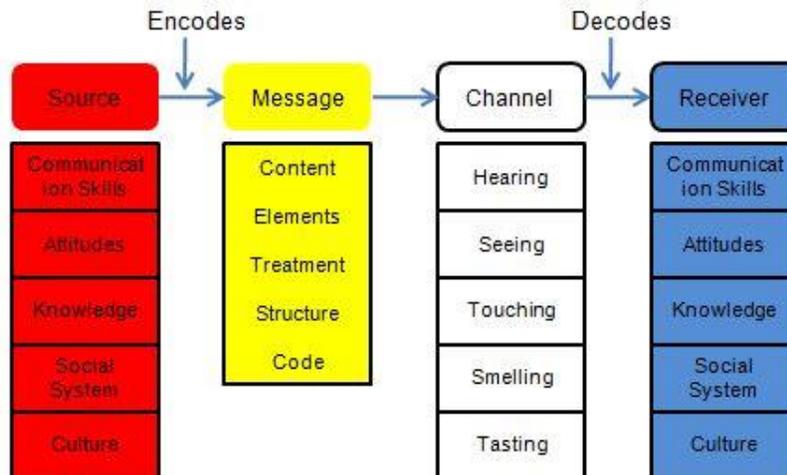
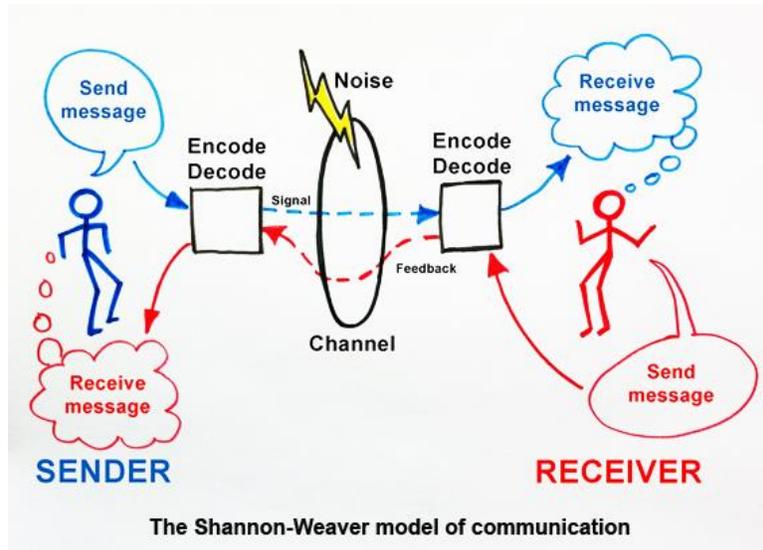


COMMUNICATING AS A CASA VOLUNTEER

THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

If you've been hanging around the planet for any length of time, you've realized that it's not easy to communicate. You know what you want to say...but then it comes out of your mouth and you hear it...and you realize that's not what you meant. Or, the response of the receiver isn't what you expected.



IS ALL COMMUNICATION VERBAL?

We know that only a small fragment of our daily interactions are verbal. The overwhelming majority is nonverbal communication. One of the most frequently quoted statistics on nonverbal communication is that 93% of all daily communication is nonverbal. Popular science magazines, students and media outlets frequently quote this specific number.

Dr. Albert Mehrabian, author of "Silent Messages," conducted several studies on nonverbal communication. He found that seven percent of any message is conveyed through words, 38% through certain vocal elements, and 55% through nonverbal elements (facial expressions, gestures, posture, etc.). Some have disputed Dr. Mehrabian's scientific research methodologies.

Whatever the exact number, the most important thing to know is that, whatever the number, most communication is nonverbal. In fact, nonverbal behavior is the most crucial aspect of communication. And, we humans appear to be hard-wired to read nonverbal communication and to combine our knowledge of it with the verbal messages we are hearing to arrive at a final message. Please see attachment on body language.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION

Of the children served in our five-county area in 2015, upwards of 45% were of Native American descent. Understanding Native American values, culture, and communication styles can be an extremely valuable part of your CASA toolkit. Consider the following comparison of dominant societal values versus Native American traditional values:

