**WHAT IS THE ROLE OF A CASA?**

**National CASA guidelines:**

National CASA interprets the “best interest of the child” standard to mean that to determine the best interest of the child, the CASA volunteer should know the child they are appointed to advocate for well enough to form fact-based recommendations to the court that address the child’s needs, and know appropriate resources to meet those needs. The CASA volunteer also informs the court of the child’s wishes, whether or not those wishes are, in the opinion of the CASA volunteer, in the child’s best interest. (p. 6) Retrieved from: <http://www.prokids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Chap-1-Dec-2016.pdf>

**Policies for New Hampshire CASAs/GALs:**

*503.02 General Obligations of All Guardians Ad Litem*.

(a) Unless otherwise specified in an order or other instruction of the appointing court, a guardian ad litem shall at all times act as a reasonable person would in the best interests of the recipient of services.

(b) A guardian ad litem shall reach an independent conclusion about what is in the best interest of the recipient of services or such other matter as may be required by the orders or instructions of the appointing court.

(c) A guardian ad litem shall perform those duties assigned to him or her by the appointing court.

(d) A guardian ad litem shall, in good faith:

(1) Formulate a recommendation, or such other report as is directed by the appointing court, as is intended to address the best interests of the recipient of services or such other matter as directed by the orders or other instructions of the appointing court; and

(2) Develop a presentation to the court that is designed to achieve results that are in the best interests of the recipient of services or such other result as set forth in the orders or other instructions of the appointing court.

(e) A guardian ad litem who believes that he or she is deficient in skill or knowledge regarding a material issue in a case shall take such action as he or she, in good faith, believes:

(1) Will enable him or her to obtain such skill or knowledge; and

(2) Is consistent with the best interests of the recipient of services.

(f) A guardian ad litem shall seek to enlist the assistance of a person or persons that the guardian ad litem believes, in good faith, possesses skill and knowledge relative to a material issue if the guardian ad litem believes that to do so is necessary under paragraph (e) above.

(g) If a guardian ad litem believes, in good faith, that there is no action that will enable him or her to obtain the skill or knowledge necessary under paragraph (e) above, the guardian ad litem shall so advise the appointing court.

(h) A guardian ad litem shall comply with all statutes and case law relating to the duties and activities of, and the procedures applicable to, guardians ad litem in general and to the duties and activities of, and procedures applicable to, guardians ad litem in the particular type of case to which he or she has been appointed.

(i) A guardian ad litem shall be able to identify the material legal and factual issues raised in the proceeding in which he or she serves.

(j) A guardian ad litem shall make those reports required by the Child Protection Act, RSA 169-C:29.

(k) A guardian ad litem shall make those reports required by RSA 161-F: 46.

**National CASA standards:**

*The National CASA Association sets Standards for CASA volunteer work. The following is a summary of those standards:*

• Reviewing records;

• Interviewing appropriate parties involved in the case, including the child;

• Determining whether a permanent plan has been created for the child and whether appropriate services, including reasonable efforts, are being provided to the child and family;

• Submitting a signed written report with recommendations to the court on what placement, visitation plan, services, and plan are in the best interest of the child;

• Attending court hearings;

• Maintaining complete records about the case, including appointments scheduled, interviews held, and information gathered about the child and the child’s life circumstances; and

• Returning all case records and notes when the case is closed or when the CASA volunteer leaves the case. (p. 9) Retrieved from: <http://www.prokids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Chap-1-Dec-2016.pdf>

**How often should a CASA visit a child?**

The CASA volunteer has direct and sufficient contact with his or her client to carry out an independent and valid investigation of the child’s circumstances, including the child’s needs and wants, so as to be able to make sound, thorough, and objective recommendations in the child’s best interest. This contact should occur in person to provide the CASA volunteer with firsthand knowledge of the child and his or her unique personality, abilities, and needs. While social contact is permitted with the child to develop trust and a meaningful relationship, the CASA volunteer functions as an objective advocate for the child and not as the child’s attorney, caseworker, counselor, or parental figure. (p. 10) Retrieved from: <http://www.prokids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Chap-1-Dec-2016.pdf>

**What is “Minimum Sufficient Level of Care” (MSL)?**

CASAs assess whether or not parents can meet the “minimum sufficient level of care” for reunification. The MSL is determined by a number of factors, each of which should be looked at specifically in relation to the case at hand.

