

# INTERVIEWING ADULTS AND CHILDREN



Presented by Tyreese Johnson  
Advocate Supervisor  
[TJohnson@familylawcasa.org](mailto:TJohnson@familylawcasa.org)

## WHOM WILL YOU INTERVIEW?

- 90-minute interview with each parent (plus home visit and parent/child observation) – in person
- Interview with the child(ren) you are assigned to - in person
- Interview with current partner of either parent alone – in person or telephone
- At least two collateral contacts for each parent – telephone
- Contact with child's school or daycare – telephone
- Contact with any applicable treatment providers – telephone

# INTRODUCTIONS

- “My name is <ALIAS NAME> and I am a CASA volunteer appointed by the court in your case.”
  - For phone calls ask: “Is this a good time to talk for a couple minutes?”
- Explain your role.
  - “I am Volunteer Advocate with Family Law CASA, a non-profit organization, My role is to gather certain information for the court and provide the court recommendations on what parenting plan is in the best interest of your child(ren). I am hoping to find a time to meet with you and the child(ren) at your home.”

# CONFIDENTIALITY

- We will make great effort to maintain confidentiality however there are a few big expectations.
- **We have an Ethical obligation to explain limits of our confidentiality:**

We must inform the interviewee that your discussion with them will be shared with the court, via our court report, and that both parties get a copy of that report as well. Also, we are Mandatory Reporters.

- Explain that you will be taking notes.
- Explain that you have read all of the court documents and know a little bit about the situation.
- Overview of Services.

# PARENT INTERVIEW TOPICS

- Every case is different. The structure of your interview will be determined by the circumstances of the case and family.
- Frequent issues include one or more of the following:
  - Substance Abuse/History of Substance issues
  - Mental Health
  - Abandonment Abuse & Neglect
  - Domestic Violence

# PARENT INTERVIEW TOPICS - SUBSTANCE ABUSE

- Ask: Describe your experience(s) with alcohol and drugs in in the past(as a teen, as an adult). When was the last time you used?
- What do you do to relax or unwind? Do you ever use drugs or alcohol to relax or unwind?
- How long did you use the drug/s for? When was the last time you used the drug/s?
- Have you had any legal charges related to drugs or alcohol?

# PARENT INTERVIEW TOPICS - SUBSTANCE ABUSE

- If you see mention to drugs or alcohol use in the file you can say: I saw in the court paperwork that the other parent alleged that you had a problem with drugs/ alcohol. Can you tell me why he/ she would say that or where that allegation came from? OR you can say: I see that the court commissioner asked you to submit to a UA, how come?
- Have you ever received counseling or other treatment services for drug or alcohol use? If so, ask when, where and why. What was the outcome? \*don't forget to have him/ her sign an ROI for any past or current substance abuse treatment

# PARENT INTERVIEW TOPICS- MENTAL HEALTH

- Have you ever participated in counseling or therapy for depression, anxiety or some other issue? Tell me about that.
- Has anyone ever suggested you might benefit from counseling or therapy? Tell me about that.
- How often are you suppose to be in treatment?
- Have you ever been Diagnosed with Mental Illness? By who? Will you sign a Release of Information?
- Are you taking any medication for your mental health? When did you start taking it? How much who prescribed it? Will you sign a Release of Information?
- Ask how it effects their day to day and parenting. Follow up with the other party.



# PARENT INTERVIEW TOPICS- ABANDONMENT, ABUSE & NEGLECT

## **Abandonment:**

- Do you get regular visit/residential time with the child(ren)? When was the last time?
- Do you speak to the child(ren) on the phone? How often? When was the last time?
- How involved where/are you in the child's day to day? How involved are you in the child's education?  
Medical needs?
- What barriers exist that are preventing you from more involved with the child(ren)?

# PARENT INTERVIEW TOPICS- ABANDONMENT, ABUSE & NEGLECT

## **Abuse & Neglect:**

It is not typically our Role to determine if abuse or neglect happened. When this is an issue on a case, we are to gather information about the incident. We also want to screen for concerns.

