

Advocate Refresher

Some Things That All CASA's Should Know About Their CASA Child – Even During a Pandemic

Our Advocate Supervisor Team has continued to be amazed at the work you have done since March. Being a CASA Volunteer has had added challenges since March of last year! You guys have definitely stepped up to the plate and continued to provide great advocacy for children!

There are some basic things that we need to know about our children at all times. While the manner of gathering the information has changed, we always want to stay on top of the following:

What Should We Know About Our Kids?

- We should always have fact based observations recorded detailing how the children interact with their current caretakers. Some examples would be: *“I have observed the child and his foster parent hugging each other and that the child appears very comfortable when speaking to his foster parent”*; *“The child is very respectful when speaking to his foster parent and is obedient regarding household rules”*; *“This CASA has observed the foster parent helping the child with his homework”*. Volunteers should also know the relationship between the child and the foster parent; is the foster parent a relative, a certified DCFS Foster Parent, a family friend, an adult sibling, etc. *Note: The foster parent or caregiver should not be the sole source of this information.
- We should have documentation regarding the environment that the child is living in. Our court reports and Optima Logs should indicate the size of the home, who lives there, what the child's sleeping arrangement is, does the child have toys in the home, how the child interacts with foster children and others in the home, and the condition of the home. If the child is in a relative placement, we'll need to know if the home is certified. *Note: You can ask the family to take you on a virtual tour of their home if face-to-face visits are not possible. The ask should be made after rapport is established.
- Our records and reports should reflect whether or not the current caretaker is committed to providing a permanent home to the child and how the child feels about being in that home. We should also make sure that we know if the caretaker's age, health, work schedule, financial status, etc. are conducive to them being able to care for the child until their 18th birthday.
- CASA Volunteers should always know where their CASA child goes to school or daycare and have reports from that facility on how the child is doing. We should obtain grades and attendance reports if the children are in school. *Most parents have the ability to view school reports, don't be afraid to ask to look. Schools can also send records electronically and most have the ability to conference with you by phone or video conference.
- We should also know what our CASA children's interests are. Find out if they like baseball, football, dance, art, music, etc. We need to know this so we can advocate for them to be able to participate in things that matter to them. *Note: Some of these are not currently available due to the pandemic but we still want to know and encourage our kiddos to find something that they love. This builds resiliency

- CASA Volunteers advocate for what is in a child's best interest but it is very important to know what their wishes are regarding permanency. We don't have to advocate for that, but it needs to be considered in evaluating best interest.
- We need to know if the child has special needs or needs any services. If the child is receiving any special services, we need to know if they are participating regularly and how they are progressing.
*Note: Contact service providers directly, the foster parent should not be our only source of information.

What Should We Know About the Parents?

- We should always know what the parents are required to do regarding Reunification with their children. This information can be obtained by reviewing the DCFS Case Plan that is uploaded in Optima or from speaking with the DCFS Worker.
- CASA Volunteers should know what the parents have completed on their case plan.
- It is important to know where parents are working and where they are living.
- Our records should reflect how often the parents are visiting with their children. If they are visiting, we need to observe the parent/child interaction during visits. CASA Volunteers should also know where the visits take place and how much time they are allotted for visitation.
- CASA Volunteers should have direct contact with the parents. While this may look a little different during the pandemic, we should give them an opportunity to tell us directly what they believe their successes are. This may be accomplished by telephone calls, video chats, or outdoor meetings. Volunteers can also ask parents to take them on a video tour of their home.

Please remember to document all of the information that you gather in Optima. National CASA Standard 7-E mandates that CASA Volunteers keep written records of all information gathered. Your Optima Contact Logs are how we accomplish that. It is not only a Standard. Your detailed logs assist us in providing better advocacy to the children we serve. Logs are reviewed prior to writing court reports and in monitoring the child's progress.

Your health and safety is very important to us. Please feel free to communicate directly with your advocate supervisor to brainstorm alternate ways of gathering information during this challenging time.