DOMINANT SOCIETY VALUES	NATIVE AMERICAN TRADITIONAL VALUES
Self is more important than the group. Self is the priority. Take care of #1.	Humility. Tribe and extended family are cared for first. Self last.
Prepare for tomorrow.	Today is a good day.
Time is linear. Use every minute.	There is a right time and place for everything (non-linear).
Youth. Values the rich, young, and beautiful.	Age. Elders are the keepers of knowledge and wisdom.
Compete to "get ahead."	Cooperate.
Be aggressive.	Be patient.
Speak up.	Listen and learn.
Take and save.	Give and share.
Conquer nature.	Live in harmony with all things.
Skepticism and logical thinking are valued.	The intuitive is honored. All around us is a Great Mystery.
Religion is a part of life.	A spiritual life. Religion is not separate.
Be a critical thinker.	Do not criticize your people.
Live with your mind.	Live with your hands. Manual activity is sacred.
Orient yourself to a house and a job.	Orient yourself to the land.
You're in America. Speak English!	Cherish your own language and speak it when possible.
Discipline your own children.	Children: a gift of the Great Spirit to be shared with others.
Have a rule for every contingency.	Few rules are best. Rules should be loosely written and flexible.
Have instruments judge for you.	Judge things for yourself.
Look me in my eyes when I speak to you. I think you're lying when you look away.	I show respect by averting my gaze while speaking.

The values of each culture influence and guide communication. Understanding where our Native American brothers and sisters have been and where they are coming from is extremely important.

It is important to understand that many in the Native American community are distrustful of the dominant culture. The history of the relationship between whites and native peoples is one of broken promises and hurt. Native American people may need more time to trust you and believe that you are working solely for the benefit of their children. Another part of that distrust stems from abuses that occurred in the late 1970s, when Indian children were taken from their families and tribes and adopted into white families. The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was developed to stop this practice and preserve the tribal identity through its youth.

Elders are extremely important in Native American cultures. Communicating with a grandmother, grandfather, great aunt, or great uncle could be an important way to learn the family history. It's not uncommon to find extended families living in one household with grandparents raising grandchildren. Within native families, there is a sense of responsibility for providing for the emotional, physical, and financial needs of one's family. Defer to the elders in the family and take your cues from them.

Community is highly valued as a protective capacity in Native American culture. For that reason, community issues often have a great impact on the individual members of the community. Community problems are seen as everyone's problems. Community is seen as an extended family. Strength and support can be found in family and community networks for individuals in distress.

Attached is a handout on communication styles of native people. As a general rule, we should respect that the ways that native people communicate are very different from the ways that we communicate. Most tribes honor storytelling as a way of teaching lessons and sharing information. The narrative style of communication still exists in Native American culture. When you go to meet with a native family, don't be in a hurry. Schedule plenty of time to stay and listen to what you are being told. Don't be surprised if the family is late for your appointment or does not want to stick to a schedule. Likewise, don't be checking your watch or in a rush.

Adapt your speech pattern to the native way of communicating. This means the tone of your voice, volume, and speed of speech patterns needs to fit the family's communication style. In many cases, speech may be slower than what you are used to. Silence is much more acceptable in native cultures. Allowing silence to settle upon a conversation is uncomfortable in white culture. Not so in native culture. Honor the narrative communication style by allowing a story to be finished, listening respectfully, and refraining from interrupting.

Understand that eye contact varies in many cultures. For many native people, direct eye contact may be considered rude or disrespectful. Particularly, in Cherokee culture, eye contact can be limited, particularly as a sign of respect or deference. Do not misinterpret the lack of eye contact as evidence that someone is lying or that the person is depressed. Even though you are simply a CASA volunteer, you may be seen as an authority figure or someone to whom respect must be shown. Return the respect and let the family know you are there to help, not to harm. Above all, listen more than you speak.

Dress, especially in rural communities, is often very casual. Keep this in mind as you choose what to wear to any home, but particularly a native home. Over-dressing may create an unintended barrier and give off the impression of aloofness. Additionally, understand that there can be a wide variation

in comfort levels with interpersonal proximity. Pay particular attention to body language and non-verbal communication.

OBSERVING CHILDREN AND ESTABLISHING RAPPORT AND TRUST

As you are observing children, understand that the same rules about verbal vs. nonverbal communication apply. The child may be telling you that he is happy with tears streaming down his face. You will have to listen carefully, ask questions, and try to understand what the child is really trying to communicate to you.

What is rapport? It is a relationship, especially one of mutual understanding. It begins with respect and acceptance and is built upon a foundation of trust. Therefore, trust can be defined as confident expectation, or belief in another person's integrity.

To build rapport, you must see the child in person and often. National CASA guidelines require that you see the child on your caseload every 30 days at minimum. However, we know that to truly build rapport, a CASA may need to see the child on his or her caseload more frequently. Finding the right balance of time spent can be difficult. The relationship you will develop is for the benefit of the child, not the adult.

