. A CASA will be working with diverse individuals, professions, and ways of life.

In working complex cases, it is easy to reduce the threat of the unknown by making the world predictable with our own conceptions. But stereotypes interfere with seeing people as they really are. When feeling the urge to stereotype, the CASA volunteer should step back and let curiosity push past the stereotype or judgment. Allow real interest and natural curiosity about our differences to lead us to expand our knowledge and understanding.

Recognizing that different points of view are merely perspectives on a specific situation and that no one has a monopoly on the truth is important. Showing empathy for other points of view in order to achieve the best possible course of action for the situation is also important. This approach will enable the CASA to reach consensus when addressing various issues and determining whether case plan tasks are reasonable to overcome the problems that led to removal of the child from the home.

The following roadblocks to communication are listed to help you avoid this behavior. A CASA volunteer should approach each person with respect and honesty. Treat each circumstance as a unique situation in order to avoid making statements that trivialize another person's circumstances.

<i>Preaching/Moralizing:</i>	“It’s wrong to do that...”
<i>Giving advice:</i>	“You should just...”
<i>Quoting facts:</i>	“Ninety percent of people today are in the same situation...”
<i>Using trite expressions:</i>	“No one ever promised you a rose garden.”
<i>Judging:</i>	“That was really stupid!”
<i>Reassuring:</i>	“I’m sure everything will be just fine.”
<i>Mine’s worse:</i>	“You think that’s bad, I had a much worse case...”

A way for a CASA volunteer to develop trust is to sincerely restate what was just heard. This allows the person an opportunity to verify what has been said, correct or clarify any discrepancies, and add additional comments.

Communicating with CASA Children

When working with a child, CASA volunteers should remember that the child's chronological age may not match the developmental age. A CASA should take time to develop a relationship that is built on consistent contact and trust. Information may come at the most unusual times and circumstances once trust is developed. It is strongly suggested that consistent personal or phone contact be made at least once every two weeks.

It is also important that the CASA volunteer be candid with the assigned child. When the child gives information that impacts the case, the CASA must tell the child in age-appropriate terms how the information will be used. What the child wants may not be in the child's best interest. The CASA volunteer must inform the child that they will present their opinions to the court, but not necessarily recommend what the child wants. It is also wise for the CASA to ask the child to clarify words or terms they do not understand. As with parents, the CASA volunteer must never promise to keep any secrets. Nothing is "off the record."

There will be a number of times when CASA volunteers will help children deal with their feelings. A child needs to have feelings accepted and respected. When a child is relaying feelings to a CASA, it is important to:

- Listen quietly and attentively.
- Acknowledge the child's feelings with an encouraging word.
- Give the feeling a name. "That sounds frustrating!"

When dealing with a child's behaviors, all feelings can be accepted. Certain actions must be limited. "I can see how angry you are at your brother. Tell him what you want with words, not with fists."

A child needs to have actions described, not evaluated. Positive descriptions can effectively praise a child's effort and increase self-esteem. For example, an enthusiastic, "I see a clean floor, a smooth bed, and books neatly lined up on the shelf," reinforces the successful behavior. "It is a pleasure to walk into this room. Thank you." Sum up the child's praiseworthy behavior with a word. "You sorted out your pencils, crayons, and pens, and put them in separate boxes. That's what I call organization!"

Self-esteem is built by giving the child age-appropriate autonomy.

1. Let the child make choices. "Do you want to go to get a hamburger today, then to the park for a picnic, or do you want to go to the mall for a slice of pizza and window shop?"



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2. Show respect for a child's struggle. "A jar can be hard to open. Sometimes it helps if you tap the side of the lid with a spoon."
3. Don't ask too many questions. Be friendly. "Glad to see you. I saw the best TV program the other day. It was about dinosaurs..."
4. Don't rush to answer questions. "That's an interesting question. What do you think?"
5. Encourage children to use sources outside the home. "Maybe the pet shop owner would have a suggestion. Let's look up the phone number and you can ask him."
6. Don't take away hope. "So you are thinking of trying out for the school play. That should be a great experience. What's the play? What part do you want to try out for?"



