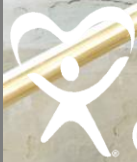


# CASA Conversations



California **CASA**  
Court Appointed Special Advocates  
FOR CHILDREN

*This project was generously  
funded by:*



## Starting a Conversation

### Introduction

Values are not “true” or “false,” nor are they fact or opinion. They represent what we cherish, and because of that, they guide our behavior.

- Values are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. What is important is to not impose them on others.
- The more we are conscious of our own values, the more we can:
  - Accept that our teens have their own values, and be able to distinguish between theirs and ours.

Help facilitate CASA youth decision-making based on their own values.

### The Facts

Our values are often expressed by:

- Our facial expression
- Our tone of voice
- The way we greet others
- Our choice of words when we discuss difficult topics, such as sexual behavior or drug use
- The questions we ask and the responses we give to youth questions
- The time we take to talk with the youth

In general, youth are more comfortable sharing their problems and concerns with someone who:

- Is understanding and open
- Listens patiently and communicates positively
- Is accepting and does not judge the youth’s behavior or situation
- Helps the youth to make his own decision
- Shows respect (treats others as being capable and responsible)

# Starting a Conversation

When a CASA imposes his values or otherwise judges a youth, the perceived power of the CASA often adds an element of intimidation, which may makes it easier to impose, but does not contribute to mutual respect nor to responsible teen decision-making.

## Starting a Conversation

- Create a safe setting for youth to talk. It is generally easier for teens to process information when they feel safe enough to express their feelings without fear of judgment. Many, many advocates report that some of the best conversations happen while driving in the car.
- Begin by listening what the teen is asking, saying and/or feeling.
- Ask open ended questions to help you, and the teen, better understand the problem, situation, concern or question; this will also assist the teen in considering options and resolving the situation.
  - "Would you like to tell me about that?"
  - "What happened next?"
  - "How did you feel about that?"
  - "What did you do then?"
  - "What do you know about \_\_\_\_\_?"
- Paraphrase the youth's portrayal of the situation to ensure that you have understood what she has said/meant, and to demonstrate to the teen that you are listening and have understood. Paraphrasing helps to:
  - Encourage the youth to continue talking.
  - Clear up confusion: "Let's see if I have explained it properly. You tell me what I just said about \_\_\_\_\_ and I'll go over it again if it's not clear".
- Provide information as appropriate and relevant to the youth's problem, situation, question, etc., being careful not to impose your values.
- Let the youth know that the problem and decision are his, that he is responsible for the consequences of his actions, that you have confidence that he is capable of resolving the problem by making the decision that is best for him, and that you will always be available to him. "I'd like to help you, but it's also very important that you take responsibility for changing things. What steps can you take to help yourself?"

**"You have to build that trust before you're gonna get anywhere."  
- Terrell**

**"If you can listen, that's all I want somebody to do. You may not agree, but just listen."  
- Unique**

**"If you really care about somebody and want to listen to them, you're gonna take that time to listen."  
- Jynnah**

# Starting a Conversation

- Show empathy: "I know that these things can be very difficult..."
- Be open and respectful of the teen's experience.
- Assist the teen in problem-solving. Through listening, open questions and paraphrasing, help her:
  - Identify her problem, what contributed to it and what she sees as the consequences.
  - Identify possible actions she might take to solve the problem
  - Identify the pros and cons/advantages and disadvantages of each possible action
  - Choose the action/solution which she feels will best solve the problem and which she is capable and committed to carry out.

*"If you ask me a question and I have to ponder it, I think about it myself, then I feel like, okay, maybe I can talk to you about it." - Jynnah*

- Offer suggestions in the following manner if it appears the teen is ignoring viable choices:

"Might it be possible that \_\_\_\_?"

"Would it be possible to \_\_\_\_?"

"How do you feel about \_\_\_\_?"

"What do you think about \_\_\_\_?"

"What might happen if \_\_\_\_?"

"In what ways could \_\_\_\_?"

- As appropriate, ask the youth what he would like you to do to assist him – without assuming control and responsibility for the problem.
- Indicate to the youth that you accept his emotions (anger, fear, and anxiety) related to the situation. Some youth are not used to talking to adults about how they feel, do not have the words to describe how they feel, feel guilty or ashamed, and/or expect to be criticized or punished for how they feel or what they have done.
- Be aware of how your tone of voice and facial expression can communicate empathy and understanding. Jokes, smiles and laughs at appropriate moments can help the teen to relax and trust you.

*"Think about what you say. Let them come to you. Be open to their decisions"- Emily*

*"Don't get mad if they say they don't know, because sometimes they don't know." - Janelle*

*"Maybe they're not ready to have that conversation yet." - Jay*

# Starting a Conversation

- Give the youth time to process the discussion, their feelings, and any new information. No conversation is too short. They may need to have many short conversations about a challenge or struggle. Honor their wishes about how long to talk about a subject.
- Try to understand why the youth may not always tell you the truth:
  - They may wish that things were different
  - They may try to avoid a painful subject
  - They may fear the consequences of others knowing what they have done
  - They may try to say “the right thing”/what they think you want to hear
  - They may not yet trust you
- Ask the youth how she will know she has made the right decision. This can help give her more confidence in her own judgment and to resist being manipulated by others.
- Always try to conclude the conversation with something positive, based on what the youth has told you or you have noted. Express your faith in the adolescent’s abilities. Emphasize positive qualities, ways forward, and optimism.
  - “I believe in you, and I know that you can address this, when you decide the time is right”
  - “You showed a lot of courage to address this situation”
  - “I sense that you are not feeling strong at the moment but you have shown a lot of strength in the way you’ve dealt with this situation”
  - “You seem very good at \_\_\_\_\_ (communicating your feelings, dealing with peer pressure, setting your boundaries ...) ”

## Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Do not** impose your values or otherwise judge the youth you are working with,
- **Do not** attempt to make the decision(s) for your youth
- **Don’t** pretend you know how the foster youth truly feels - you don’t know.

*“Try not to bombard them. If you say three sentences, I’m gonna let it marinate.”*  
- Janelle

*“Don’t say ‘I know’; the youth in foster care- we’ve heard ‘I know’ so many times we know who truly means it and who doesn’t”*  
- Fabian