Factors to consider include:

* Child’s needs
* Social standards
* Community standards

The MSL Standard:

* Relates to a particular child
* It is a set of minimum conditions, not an ideal situation
* It is a relative standard depending on the child’s needs, social standards and community standards
* It will not be the same for every family or even every child in a particular family
* It remains the same when considering removal and when considering reunification

See more info about MSL: <http://www.casalakecounty.com/filelibrary/Defining%20Minimum%20Sufficient%20Level%20of%20Care.pdf>

**Attitudes, Values & Skills That Enhance CASA Volunteer Work**

• Professionalism

• Ethics, accountability, confidentiality, resourcefulness, critical thinking, and good judgment.

• Interpersonal Competence

• Non-judgmental, respectful, collaborative, self-aware, and assertive. CASA volunteers are expected to demonstrate respect and open-mindedness in their interactions with all parties to the case. (p. 16) Retrieved from: <http://www.prokids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Chap-1-Dec-2016.pdf>

**Understanding Children (CASA TRAINING):**

*Important Points About Children’s Needs:*

- To advocate for a child, the CASA volunteer must keep the child’s needs clearly in mind. The child’s needs are paramount.

- Human needs can be ordered in a sequential hierarchy (i.e., Maslow’s survival, security, primary relationships, esteem, and community/wholeness).

- Healthy growth and development depend on adequately meeting more basic needs before other needs can be addressed (e.g., the development of friendships depends on more basic needs being met).

- Children’s needs depend on their age, stage of development, attachment to their family/caregivers, and reaction to what is happening around them. (p. 5)

Retrieved from: <http://www.prokids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Chap-10-Dec-2016.pdf>

**How Children Grow & Develop (CASA TRAINING):**

When children’s needs are being met appropriately, they are able to grow and develop optimally. It is important in your work as a CASA volunteer to be able to assess age appropriate behavior for children from birth through adolescence.

Children need to feel that they are loved, that they belong, that they are wanted. They also need the self-confidence that comes from being able to meet situations adequately. (p. 7-8) Retrieved from: <http://www.prokids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Chap-10-Dec-2016.pdf>

**Attachment (CASA TRAINING):**

- The psychological connection between people that permits them to have relational significance to each other.

- An affectionate bond between two individuals that endures through space and time and serves to join them emotionally.

- A strong and enduring bond of trust that develops between the child and the person(s) he or she interacts with most frequently.

- Attachment is a skill that begins to be learned shortly after birth and develops intensely throughout the first three years of life. After the age of three, children can still learn how to attach, however, this learning is more difficult. The child’s negative experiences with bonding will strongly influence the child’s response to caregivers and other individuals throughout the child’s lifetime.

*Children who are learning to attach will be influenced by three specific factors:*

1. The child’s genetic predisposition;

2. The conditions under which the child is taught; and

3. The child’s “teachers” (the parents or caretakers). (pp. 13-14)

Think about what you have observed in a healthy relationship between a child and parent. There is a distinct cycle of infant attachment development: (1) expressing a need (by crying); (2) having that need met (feeding, diapering, holding); (3) growing familiar with the person who meets the need; and (4) trusting that the caretaker will be there every time. This leads to “bonding” with that person, the trusted caretaker. This is the healthy attachment cycle. (p. 15)

An attachment may be broken when a child loses contact because he or she may have been moved many times, or when visitation does not occur frequently and on a regular basis when the child is very young. There are many factors that can contribute to the lack of healthy attachments. At the most serious end of the continuum is Reactive Attachment Disorder. (p. 15) Retrieved from: <http://www.prokids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Chap-10-Dec-2016.pdf>

**Healthy Attachments (CASA TRAINING):**

Healthy attachments are not based on genetic ties to or the gender or culture of the caretaker. They are based on the nature of the relationship between the child and the caretaker. (p. 14) It is very important to understand the normal process of attachment because the experiences of most of the children in the child protection system increase the likelihood that they will have attachment problems, which may or may not rise to the level of a Reactive Attachment Disorder.