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Establishing Rapport and Trust with Children

A relationship characterized by rapport and trust...

- Should be built on a sincere interest in the child as a person as well as the child's well-being.
- Takes time and energy.
- Involves actively listening to the child's words and observing his/her nonverbal cues.
- Needs regular nurturing.
- Requires honesty in all communication with the child.
- Is developed for the benefit of the child, not the adult.

The children for whom CASA volunteers advocate have been traumatized by the abuse or neglect that brought them to the attention of the child protective services system and by all of the life changes that have occurred as a result of agency intervention. As a CASA, you are likely to be one more new person in a long line of new people in the child's life.

In order to be an effective advocate, you must perform a thorough independent investigation of a child's situation and best interests (not the allegations that brought the child into care). In the course of that investigation, you will meet and talk with the child, the child's family, the child's extended family and neighbors, and the professionals who are working with the child and his/her family.

Developing rapport and trust with the child is one of your most important responsibilities. It is the foundation of your relationship with the child. Respecting privacy is critical to establishing a trusting relationship. You can assess what the child needs and what the child wants only if you have established a relationship that allows the child to honestly share his/her feelings.

Reflection Question

Name three concrete things you think you could do to establish rapport and trust with the children you will encounter as a CASA volunteer.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



Considerations for Observing Children

Knowledge about communication is important to the specific ways you will gather information from children. Some children can talk about their situations and their wishes, but other children do not have verbal and developmental skills sufficient to express their needs and wishes. Because the verbal skills of children vary, fact-based observations about a child are a vital part of your investigation and court report as a CASA volunteer.

Because it is impossible to observe everything a child does, it is important to think about what specific information you want to know about the child while trying to keep your mind open to unexpected information. Reading over the following questions several times before you begin observing a child will help you remember what to look for.

1. What is the specific situation in which the child is operating?

What other activities are going on? What are the general expectations of the group at the moment and what is the general atmosphere of the room—calm, noisy, boisterous, quiet?

2. What is the child's approach to materials and activities?

Is the child slow in getting started or does he/she plunge right in? Does the child use materials in the usual way or does he/she use them in different ways, exploring them for the possibilities they offer?

3. How interested is the child in what he/she is doing?

Does the child seem intent on what he/she is doing or does the child seem more interested in what others are doing? How long is his/her concentration span? How often does he/she shift activities?

4. How much energy does the child use?

Does the child work at a fairly even pace or does he/she work in spurts of activity? Does the child use a great deal of energy in manipulating the materials, in body movements, or in talking?

5. What are the child's body movements like?

Does the child's body seem tense or relaxed? Are movements jerky, uncertain, or poorly coordinated?

6. What does the child say?

Does the child talk, sing, hum, or use nonsense words while he/she works? Does the child use sentences or single words? Does the child communicate with others using words or gestures?

7. What is the child's affect (visual emotions)?

What are the child's facial expressions like? Does he/she appear frustrated? Happy?

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8. How does the child get along with other children?

Does the child play alone, with only certain children, or with a variety of children? Is the child willing or unwilling to share toys? Does the child always initiate or always follow along with group ideas?

9. What kinds of changes are there from the beginning to the end of an activity?

Does the child's mood change during that period?

10. What is the child's relationship with you?

11. What is the child's relationship with others (parents, caseworker, attorney, foster parents, etc.)?

12. Is there anything "different" or "troubling" about this child as compared with other children of the same age?

13. Are there issues that you think should be checked out by a professional? (Vision, hearing, dental health, cognitive development, physical development, psychological development, etc.)

Adapted from "Assessing a Child's Welfare," Eunice Snyder, ACSW, and Keetje Ramo, ACSW, School of Social Work, Eastern Washington University, 1984.

Reflection Questions

- In addition to observing behaviors and expressions, what other ways can you learn about what children are feeling?

- How do these ways differ from the ways you learn about what adults are thinking and feeling?

- How might your observations be influenced by your assumptions?