- What does a typical day with your child look like when you are together?
- Has CPS ever been called or involved with you or your family? If yes, When? Why? What was the outcome?
- Has CPS ever been called or involved with the other party? When? Where? Why? What was the outcome?
- What Services did CPS asked you to complete?
- How do you discipline the child(ren)?

# PARENT INTERVIEW TOPICS - DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

It is not typically our role to determine if DV happened or not, it is not our role to determine how bad the DV was.

- Describe the worst argument you ever had with anyone. What happened?
- Describe the worst argument or conflict you had with the other party. What happened?
- If we know about physical altercation from the pleadings ask both parties about the incident.
- How often did things like that happen? Ask where was the child(ren) when it happened.

## PARENT INTERVIEW TOPICS - DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- If someone has DV in their JABS ask them about the charge. Ask them about treatment.
- Ask them how long were they in treatment? Ask them what did they learn.
- Ask about their current relationship and how is it different from the previous relationship.

Be mindful to survivors, don't be too aggressive with questioning them. Talk to your supervisor about different approaches.

## PARENT INTERVIEW TOPICS – STEP BY STEP GUIDE

Make sure you refer to the Step By Step case guide  
and your supervisor's direction.

## TOOLS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR INTERVIEW

- Make every effort to be open-minded and non-judgmental.
- Actively listen first; put your agenda and questions on hold for the first portion of the interview.
- Consider what this experience may be like for the parent. Remember: You are in a position of power. It is your job to investigate, but you also have the opportunity to create an atmosphere of empathy and respect in the interview.

# TOOLS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR INTERVIEW

- Use open-ended questions often.
- Listen carefully and ask for clarification.
- Sometimes you may have to ask the same question multiple times and in different ways.
- Always ASK the questions—even if you think you will not receive an honest answer or that you know the answer.
- Do your best, but remember you can always follow up with the person later for clarification if needed.

# COMMON MISTAKES

- Don't spend too much time on things that are out side our scope:
  - Financial disagreements between the parties
  - Specific dynamics of the parties previous romantic relationship that does not effect child safety
  - Current events/the weather
  - Details about the parent's lease (or lack of one)
- Don't forget to address the specific allegations in the parent's Criminal Backgrounds
- Don't neglect the directions of your supervisor; gather the information the court asked us to report on. Even if you think you know the answer already.



## COMMON MISTAKES



# COLLATERALS

- Every case is unique! Possibilities include but are not limited to:
  - Treatment providers
  - Child's caretakers
  - Coaches
  - Teachers
  - Neighbors
  - Friends
  - Family members



## NON PROFESSIONAL/PERSONAL COLLATERALS

- Who can provide a more objective history than the parties?
- Are there people who knew both parents together?
- People often say something different when on the phone than they would in a declaration.
- You're not limited to people the parties suggest you interview.
- It is important to speak to people living in the home, especially significant others or roommates. Don't forget to get names and dates of birth so we can do a background check.

## NON PROFESSIONAL/ PERSONAL COLLATERALS

- Usually interviewed by phone.
- Discuss your role and inform him or her that your conversation will not be kept confidential.
- When was the last time he or she saw each parent with the child and what did that look like?
- Take notes of call, quotations are helpful.
- Always interview any current significant others.
- Be careful not to disclose what the parties have told you.

## PROFESSIONAL COLLATERALS

- Discuss your role and inform him or her that your conversation will not be kept confidential.
- Be prepared for the interview—utilize your advocate binder and advocate supervisor (Step-by-Step Guide).
- Never assume that a professional is unbiased.
- Share very little (if any) information about the case.
- Be aware that the provider may not feel comfortable making recommendations for the court.

# MENTAL HEALTH & SUBSTANCE ABUSE PROVIDERS

- What is your education and licensure? How long have you been in practice?
- What has the parent been diagnosed with? Can you describe what that is?
  - Specific questions about UA testing
- What is the recommended treatment?
- Does the parent take any psychiatric medication?
- What is your understanding of the parent's history with mental health/substance abuse problems?
- What is the prognosis?
- Have you seen the previous CASA report?
- Have you seen past treatment records for the parent?

