

# Interviewing the Child Handout Session 3 Greene Case



## PREPARATION FOR INTERVIEW

Using a play setting can be very beneficial when interviewing children, as it creates a less formal and more relaxed environment. Depending on the age and type of trauma, children may have a difficult time verbally expressing how they feel and will be more likely to open up if they feel less threatened and in more control of the interview. Communicating through play makes it more about fun and can make serious conversations less scary.

### 1. Find clarity about the purpose of your interview:

- Make a list of possible biases that you may have regarding the issues in the child's life. Becoming aware of these biases can influence your decisions and recommendations regarding this case.
- Become aware of how you feel about the situation of the case prior to interviewing
- Discuss biases with CASA Supervisor and how to keep them from tainting your judgement

### 2. Determine what you need to learn

- Social, physical, and cultural aspects of the child's life.

### 3. Develop a framework for questions

- Rapport building is extremely important—a child is more likely to open up if they feel comfortable and safe.

### 4. Determine the proper setting

- Create a safe and fun environment so the child feels comfortable talking. You may want to bring along some items with you to make the

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interview more fun. Such items can be: colored pencils, crayons, paper, puppets, games, books, etc. Make sure the items are age appropriate.

- b. Home visits provide an excellent opportunity to observe the child in his/her own environment. It can also provide an opportunity to observe the interaction between the child and his/her caretaker.

## INTERVIEWING CHILDREN

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. Consider the following when conducting your interviews:

### 1. introduce yourself to the caretaker and explain your role

- a. Explain that you would like to interview the child in a separate location and ask for any suggestions as to the best place to conduct your interview with that child.

### 2. Suggest that caretaker introduce you to the child

- a. Once the parent or caretaker has introduced you to the child, suggest that the child show you his or her bedroom or play area.
- b. You may want to consider conducting the interview in a room that is separate from the rest of the household; however, if the child appears anxious or concerned than you may explore other options. If the child does not want to meet with you separate make sure to honor that child's wishes.

### 3. Conduct Interview with Child

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- a. Make sure the setting that is chosen is one that will engage the child's interest.
- b. Focus on helping the child feel comfortable and relaxed
- c. Explain the reason for your visit
- d. Allow the child to guide the playtime activities and only provide some direction when needed.
- e. Share your role by using pictures or drawings if age appropriate. Explain the importance of getting to know the child.
- f. Encourage the child to ask any questions he or she may have. This will help reduce anxiety and also engage the child.

## **4. Make sure to observe how the child interacts with the family or caretakers**

- a. Once you have completed your interview with the child, you may want to observe how the child interact with his/her family. If the child is placed in a foster home consider coordinating a time with the caseworker to observe a supervised visit with family members.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

The court is the only party to whom you are required to report what the child tells you. Obviously your CASA/GAL volunteer supervisor will also have access to this information. The information that you gather during your interview will be provided to the court via your court report. Make sure to provide facts that support your decisions and recommendations. Inform your CASA Supervisor if you have any concerns regarding your conversation with the child or any other parties especially if it involves illegal activities or is detrimental to the child's well-being. Remember you are an information gather and not an informant. Should someone have questions regarding the case refer them to the caseworker as that is their liaison between the courts and the child.

## DEVELOPMENTAL ASSESSMENT

1. Assess the child's developmental level and make sure the interview is framed in a way that is age-appropriate for that child.

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- a. Remember a child’s chronological age may not be the same as their developmental age. Trauma can sometimes be a reason as to why these two do not match.
  - b. Understanding the child’s developing cognitive abilities and emotional state of mind can help you better interpret what the child says and does.
2. Gathering as much information as you can about the child through interviews with parents, consultations with the school ie: teacher, guidance counselor, social worker, etc., the caseworker, medical provider, and any other professional you deem important to interview can also help you better interpret what the child says and does.

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Remember 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 the investigation. A poorly conducted interview of a child-victim can leave a child feeling alienated and upset. 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:

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

Please keep in mind that it is extremely important to make sure the questions you ask the child are appropriate for their developmental level.

### **Infants:**

Your interview will be primarily through observation and asking questions of the parent or caretaker. This type of “interview” with an infant and parent should provide you with a sense of whether the parent provides the child with appropriate

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stimuli, enhances the security of the child and meets the child's physical and emotional needs.