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Dealing with Conflict

As a CASA volunteer, you will be gathering information from various sources in order to form your recommendations on behalf of the child you represent. It is inevitable that these various sources will hold different points of view and, in some cases, will come in conflict with you or with each other. Many of us are wary of conflict. It may stir up uncomfortable feelings and negative associations. Our past experience with conflict may lead us to believe that it is destructive. We may try to avoid it, or we may feel inadequate to the task of addressing and resolving it.

But conflict is a natural part of life, and it can be a positive and constructive force. It can clear the air, help us articulate our point of view, and help to define a problem in a way that ignoring it never can. What follows is some information about how to manage conflict that may help remove some of its negative associations and help us see its positive aspects.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we all have a preferred style of handling conflict. We most likely learned it within our family of origin, and we keep at it because it feels part of who we are, how we do things. It's a familiar response that we do not often examine. But, as you will see, each of the following conflict styles is available to all of us. Think of them as tools in a toolbox. Just as different jobs call for different tools, different situations call for different conflict management styles.



Conflict Management Styles

The following framework, developed by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann to describe conflict management styles, is used extensively in business and educational programs. A person's style in dealing with a particular conflict depends on the importance of the task or topic at hand and the importance of the relationship between the two parties in conflict.

DIRECTING: "WHAT I SAY GOES" OR "THIS IS NOT NEGOTIABLE"

You are confident that you know the best way, so you don't bargain or give in. You may feel that you need to stand up for what you believe is right. You may also feel you need to pursue your concerns rather than the other person's concerns.

Potential Uses:

- When immediate action is needed
- When safety is a concern
- When you believe you are right

Potential Limitations:

- Intimidates people and can force them to react against your position
- Does not allow others to participate in the decision-making process

AVOIDING: "DON'T MAKE WAVES" OR "THIS ISN'T WORTH THE BOTHER"

You don't address conflict because you are attempting to be diplomatic or because you want to address it at another time.

Potential Uses:

- When confrontation is too damaging
- When a cool down period might be helpful
- When you want to buy time to prepare
- When you believe the situation will resolve itself in time

Potential Limitations:

- Important issues might not get addressed
- The conflict might escalate or return later

ACCOMMODATING: "IT DOESN'T MATTER TO ME"

You yield to the other person's point of view for the sake of a positive relationship. You may give in for now but expect to get your way another time when the matter is more important to you.

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Potential Uses:

- When the relationship is more important than the issue
- When you want to keep the peace and maintain harmony
- When the outcome is more important to the other person than it is to you

Potential Limitations:

- If used too often, your needs don't get met

COMPROMISING: "LET'S SPLIT THE DIFFERENCE" OR "HALF A LOAF IS BETTER THAN NONE"

You seek a middle ground that everyone can agree on. Each party must give up something to reach an agreement that each can live with. Compromising is often quick and easy, and most people know how to do it.

Potential Uses:

- When parties of equal strength have mutually exclusive goals
- When all else fails

Potential Limitations:

- May avoid discussion of real issues
- Everyone may walk away dissatisfied

COLLABORATING: "TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE" OR "LET'S WORK IT OUT"

You work with the other parties to explore your disagreement, examine alternative solutions, and attempt to find a mutually satisfying solution ("win-win") rather than telling them what you think is best or right.

Potential Uses:

- When everyone's needs are worth meeting
- When you want to improve relations between parties
- When parties are willing to learn from each other's point of view

Potential Limitations:

- This method takes time
- It will not work unless everyone is willing to participate
- It requires trust

