

## **Eight Steps to Engaging Children in Conversation**



Children in out-of-home care experience a painful mixture of fear, confusion and loss, and it is often difficult for them to meet and trust new people. Knowing the challenge they face, how do you begin building rapport? What are the steps to engaging them in a friendly, supportive conversation?

- 1. Do Your Homework.** Empathy is the most important step in your preparation. Before you meet the children, review what you have learned about them so far. Pay special attention to anything that will help you understand their personalities, developmental level or past experiences. Ask yourself, “How is this child likely to feel right now? How might he or she feel about meeting me?”
- 2. Find a Peaceful Space.** When you meet children for the first time, find a calm setting where they can feel safe, and join them on their level. Avoid rooms with blaring televisions or other electronic distractions.
- 3. Keep It Light.** Find a game or toy so that the children have a neutral focus for their attention when nervous. Coloring books work well with younger children, while outdoor activities and card games such as *Uno* work for a variety of ages.
- 4. Start Small.** Begin with the safest topics. Compliment their shoes or a picture they have drawn, and ask them about their likes, dislikes and interests. With older children, it is helpful to know something about the latest entertainment personalities, music or movies. Engaging children in small talk will help you make quick assessments of their developmental levels so that you can select the most appropriate level of language to use.
- 5. Know Your Limits.** Be mindful of your boundaries. You are not a therapist, attorney or forensic interviewer. It is not your job to find out more about the conditions that brought the children into care. As a CASA volunteer, you want merely to learn more about the children and help them understand your role.

**6. Acknowledge Feelings.** As the conversation progresses, children may begin to express their feelings and perceptions about the events in their lives. Be aware that something you intend to be comforting may instead sound like a contradiction and will shut down further conversation. Acknowledge feelings explicitly. Instead of, “I’m sure your new teacher was only trying to keep the class on task,” try “That must have been embarrassing. What happened next?”

**7. Don’t Just Say “No”.** Children may make requests that you are unable to fulfill. Pause to consider all requests, even if you know you have to say “no,” and think through your reasons out loud so that they can understand the reason for your denial. Follow up by suggesting an alternative.

**8. Listen. Listen. Listen.** Above all, listen more than you talk. Listening to children demonstrates respect and builds self-esteem.

Top Tips for Volunteers, Ben Wilkins, National CASA Curriculum Advisory Committee