## **Direct observation**

- What is the infant's temperament?
  - Overly fussy?
  - Relatively happy?
- How does the infant respond to strangers?
- Does the infant make eye contact?
- Does the infant seem comfortable with the parent or caretaker?
- Does the infant appear to be dressed appropriately for the temperature of the room?
- Does the infant have any bruises or marks?
- Does the infant appear clean?

## **Parent-infant Interaction**

- How does the parent relate to the child?
- Does the parent appear calm, gentle, relaxed and confident about parenting?
- Does the parent appear anxious, easily frustrated, inattentive, indifferent, or detached?
- Does the parent respond appropriately to the infant when he or she cries?
- How does the parent communicate to the infant? Does he/she pick the infant up immediately when he/she cries?
- Does the parent let the infant cry for long periods of time?
- Does the infant sleep through the night?
- Has the infant been sick recently?
- How did the parent handle it when the infant was sick?
- When was the last time the infant was seen by a medical provider?
- Does the infant have any health concerns?
- Does the infant have a favorite toy?

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This interview should hopefully give you sense of how secure this infant feels and perhaps the type of attachment he/she may have to his/her parents. This interview may also show you the attentiveness of the parent and whether the child's needs are being met. The interview can potentially help you understand the types of resources needed and the recommendations that you can make to the court that will help create a safe, permanent and loving environment.

## Toddlers:

- Test the world and assert their will power
- Try to be autonomous
- Still need security that they can hold onto when they do not want to let go.
- Difficult to structure play
- May exhibit separation anxiety

## When Interviewing:

- Use short, simple sentences.
- Use the child's terms: Ask for clarification if you do not understand the terms used. For example: "What do you call \_\_\_\_\_?" "Tell me about..."
- Use names instead of pronouns
- Toddlers are people pleasers and want to say and do things that make others happy and appear to approve, so you may want to rephrase a sentence rather than repeating it because the child may think he/she gave the wrong answer.
- Avoid asking time relevant questions as these questions are difficult concepts for toddlers to understand.
- Consider recreating a situation or event to help stimulate the toddler's memory. Perhaps play a game or have a pretend tea party. Children at this age love to play pretend.

## Pre-schoolers:

- Enjoy using fantasy to mimic other people and events in their lives
- Cannot think logically
- Reason better when contexts are known to them
- Perform well with memory tasks that depend on recognition, but poorly on deliberate recall

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- More likely to use magical thinking or give inaccurate information when they are unsure or are confused about what is being asked.
- May only tell adults what they believe the adult wishes to hear
- Ask child to repeat what you said rather than ask if they understand
- Try not to follow every questions with another question. Ask the child to elaborate or just consider acknowledging the child's response rather than asking another question
- Learning about the child's routine may help the child recall particular events
- Consider asking the child "If you had a magic wand and could change anything you wanted, what would you change?" or "If you had three wishes about your family what would they be?"
- You may also want to ask the child to draw his/her family, which can help give you the child's idealized version of the family. After he/she has finished drawing ask him/her to tell you more about his/her family. Ask how that person is feeling. If the child appears to be struggling with verbalizing this, consider providing some descriptive word; however, be careful not to ask leading questions. Let the child be the one who leads the interview.

## Gradeschoolers:

- Moving towards mastery and competence
- Creative and competitive
- More receptive to games or building things
- Developing self-esteem
- Uses peers to measure their skills and self-worth
- Have better recall memory than pre-schoolers
- Logical thinkers
- Solution-focused
- Need to feel a sense of control
- May play out situations that they are trying to master
- Play and storytelling tends to emerge in their drawings and building things

## Teens:

- Struggling to fomulate their own identity

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- More independent
- Continue to need some structure and flexible boundaries
- Clarification of their own values is important
- Have cognitive ability to understand the realities of their life situation.
- May withdraw from family to protect themselves from pain
- Resistant to questioning
- First part of interview should encourage the teen to talk about issues in which they are most interested ie: dating, friends, classes, sports, and extra-curricular activities. Topics that are separate from court.
- Ask “What do you think is going on with your family?”
- Consider phrasing things like, “I heard \_\_\_\_\_ happened. What was that like for you?”
- Ask them to tell you about their earliest memory
- “What has changed for you since being separted from your parents?”
- Evaluate teens carefully; try to distinguish between normal adolescent behaviors and behaviors that may indicate depression or intense anger that may be related to the seperation.