

Child Visits: Considerations for Observations

Knowledge about communication is important to the specific ways an advocate will gather information from children. Some children can talk about their situations and wishes, but other children do not have verbal and developmental skills (or a willingness) sufficient to express their needs and wishes. Because the verbal skills of children vary, fact-based observations about a child are a vital part of your investigation and court report as a CASA volunteer.

Because it is impossible to observe everything a child does, it is important to think about what specific information you may want to know about the child, while trying to keep your mind open to unexpected information. Reading over the following questions several times before you begin observing a child will help you remember what to look for and note.

1. What is going on in the setting during the visit?

What other activities are going on? What are the general expectations of others at the moment and what is the general atmosphere of the room – calm, noisy, hectic, happy, stressed?

2. How does the child respond to you and others present during the visit?

Does the child greet you, respond appropriately to questions, listen to adults, etc.?

3. How interested is the child in what he or she is doing?

Does the child seem intent on what he/she is doing or does the child seem more interested in what others are doing? How long is his/her concentration span? How often does he/she shift activities?

4. What is the child's approach to materials and activities engaged in during the visit?

Is the child slow in getting started or does he/she plunge right in? Does the child use materials in the usual way or does he/she use them in different ways, exploring them for the possibilities they offer?

5. How much energy does the child have?

Is the child lethargic? Does the child work at a fairly even pace or does he/she work in spurts of activity? Does the child use a great deal of energy in manipulating materials, in body movements, or in talking?

6. How does the child appear and function physically?

Does the child's body seem tense or relaxed? Are movements jerky, uncertain or poorly coordinated given the child's age? Are there any physical abnormalities?

7. How does the child express themselves?

Does the child talk, sing, hum, or use nonsense words while he/she plays? Does the child use sentences or single words? Does the child communicate with others using words or gestures?

8. What is the child's affect (visual emotions)?

What are the child's facial expressions like? Does he/she appear frustrated? Happy? Do expressions correspond to what he/she is saying or doing?

9. How does the child get along with other children if present?

Does the child play alone, with only certain children, or with a variety of children? Is the child willing or unwilling to share toys, etc.? Does the child always initiate or always follow along with group ideas?

10. What kinds of changes in behavior/mood/emotion occur between the beginning and the end of an activity?

Does the child's mood change frequently? Are behaviors inconsistent depending upon who interacting with the child?

11. How does the child transition from one activity to the next?

Is the child able to calmly stop an activity when necessary or redirected? Does the child always become upset when change occurs?

12. How does the child respond to discipline or rules?

How does the child respond when given a directive by the caregiver or other authority? Is the child usually compliant, openly defiant, unresponsive?

13. What, if anything, seems different or concerning about this child as compared with other children of the same age?

Recognizing that the stages of development have wide ranges, is the child's behavior or development significantly different than others of his/her age?

14. Are there any issues/behaviors that potentially should be assessed by a professional?

Vision, hearing, dental health, cognitive development, physical development, psychological development, emotional/behavioral, etc.?

*Adapted from National CASA Volunteer Manual; "Assessing a Child's Welfare" Eunice Snyder, ACSW and Keetje Ramo, ACSW, School of Social Work, Eastern Washington University, 1984