Effective questions for children and youth about safety, permanency and wellbeing

Introductions and Establishing the Relationship

Regardless of the age of the child you are engaging, the first three tasks that should be accomplished on the first visit and revisited at every subsequent visit include:

- Introducing yourself and your role
- Discovering and talking about family relationships
- Creating a trusted connection with the child or youth that provides them with assurance regarding your availability and consistent support.

Learn to respond to the child’s needs in the interviewing rhythm during your exchange by:

- Giving the child plenty of time to respond.
- Allowing for silence.
- Acknowledging feelings, helping the child to think of words for their feelings.

Depending upon the age of the child or youth, different approaches to these introductory goals will differ:

**Very young children:**

**Use a Helping Hand:** Hold up your hand and point to each finger, asking the child who is in his or her family and who is living in his home. Ask them to talk about the people in their lives that are helpful or supportive. Ask them to talk about people in their lives that make them worried or afraid.

Consider use of the Signs of Safety/Safety Organized Practice tools such as Three Houses (House of Good Things, House of Worries, House of Wishes) or Safety House to help elicit supportive adults and concerning individuals in the child’s life.
Safety questions for very young children:

- Ask the child whether they know name, street address and telephone number of caregiver.
- Ask the child who stays at home with them and whether they are ever alone.
- Ask the child who takes care of them when their care provider is away. Ask them about this experience.
- Ask them general questions about how to respond to a frightening or scary situation.
- Talk to them about outside play and who is with them when they play outside.

School-aged children:

Be sure to talk with older children about the role you play in supporting their safety and wellbeing while they are separated from their family.

Consider use of the Signs of Safety/Safety Organized Practice tools such as Three Houses (House of Good Things, House of Worries, House of Wishes) or Safety House to help elicit supportive adults and concerning individuals in the child’s life.

Create a Ecomap or Genogram: Ask the child to build a picture of their family and households using these family systems tools or by drawing a pictorial representation of family.

Safety questions for school aged children:

- Ask the child who takes care of them when care provider is not at home or at work. Explore their feelings of safety with this caregiver.
- Ask the child to tell you the name, address and telephone number of their caregiver.
- Ask the child if they are allowed to make telephone calls privately at this home.
- Ask the child if they are ever left alone at home. Ask about whether the child spends the night at other family homes.
- Ask how the child gets to and from school.
- Ask the child about who checks on them when they are outdoors playing.
• Ask the child about their use of a computer – internet, websites and family rules about computer use.
• Ask the child to show you their room.
• Ask about other children in the house and their relationship with them. What happens when they have a fight?
• Ask the child what they would do if something scary or bad happens.
• Ask the child if they are worried about anything and if as a caseworker, you can help.

Older youth and young adults:

Introduce yourself and inquire about the youth’s knowledge and perspective on your role as a social worker. Engage the youth by asking the question: “What can I do to help you make the best of your situation?”

Ask the youth to talk to you about who family is to them, who they feel support from and close to.

Consider a discussion based upon the Signs of Safety/Safety Organized Practice interviewing structure of the Three Questions: “What are we worried about?” “What is working well?” and “What needs to happen now?”

Safety questions for older children

• Ask the child who takes care of them when care provider is not at home or at work. Explore their feelings of safety with this caregiver.
• Assess the youth’s plan for being able to contact a safe adult if there was an emergency.
• Ask the child if they are allowed to make telephone calls privately at this home.
• Ask the youth what the rules are for staying home alone or being alone away from the house. Ask about whether the child spends the night at other family homes.
• Ask how the child gets to and from school.
• Ask the child about who checks on them when they are outdoors playing.
• Ask the child about their use of a computer – internet, websites and family rules about computer use.
• Ask the child to show you their room.
• Ask about other children in the house and their relationship with them. What happens when they have a fight?
Discuss the issues of dating safety, safe sexual contact and hazards of tobacco, drugs and alcohol and offer resources to support the youth in this area.

Ask the child if they are worried about anything and if as a caseworker, you can help.

**General questions about safety:**

Who do you feel close to?
Who do you talk to when you are worried or concerned about something?
What are things that make you feel worried, afraid or nervous?
Is there anything you would like to change at home that would make you feel safer?

**Questions you might ask a foster child during a monthly contact**

- Questions regarding their out-of-home care home:
  - Tell me about where you live.
  - How are you and your foster family getting along?
  - Is there any part of your new home that you do not understand?
  - Is there anything about where you are living that you need help with?
  - If you could name one thing that needs to get better, what would it be?
  - Tell me who lives in the home you are living in.
  - What are the rules at home?
  - What happens when someone breaks a rule?
  - What do you like/dislike about living there?
  - Who do you play with at home? Who do you play with near your home? What do you like to play?

- What are some of the good times you have had since being part of this family?

- What are some of the ways the family shows you that they like/love you? (use this question only with discretion and proper foundation)

- How do your foster parents help you when you feel sad?
Who helps you with your homework?

What is your favorite meal? When was the last time you had this meal?

Do you have chores or family responsibilities at home? Do you get an allowance?

Tell me the name of your friends at home and friends at school.

Tell me something exciting or fun that you have done since I last saw you.

How is school going? Grades, friends, after school activities?

Can I ask you about you and your birth family? How are visits with family going? Parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles?

**Talking to older youth about preparing for independent living**

What ILSP activities have you participated in lately?

Where do you see yourself staying once you are out of foster care (older teens)?

Any plans for going to school after you graduate high school or get a GED? College? Vocational training program? Have you talked with your ILSP worker about financial assistance for school? (FAFSA deadline is March 2 of each year).

What are your plans for working, either full-time or part-time?

Do you have your Social Security card, birth certificate, and California ID card? What about health records?

What adults do you have a good relationship with? Who do you go to when you are mad, upset or excited to tell someone about a success?

**Tips for visiting a child or youth in foster care:**
• Review the file before the visit to be sure you are acquainted with the child’s background and service needs and develop an outline of areas for discussion during the contact.

• Consult ahead of time with substitute care providers and service providers to determine areas of focus and concern.

• Assure that a portion of the visit with the child or youth occurs privately.

• Schedule your visits in advance so that you don’t interrupt school or family routines unnecessarily. When assessing for safety concerns in out of home care, use visits to school or other activities when the child is not around the substitute care provider.

• Be honest – acknowledge difficulties, ask the child for ideas about what can make them more comfortable.

• Keep your promises and don’t make promises you are not able to keep.

• Stay tuned to important events in the child’s life such as birthdays, school achievements, sporting events.

• Learn to notice and recognize behaviors that merit recognition such as improvements in behavior at home or school, school achievements, and development of friendships.

(Sources: College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, School of Social Work and National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and
Permanency Planning, Promoting Placement Stability and Permanency through Caseworker/Child Visits, May 2009)