It is much easier to assess what the child needs and wants if you have established a relationship that allows the child to honestly and openly share his thoughts and feelings. Building a relationship with a child takes time and energy. We must actively listen to the child's words, while simultaneously observing the nonverbal cues she is relating. Most importantly, trust requires honesty in all communication with the child.

You must be a person of your word. Make no promises you cannot keep. Children notice when adults follow through on their word, especially when they are accustomed to adults breaking promises. Also, the relationship with the child should be built on a sincere interest in the child as a person, as well as concern for the child's well-being.

To build rapport, your interactions must be:

1. Positive. Speak positive messages and hope into the child's life.
2. Non-threatening. Don't shame or disrespect the child.
3. Empathetic and understanding. Let the child know that you hear him.
4. Engaging. Do something together that the child enjoys doing.

The first time you meet the child:

1. Introduce yourself. State your first name. Don't require the child to call you Mr. or Mrs. Explain your role as a CASA in terms she can understand.
2. Choose a calm environment, preferably a familiar, relaxed atmosphere with minimal distractions.
3. Wear casual clothing so that you appear open and approachable.
4. Find common ground by learning about the child. Ask questions about the child's interests, school and extracurricular activities, pets, favorite sports, games they like to play, or special talents the child may possess.

5. Share a few bits of information about yourself with the child in the process. Be careful to keep the conversation centered on the child.
6. Get down on the same level or below the child's level. Sitting on the floor is a great way to bridge the distance, if you can.
7. Mirror the child's body language and posture, if possible.
8. Actively listen. Nod your head. Ask questions. Focus on the information being relayed to you and reflect the information back to the child for accuracy. For example, "Sarah, I want to make sure that I understood. You are saying that your mother never got up in time to take you to school."
9. As you speak with the child, be sensitive to his developmental level and use age-appropriate phrasing.
10. Ask open-ended and indirect questions. These types of questions create a narrative between the volunteer and the child and gives the child an opportunity to "steer" the conversation. It also reduces the chance that a volunteer might ask "leading" questions.

If there are multiple children in a home, try to make time for one-on-one conversation with each child. Bring some items with you, such as Playdough, Legos, bubbles, blocks, puzzles, crayons and coloring books, and other games and toys. These types of items will give the children a focal point as they are talking to you, while also keeping other little hands busy. Remember that play is a child's work.

Also remember that children have short attention spans and may require frequent breaks. Handle conversations very lightly before trying to speak about more intense subjects. The best way to do this is to begin with neutral topics, such as, "Tell me about your trip to the lake last weekend." Then, signal the topic change to the child and ask their permission to speak about a more difficult topic. You could say something like, "Sarah, is it okay with you if we talk about the visitation you had with your Mom last week?" If the child says "no," honor their request and say, "No problem. When you're ready to talk, I'm here to listen."

Don't be afraid of silence. Sometimes, children just need a comforting presence as they process. Don't over-talk to fill the silence. If you must use legal terminology or acronyms, try to explain the terms in a way the child can understand. Do not comment on or criticize the child's behaviors. The foster parents will correct the child and help them make better decisions. Be careful not to relate case-sensitive information to the child or to discuss the particulars of the case with the child.

AGE-APPROPRIATE COMMUNICATION

Tailor your visit and your communication style to the age and developmental stage of the child and you will have a good visit.

INFANTS AND TODDLERS (0 to 2 years): This is the most crucial time in a child's life for developing their physiological capacity to build trust and establish relationships. Children at this age learn to build trust based upon the fulfillment of their basic needs. Their brains and bodies are growing at a very high rate. Build rapport with them by: (1) holding them; (2) playing peek-a-boo or pat-a-cake; (3) blowing bubbles; (4) speaking in a soothing voice; (5) smiling; (6) reading books; (7) rocking them to sleep; (8) feeding them; (9) reading a book; and (10) engaging in unstructured play, such as stacking blocks or playing with age-appropriate toys.

YOUNG CHILDREN (2 to 5 years): This is a time of rapid growth and development in young children. Language is developing rapidly and these children are extremely active and energetic. Young children want to please adults and be praised. They respond well to smiles and kind words. They are learning about how relationships work. Build rapport by using short, simple sentences with terms the child knows. Use play figures, stuffed animals, cars, and other toys to engage in structured play. Invite them to show off by reciting their ABC's and 123's or sing songs with them, like "The Itsy, Bitsy Spider" or "London Bridge." Play age-appropriate games and read books at their age level.