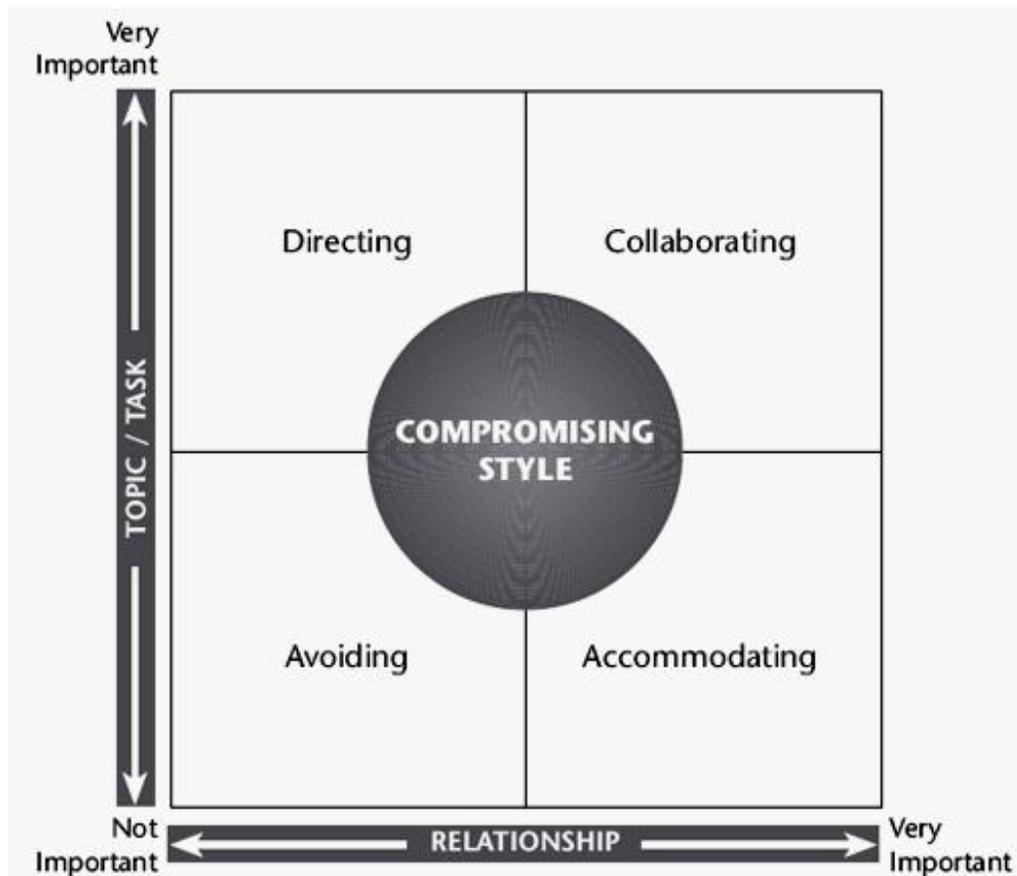
Adapted from the Thomas-Kilmann Mode Instrument



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One way to determine which style is the most effective in any given situation is to weigh the importance of the relationship against the task or topic at hand (see chart below). For example, the accommodating style is most effective when the relationship is more important than the task (e.g., one person lets another choose the movie they'll see because it's the company that's important, not the movie). Conversely, the directing style is most effective when the task is important and the relationship is not (e.g., a police officer evacuating a burning building won't be concerned if you like him, just that you escape safely).

Many of us fall back on the same conflict management style out of habit, but the relative weight of task and relationship will vary from situation to situation. It's important to consider each instance and use the most appropriate style. Each style will be useful to you at different times in your work as a CASA volunteer.



Activity: Conflict in CASA Work

Read each of the following case scenarios and answer the questions that follow.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SCENARIO 1

The CASA Volunteer

You are a new CASA volunteer on a case involving twin three-year-olds. You are having a disagreement with Susan, a caseworker, regarding the need for developmental evaluations. The state has legal custody of the children. The maternal grandmother, who has physical custody of the girls, has reported to you that the girls have hardly any verbal skills. You have met the girls and they seem to know only a few words. You believe that a professional in child development should decide if the children need evaluations.

The grandmother has no transportation and is caring for two other school-age children. She appears to you to be overwhelmed and genuine in asking for help. She is willing to attend the evaluations but needs help setting them up and getting there. You feel it is a CPS responsibility to set up the evaluations and transport the girls.

