

# HOW TO ASK GOOD QUESTIONS

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**Well thought out questions, asked at the right time, help court-appointed special advocates gain access to good, rich information. Here's how to ask good questions.**

Court-appointed special advocates (CASA volunteers) interview children, parents, teachers, neighbors, foster parents, counselors, therapists, doctors, nurses, family members, and many other people to collect factual information. The facts collected over a course of interviews will be the basis for a written Report to the Court with fact-based recommendations. This Report to the Court will help the court understand what is happening with children and their families and provide information upon which the court can make good decisions. Learning how to ask good questions is an essential component of the CASA volunteer's job duties.

## BUILDING RAPPORT

For the first interview with a child, a parent, or a family member, keep your expectations low. If you'll tell yourself that your goal is to introduce yourself and to explain your role, you will fare better. This interview may not yield all of the answers you are looking for.

Crafting a good introduction of yourself as CASA is essential before going to the first interview. We will cover that topic in an upcoming podcast.

The first interview with any person is a great time to roll out a good open-ended question such as: "Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?" or "Could you share with me what you would like to see happen here?"

## LISTENING

Good interviewers are excellent active listeners. They portray an open, relaxed body language that expresses concern for the person being interviewed and interest in what he or she has to say. Good interviewers ask questions and then remain silent, waiting to hear what is next. They stay quiet until the individual speaking has finished. They ask clarifying questions, such as, "So what I'm hearing you say is that you're concerned about \_\_\_\_\_. Is that right?"

## OPEN-ENDED AND CLOSED-ENDED QUESTIONS

Open-ended questions invite storytelling and narrative. When asking an open-ended question, you are opening the floor to your interview subject. You invite them to open their heart and their mind to you.

### CLOSED-ENDED QUESTION EXAMPLES:

*Did you have a good day at school today?*

*Do you like ice cream or cookies?*

Answers to a closed-ended question would be yes, no, or maybe or a one-word answer such as "cookies."

### OPEN-ENDED QUESTION EXAMPLES:

*Tell me about yourself?*

*Can you describe what happened the night your Dad got arrested?*

Answers to open-ended questions require narrative or storytelling. The answers to these questions are more than a one-word answer. By answering, the person being interviewed is sharing their experiences, knowledge, and perceptions.

Close-ended questions invite the person you are interviewing to give a one-word answer. Most often, the answer to a close-ended question is “yes,” or “no.”

Throughout the interview, it’s important to watch the nonverbal cues – the eyes, the tone of voice, fidgeting, squirming, legs and arms, hand gestures, to determine incongruity between what is being said and what is really being said. This is why in-person interviewing is so important. As a CASA volunteer, you will want to conduct interviews in person whenever possible.

## TYPES OF QUESTIONS

**Clarifying Questions:** These questions help us better understand what has been said. In many conversations, people speak past one another. Asking clarifying questions can help uncover the real intent behind what is said. These help us understand each other better and lead us toward relevant follow-up questions. “Can you tell me more?” and “Why do you think that is?” both fall into this category. People often don’t ask these questions, because they tend to make assumptions and complete any missing parts themselves. In CASA work, you can never ask too many questions.

**Adjoining Questions:** These questions explore related aspects of a situation that are often ignored in the conversation. Questions such as “How do you think things would have turned out if you’d left the party?” or “What do you think would happen if you worked on a treatment plan?” fall into this category. Our laser-like focus on the immediate often inhibits us from asking more of these exploratory questions, which help the interview subject think about other situations and circumstances outside of the immediate ones.

**Funneling Questions:** These questions are used to dive deeper into a subject. For example, asking a parent, “What five things did you learn in your parenting class that you can apply in your home?” helps CASA volunteers to determine if the individual fully participated in the class and what concrete steps they plan to take to implement the learning objectives.

**Elevating Questions:** These questions raise broader issues and highlight the bigger picture. They help you to “zoom out.” Being too immersed in an immediate problem makes it more difficult to see the overall context behind the problem, such as attitudes, ways of being, and causation. You can ask, “Taking a step back, what do you see as the larger issues?” or “Am I addressing the right questions?” We invite the interview subject to take a birds-eye view of the situation and look around and behind problems for larger issues that are creating those problems.

## TIMING, SEQUENCE, AND PLACEMENT

The proper timing, sequence, and placement of questions in an interview is essential as well. Some clients are not able – cognitively or developmentally – to handle some of the questions we might like to ask. For example, some children may not be able to fully think through an elevating question, while many are able – even more so than adults – to see exactly what caused something to happen and how best to fix it. If an interview subject seems tired, angry, or upset by a line of questioning, it’s always okay to change the subject and move to a lighter topic, or to say, “You seem to be upset about something. Would you like to talk about that?” If the answer is “no,” bring the interview to a close and give the subject some space.

*Your Advocate Coordinator is available to help you with interviewing. If you have other questions or need more information, send us a question at [info@cano-casa.com](mailto:info@cano-casa.com).*