# INTERVIEWING CHILDREN





# THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILD INTERVIEWS

- Our work is all about them
- Seeing the child with your own eyes is crucial to monitoring their well-being
- Children provide a wealth of information; their perspectives are unique
- Interviews allow the children to be heard and to feel heard
- An interview with the child communicates and models a message that the child is important
- Interviewing children is the fun part of being an advocate



## PURPOSE OF THE CHILD INTERVIEW

- Get to know the child.
- See the level of attachment he or she has with each parent.
- Learn about parenting practices in the home.
- Learn how they are doing in school/social settings.
- Learn what stresses the child currently has (or has had).

# EXPECTATIONS FOR CHILD INTERVIEW

- Child interviews generally take place in the home and/or at the school.
- Interviews are alone with the child (even when they have close siblings or twins); however, there *could* be exceptions.
- Interviews should be in a location where the child and you both feel comfortable, with open doors. (Don't sit on the bed; opt for the floor or a chair and leave the door open.)
- No conversations with adults in front of the child(ren).
- **Never** ask the child(ren) to choose one parent over the other.  
(i.e. **Don't** ask “Who do you want to live with?”)
- In the Highly Unlikely event a child discloses child abuse for the first time to you, allow the child to finish their thought, acknowledge that their information is important and sensitively conclude the interview, then call your supervisor. We are mandatory reporters so its possible we will have to report it to Protective Services.

# TIPS

- Take breaks when needed or transition to a lighter subject.
- Use simple words and short sentences.
- Respect boundaries; make sure they are comfortable.



How long should the interview be?

**AGES 3-4 = 10-15 minutes**

**AGES 5-7 = 15-30 minutes**

**AGES 8-11 = 15-40 minutes**

**AGES 11-15 = 30-60 minutes**

**AGES 15-18 = 45-60 minutes**

## HOW TO START THE INTERVIEW

- Ask the child why he/she thinks you are there.
- Clarify your role (not a family friend).
- Let them know your conversation is not private/confidential.
- Let them know they are not in trouble.
- Remind them to tell you if you get something wrong—repeat things back to them so they can correct you if it is wrong.
- Build Rapport with the child early in the interview

# RAPPORT BUILDING

- Tell me what you like to do.
- Tell me all about school.
- Tell me about your friends.
- Tell me about your hobbies/sports.
- Tell me about your last birthday (or a recent holiday you know they celebrated).
- I really want to get to know you. Tell me everything you did today from the time you woke up until now.

## BODY OF THE INTERVIEW

- Tell me three words that describe your mother? Your father?
- Tell me something that your mom/dad does that makes you happy? And sad?
- Tell me about routines and rules at mom's/dad's house.
- Tell me about your siblings.
- Tell me about the worst trouble you got in, what happened?
- When you have a problem, who do you go to for help?
- Do you feel safe?
- Remember the topics your supervisor told you to ask about. Sometimes you can ask the child about that if its age and development appropriate.

## CLOSING

- Allow 5-10 minutes to neutralize the situation.
- Go back to general/neutral questions: What are your plans for the weekend? Seen any good movies lately? Talk more about interests or hobbies.
- Ask if there is anything else they would like you to know or want to talk about.
- Thank them for their time and participation, and for their help in allowing you to learn and understand more about the situation.
- Leave on a positive note.

## FINAL TIPS

- A key component to a good interview isn't just knowing what questions to ask, but knowing how to listen.
- Prepare for the interview by reading over the questions in your step-by-step guide.
- Make sure you and your supervisor have had a conversation about what questions need to be asked based on the issues with your specific case.
- Even if a collateral's native language isn't English, make the attempt to interview them.





QUESTIONS?

Email Me:

[TJohnson@familylawcasa.org](mailto:TJohnson@familylawcasa.org)