OLDER CHILDREN (6 to 9 years): Children this age still want to please adults, but they are learning how to manipulate their interactions with adults to get what they want. They are growing ever more autonomous and are becoming self-directed. Build rapport by: (1) asking them about holidays, pets, school, and friends; (2) drawing self-portraits, houses, cars, and their family; (3) playing the game "Hangman" or "Uno"; (4) playing with Legos and Playdough; and (5) playing the "Three Wishes" game.

PRE-TEENS (10 to 13 years): This age group is learning to test the system. They still want to impress, but will hold back information. These children are developing meta-cognitive skills and often use jokes to disarm or deflect attention from a subject. They can speak in code or may use teen jargon adults don't know. Build rapport by: (1) letting them lead the conversation; (2) noticing things that they appear to be interested in and learn about them; (3) challenging them to a board game or puzzle; (4) talking about subjects in school that they excel in; and (5) play the "Debate Game."

TEENAGERS (14 to 18 years): This age group is seeking independence and personal identity. They want to be treated as adults and will be more open if treated as young adults. Be aware that they will lie to you and will attempt to startle or shock you. Build rapport by: (1) taking interest in their hobbies, movies, and musical tastes; (2) talk about dating, friends, classes, sports, and extracurricular activities; (3) listen to their speech and learn some of their slang words; and (4) urge them to talk about how they envision their future.

CONFLICT: PROOF THAT YOU'RE DOING YOUR JOB CORRECTLY

By now, you understand that being a CASA volunteer involves multiple parties with differing opinions about how to resolve the presenting problem within families. Additionally, each of these people brings different values and mores to the work. You've also learned that CASA isn't always liked or valued.

Some people won't respect you because you are a volunteer. You don't have a law degree or other credentials. This is actually to your benefit. You see the child and family in a way many of the professionals do not. You represent the community standard. There is great credibility in your role because you have nothing to gain from the proceedings.

Some people won't like the questions you ask or the reports you write because they expose material weaknesses in their own work product. DHS workers particularly fall prey to this. Try to work collaboratively with the caseworker. Ask them, "How can I help?" "Would you like to go together to visit the home?" Remember that the goal is to work collaboratively but also independently. There are going to be times when you have information that runs counter to the general direction the case is going in. Report what you know and allow the judge to make the decisions.

Some people don't think CASA is a valuable service. They don't like an extra set of eyes and ears prying into the case or digging through the case file. They will try to file motions to stop you from seeing paperwork or they will ask for a different CASA volunteer, or they will ask that you be thrown off of the case. Stand firmly in your role as child advocate and let the nay-sayers have their say.

When conflict arises, ask yourself what you can do to counteract or overcome it. Sometimes, there is nothing to do but just stay strong and do your job by advocating for the children. Never give up and never give in. Be kind but firm. State the truth always.

Do you know who DOES value CASA? Judges. If you're doing your job correctly, you won't ever hear a complaint from a judge. Keep up the good work for children.

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We've spent a lot of time talking about theories and facts we know about communication. But, how do you apply it to your work as a CASA volunteer?

1. Not everyone involved in the child welfare system likes CASA or the role we play. Don't take it personally. It isn't your responsibility to win them over. Your responsibility is to make sure the judge knows everything he or she needs to know about the safety, well-being, and needs of the child.
2. Realize that you are going to be lied to at some point along this journey. You'll need to check all of your facts.
3. The most important skill of the CASA volunteer is to LISTEN. If you notice during your visits with individuals that you're doing most of the talking, try being silent. You can't be an effective fact-finder if you're the one sharing all of the facts.
4. If someone is being rude or disrespectful, this isn't your opportunity to respond in kind. Be professional, courteous, and stay above the fray. For CASA, this job isn't personal. We don't earn anything but the satisfaction of knowing we've done a good job for children. Say, "I'm so sorry you feel that way. I'm here to help children. What would you like me to do differently?"
5. Protect the confidentiality of the case you've been assigned. Be relentless in your efforts to protect the privacy of the children and families you work with. See the attached flow chart.
6. Ask the DHS caseworker how they would like to receive correspondence from you? Text, phone call, email? Then, stick to that form of communication.
7. Is the caseworker ignoring you? Not returning calls or messages? No problem. Collect your information independently and file your report. They'll get your information in the report before court. Do not try to befriend the DHS worker or call them every time you learn something new. Call your Advocate Coordinator if you need to process it.
8. Be diligent about collecting good, factual information and double-checking all of your sources of information. Truth wins out every time.