

Interacting with Children

Meeting with and talking with the children on your caseload can sometimes feel overwhelming and intimidating, especially when you are meeting a child for the first time. We hope that this guide will be helpful to you as you get to know the child(ren) on your caseload better.

Where to Visit:

The best place to visit your child(ren) each month is in their home. A home visit allows you an opportunity to enter that particular child's world and learn about the child's home and play environment. When doing a home visit, you may want to take items with you to use throughout your visit. Helpful items to bring with you during a visit include: drawing paper, coloring books, markers, crayons, books, board games, or a deck of cards.

Visits can also take place outside of the home at the school, DHS office, or during a parental supervised visit. Some volunteers will even ask the child's guardian to meet them at a park or play place so that the child(ren) and volunteer can play while they visit.

Questions & Activities for Visits:

When working with children it is important to assess the child's developmental level and age to frame the questions and activities so that they are age appropriate for the child(ren). The following developmental stage questions and activities will provide you with a starting point to use when working a case.

Infants:

Since we cannot "interview" infants the following techniques and processes can be used to assess the child's situation:

1. **Direct observation of the child:** Watch the child while playing, or generally relating to the parent or caretaker, in order to gain a sense of the child's temperament. Observe the infant's development, and view the infant's reactions to a stranger (yourself). Note whether or not the baby makes eye contact (some are gaze avoidant). Ask yourself: Does the baby seem comfortable with the parent?
2. **Assessing the parent-child interaction:** It is important to note how the parent relates to the child. Note whether the parent appears to be calm, gentle, relaxed, and confident about parenting, or if the parent is anxious, easily frustrated, inattentive, indifferent, or detached. Note what the parent does with the baby and what the parent communicates to the child through looks, touches, and gestures.

This “interview” with the infant and parent will hopefully provide you with a sense of how secure this child feels. You may also get a sense of whether the parent provides the child with the appropriate stimuli, enhances the security of the child, and meets the child's needs.

2 to 5 Year Olds:

With this group, it often works best to simply invite the child to play. The following are examples of structured play that can bring forth important information about who is central to the child's life as well as the child's feelings about people and situations.

1. **Tea Parties:** Tea parties can create an opportunity to see who children invite or don't invite. They can pick a stuffed animal to represent each invitee. Place all the animals at the tea party and let the child continue to lead the play.
2. **Play Figures:** Young children engaging in dollhouse play often play out actual events they have experienced in their lives. Let the children lead the play and see how they look at families, parents, and others in their lives.
3. **Coloring:** Grab a good old fashioned coloring book and some crayons or markers and spend some time relaxing and coloring with the child(ren) while you talk.
4. **Book Reading:** Read an age appropriate book to the child. If possible focus on books that talk about separation, friendships, and family. Ask questions as you read the book about members of the family relevant to the book and the child's life; “Have you ever felt this way?” “Has this ever happened to you?” etc.
5. **Building Toys:** Lego's, Lincoln Logs, Connect Blocks, Tinkertoys, etc., can often provide an opportunity for the child to tell a story about what they have built.
6. **Draw Yourself:** Use this task to provide an indicator of the child's developmental level and to get a sense of the child's perception of self. Ask the child to draw a picture of himself or herself. After they complete the drawing, ask the child to give you some words that tell you what the child is like, thinking, or feeling. If this is a young child, write the words on the child's picture. If the child is older, ask the child to write the words: this gives you an idea of writing and spelling skills.

6 to 12 Year Olds:

The younger children in this age group respond well to some of the 2 to 5 year old techniques. Here are some additional examples of structured play that can bring forth important information about children in this age group. Many of these activities will incorporate questions into the activity that will allow you to get to know the child(ren) on a deeper level and to develop a better understanding about their current and past situations and where they see their lives in the future.

1. **Animal Projection:** Ask the child about having animals at home or what the child's favorite animals are then ask how that animal reminds them of people in their life. You might ask additional questions like “What animal reminds you of yourself?” or “What animal reminds you of (an important person in their life)?” In order to find out where

they want to be you could ask, “If you could change yourself into an animal, what animal would you be? Why?”

- 2. Life Story:** “Let’s write a short story about your life...” This can be done either on paper taped to the wall or a large piece of paper. Either the child or you can do the writing. Prompt the child with “Let’s start with where you were born. Do you know who was there when you were born?” Let the child take the story from there, highlighting areas they believe to be important in their lives.
- 3. Draw Your Family:** Often this will give you the child’s idealized version of the family. You might want to ask the child, “Tell me about your family” or “Tell me something about your mom/dad.” Ask the child to draw his or her family with everyone doing something active. You might ask, “How is ___ feeling in this drawing?”
- 4. Favorite Things in Life:** Take three sheets of paper and title them Mom, Dad, and Me. Ask the child to list each person’s favorite things (for example: TV program, ice cream flavor, sport, activity, etc.) and have the child list each item on the appropriate sheet. Each response is an opportunity to ask the child to share more about themselves. After the three lists are done, you may have a sense of the areas in which the child identifies with a parent.
- 5. Magic Wand:** “If you had a magic wand (it is nice if you actually have a magic wand!) and could change anything you wanted, what would you change about **(a)** your family, **(b)** your Mom and Dad, **(c)** where you live, and **(d)** yourself?”
- 6. Three Wishes:** “If you could have any three wishes granted by a magic fairy, what would you wish for?” This gives a chance to hear the child’s responses and dig deeper if needed. You could even be more specific if necessary, “What three things would you wish for your mom/dad? Your family?”

13-18 Year Olds

Children at this age level are often ready to engage in activities that allow them to talk while doing something else they enjoy. Here are some great activities to do with teens during your visit:

- 1. Card Toss:** Place an empty wastebasket on the far side of the room. Using a deck of cards, you and the child take turns tossing a card into the basket. Keep score as to how many cards are successfully tossed into the wastebasket. If it is a small child, make sure the child is standing closer to the basket than you. This also works well when you are meeting siblings together, because it provides a good opportunity to observe sibling interactions.
- 2. Board Games:** Grab a kid friendly board game and play a round or two with the child(ren). This is a great way to keep siblings of all ages engaged during a visit where multiple children live in the home.
- 3. Playing Catch:** Grab a football, bouncy ball, or even a frisbee and get outside to play some catch with the child(ren) for a bit. You can chat while you play.

Here are some questions to ask teens while you are playing games or taking a walk outdoors.

1. What are your interests?
2. Have you visited/spoken to your parents or family? How often? What was the best part about that visit? What did you like the least?
3. What do you like best about your current placement? What do you like least?
4. What has changed for you since being separated from your parents?
5. What is your earliest memory?
6. Are you having any problems at home? School? Friends? Have you told anyone? What was the outcome?
7. What is your favorite thing about school? What do you like least?
8. What does your future look like in your mind?
9. If you could live anywhere you wanted, where would you live? Why?

Additional child observations:

1. What is the child's affect and mood?
2. Do you see any significant mood changes?
3. What is the child's development stage? Are they on track?
4. What is the child's verbal ability?
5. How are the child's relationships with others? How does he/she interact?
6. What is the child's intellectual outcome?