**Separation (CASA TRAINING):**

- Integrating this understanding about separation and loss with information on child development, behavior, attachment, and a child’s sense of time allows CASA volunteers to more accurately assess a child’s needs.

- When children are removed from their homes, no matter how strong or weak the attachment, they feel isolated and detached. Not only do they worry about not seeing their parents, but they also suffer from fears of losing peer groups and siblings, changing schools, or missing something as simple as their bed or toys. (p. 20)

**Separation Experience:**

There are a number of things that a CASA volunteer can do to help a child who is experiencing difficulty with the separation from his or her parents.

- Children in the foster care system are damaged every time they are moved from one place to another.

- Each placement increases the likelihood of irreversible damage to the child’s emotional and psychological health.

- Once you are appointed, you can advocate that the child not experience multiple placements. (p. 20) Retrieved from: <http://www.prokids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Chap-10-Dec-2016.pdf>

**Emotional & Psychological Issues for Children (CASA TRAINING):**

It is not the purpose of this training to make you an expert in child development or psychology, but to help you recognize warning signs that might indicate the need for evaluation and treatment by a qualified mental health professional. A specific behavior may be a warning sign of a particular problem but may also be attributable to a variety of other causes. It is critical that the CASA volunteer not try to diagnose.

**Grief & Depression:**

Many of the children in the CASA volunteer program experience a tremendous amount of sadness after being removed from their homes. Despite their strong emotions, often children cannot verbally express their persistent feelings of sadness and emptiness. At earlier developmental stages, abstract thinking and vocabulary do not exist. Children may not know why they feel sad; they simply do. (p. 25)

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:**

PTSD, develops as a reaction to a terrifying event or series of events, such as severe child abuse or witnessing domestic violence. PTSD typically appears within six months of the event and can last for many years. Symptoms of PTSD are placed into three categories:

1. Intrusion (re-experiencing the trauma)

2. Avoidance/Numbing (avoidance of things that remind one of the trauma)

3. Hyperarousal (increased tenseness and heightened awareness) (p. 26)

Retrieved from: <http://www.prokids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Chap-10-Dec-2016.pdf>

**The Importance of Family to a Child**

When a child’s biological family is unable to meet these needs, what then? What is in the child’s best interest? These are not easy questions to answer. The CASA volunteer starts with the assumption that a child’s own family is usually the best setting for raising and nurturing that child. This is true even if the family’s lifestyle, beliefs, resources and actions are radically different from the volunteer’s. As long as the child’s family meets or can be helped to meet the minimum sufficient level of care required for the safety of that child, the child belongs with his or her family. (p. 11) Retrieved from: <http://www.prokids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Chap-4-Dec-2016.pdf>

**The “Best Interest” Principle—What It Means**

• A safe home

• A permanent home

• As quickly as possible

Judges use the “best interest of the child” standard when making their decisions in child abuse and neglect cases. Child welfare and juvenile court practitioners and scholars have debated the meaning of “best interest of the child” for years. Books have been written on the subject; however, there is still no concise legal definition for this standard. (p. 10)

**The Best Interest Principle: What the National CASA Association Says:**

The CASA/GAL volunteer is guided by the “best interest” principle when advocating for a child. This means that the volunteer knows the child well enough to identify the child’s needs. The volunteer makes fact-based recommendations to the court about appropriate resources to meet those needs and informs the court of the child’s wishes, whether or not those wishes are, in the opinion of the CASA/GAL volunteer, in the child’s best interest. (pp. 10-11)

Retrieved from: <http://nc.casaforchildren.org/files/secure/training/preservicecurriculum/2_VM.pdf>

**Evaluating & Advocating for the Best Interest of Children**

As a CASA/GAL volunteer, you can use the following categories to evaluate and advocate for the best interest of children:

Safety: Child safety is paramount and best achieved by supporting parents within their community.