The Caseworker

Susan has been a caseworker for the state for five years. She has some very difficult cases that are taking a great deal of her time and her caseload has been soaring. The department has just been reorganized—again—and Susan has a new supervisor who is very concerned about budget and has been complaining about the high incidence of referrals for outside services (such as developmental evaluations). Susan doesn't believe that evaluations on these children are really necessary; she has had some experience with twins, whose language development was delayed because they had developed their own ways of communicating with each other, and believes that is the situation here. Susan has also had some contact with the grandmother and is not convinced that she will follow through with plans.

Adapted from material from the North Carolina Guardian ad Litem volunteer training curriculum.

- What would you do as the CASA volunteer to resolve the conflict?

- What barriers might prevent you from resolving the conflict?

Activity: What Do You Say?

As you read each of the following questions and statements below, reflect back on what you have learned so far about being a CASA volunteer. Which questions and statements do you think you could respond to? Which ones do you want to discuss with your county coordinator?

What Do You Say When the Child Says...

- When can I go home?
- Why am I in the foster home?
- Can I tell you something, but you have to promise not to tell anyone else?
- I lied. I didn't tell the social worker the truth.
- My daddy said I couldn't talk to you.
- Where's my mommy? Why doesn't she come see me?
- I hate my *#@\$* parents. I never want to see them again.
- I won't go to counseling.
- I'm pregnant.
- I haven't told anyone yet, but my dad's been molesting me.
- F*** you! I'm not going to talk to you!

What Do You Say When the Parent Says...

- What are you going to tell the judge about my case?
- You can't talk to my kid at school without my permission.
- You're just a volunteer. Let me talk to your supervisor.
- I'm not going to let you in my house if you try to visit me.
- Can you give me a ride to my counseling appointment?
- Would you watch the kids while I go to the store?
- I'm flat broke. I don't have any food. Would you give me some money so I can go shopping at the grocery store?
- What do you know—you don't have kids.
- Why won't you let my kids come home? Don't you like me?

What Do You Say When the Caseworker Says...

- I'm really busy. Can you please supervise this visit?
- I don't have time to do transportation. If you want these kids to see their mother twice a week, you have to drive them to the visits.
- I don't have a case plan written yet.
- There's a wait list for services. What do you expect me to do?
- Oh, those kids? I sent them to relatives last week.

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- I'm the intake worker. I transferred the case last week. I don't know who the new caseworker is.

What Do You Say When an Attorney Says...

- Can I get a copy of your file?
- My client, the dad, can't stand you. How do I get a new CASA assigned?

What Do You Say When a Foster Parent Says...

- I haven't heard from the caseworker recently. What's going on in the case?
- Can you sign Susie's permission slip for this downhill skiing activity?
- John's mom called and wants an extra visit this weekend. Is that okay? I haven't been able to reach the caseworker.
- There's an IEP meeting at school next week and they want his guardian to be there. Is that you or me?
- Mary's mom is here for a visit right now and she's very drunk. What should I do?
- Amy ran away from my foster home last night. What do I do?
- I want these kids out now—they're driving me bats. HELP!

What Do You Do or Say When...

- A legislator calls you about your case?
- The ombudsman calls you about your case?
- The governor's office calls you about your case?
- A reporter calls you about your case?

Created by Alaska CASA



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Resources

Association for Conflict Resolution

www.acrnet.org

The Association for Conflict Resolution is a professional organization dedicated to enhancing the practice and public understanding of conflict resolution. Their website provides a state-by-state search for ACR chapters.

The Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC)

www.cnvc.org

The Center for Nonviolent Communication is a global organization whose vision is a world where all people are getting their needs met and resolving their conflicts peacefully, including in systems such as economics, education, justice, and healthcare.

CR Info

www.crinfo.org

This site provides extensive information about conflict resolution, including articles and resources on more than 600 topics.

Interviewing Children e-learning course

<http://www.supreme.state.az.us/casa/prepare/training.html>

This module focuses on the uniqueness of interviewing children, emphasizing the important developmental considerations in planning the child interview, and delineating some age-appropriate interviewing techniques.