Permanence: Children and youth need and have the right to lifelong nurturing and secure relationships that are provided by families who have the skills and resources to meet their specific needs. Efforts to identify and secure permanence for children are continuous and integrated into all stages of involvement with children and families.

Well-Being: Children’s well-being is dependent upon strong families and communities meeting their physical, mental, behavioral health, educational and cultural needs.

Family Focus: Families are the primary providers for children’s needs. The safety and well-being of children is dependent upon the safety and well-being of all family members.

Respectful Engagement: Children, youth and families are best served when advocates actively listen to them and invite participation in decision making. Respectful engagement includes understanding and honoring of the family’s history, culture and traditions, as well as empowering them to meet their unique and individual needs through utilization of family strengths, and educating them regarding the child welfare process.

Professional Competence: Children are best served by advocates who respond to the evolving needs of communities, are knowledgeable of the historical context within which the child welfare system operates, provide respectful treatment to families and continually strive for professional excellence through critical self-examination. (p. 21)

**How to be an Effective CASA**

A CASA volunteer needs specific knowledge, attitudes, and skills to effectively advocate for a child. Children who have been abused or neglected need a voice in the court to advocate for their best interests. An effective advocate is able to:

1. Approach each case with the goal of advocating for interventions and services designed to ensure that the child is in a safe, permanent, and nurturing home as soon as possible;

2. Work within the parameters of laws governing child abuse, neglect, and dependency cases; and

3. Under the guidance of ProKids staff:

• Conduct an independent investigation to gather facts, and research the case to ascertain the needs and wishes of the child;

• Collaborate with the child (when possible), the child’s family, the child protective services agency (Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services - HCJFS), and other service providers to identify the appropriate resources for meeting the needs of the child and his/her family and to determine where those resources are available;

• Consistently present to the court fact-based recommendations so that appropriate resources can be ordered to meet the needs of the child…

ProKids mobilizes our community to break the vicious cycle of child abuse and neglect. ProKids National CASA/GAL Association Standards describe the major criteria a CASA program must meet for each volunteer. Since monitoring began in 2000, ProKids has been in 100% compliance with all minimum standards set by National CASA. Retrieved from: <http://www.prokids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Chap-1-Dec-2016.pdf> ProKids CASA University

**Case assessment questions for a CASA:**

• What harm has the child suffered?

• Classify the degree of harm as severe, moderate, or mild.

• Are the consequences, physical and emotional, likely to be short-term, long term or permanent?

• What is the likelihood of recurrence and why?

• What services, short of removal, are necessary to adequately reduce risk?

• What services were made available to the family prior to removal (or prior to hearing)?

• What is the parent/caregiver’s understanding of the situation?

• Is the parent/caregiver motivated to make necessary changes?

• Describe the parent/caregiver’s current emotional state.

• What kind of support is available from the parent/caregiver’s spouse, significant other, extended family and/or friends?

• Has the parent/caregiver demonstrated cooperation with service providers or lack of it? What indications of parent/caregiver-child attachment have been observed?

• Are basic food and clothing provided for the child when he or she is in the parent/caregiver’s home?

• Is the family income sufficient to meet the child’s basic needs?

• List all the losses that the child would suffer by being removed from the home.

• What is the most appropriate type of placement for this child?

• What efforts have been made to locate possible relative placements?

• What will out-of-home placement provide for the child? What will out-of home placement provide for the parent/caregiver?

• What visitation arrangements should be made between the child and parent/caregiver (for example: location, frequency, length, transportation, supervision)?

• What is the expected duration of placement? (p. 23)