



Caseworker Guidance

As a caseworker, you have one of the most important and rewarding jobs you can find. This guidance document was created specifically for you, by the OCFS Youth Advisory Board, so that you can be better equipped for those face-to-face meetings between you, the youth in your care, and their foster parents.

Be Aware

As a caseworker, one of the most important jobs you have is to be observant.

When you go on a home visit, make sure you are assessing the environment thoroughly and being attentive to red flags in the child's—or foster parent's—behavior. Is the child talking as much as they usually do? Does the relationship between the youth and foster parent seem the same as previous meetings?

Trust your instincts. You know your job. There is nobody better equipped to do your job better than you are right now.

Privacy

While it's not entirely convenient to squeeze in a private session with youth during every single home visit, it is important to remember that some youth are more shy than others, and will not be as willing as others to talk in front of their foster parents about issues they are having with their foster parents.

This is where your observational skills are very important. You have to be able to catch the smallest change in behavior to see when a child needs some additional, private support. Either way, it should be a priority to talk to youth in a private setting as much as you can regardless of whether you sense something is wrong.

As a caseworker, you may be the only person they have to talk to about their situation.

Consistency

Consistency is very important to youth. The best way to create a healthy, trusting, relationship with the youth in your care is to be consistent in your scheduling. While this is best achieved through regular, unmissed, visits, the reality is that things happen and sometimes you cannot make a meeting. The important thing is that the youth is aware that something important has come up and that you aren't just "ditching" them (trust me, this is the first thing they will think).

Ideally, it would be best if you could talk to the youth directly about having to reschedule, but if you cannot, it wouldn't hurt to tell the foster parent to let the youth know that if they need anything between the time of rescheduling and the next visit, to please let you know. This says, "Yes I had to be a little inconsistent and reschedule, but I still care to make sure that you are okay until the next time we meet."

There is no greater joy nor greater reward than to make a fundamental difference in someone's life.

– Mary Rose McGeady

Supporting your youth

When meeting with a foster parent and child together, it is important to be consistent in language and, behavior. Something that you will undoubtedly come across, is a youth who has a rocky history with past foster parents, and caseworkers getting "too close," creating a feeling of "me (youth) vs. them (foster parent, caseworkers, etc.)."

As best as you can, avoid communicating or acting differently with the foster parent vs. the child when you are all together in a meeting. This will prevent your appearing to favor one over the other. Youth want to feel like their caseworker is supportive. i.e., "have their back."

That being said, it is important to keep your relationship with foster parents at a level where you won't feel uncomfortable confronting them, if that time ever comes. Another way to support your youth is by trying to figure out each youth's affiliation early so that you aren't having to use assuming pronouns. A simple "How would you prefer to be called?" will do it.

Trust and Engagement

Help to build trust by being open and honest, and talking about your own interests/family.

Youth can tell when you're only asking questions to get the information you need for paperwork. Show interest in the youth as a person by striking up a conversation. Follow up on conversations you had in past visits or acknowledge an accomplishment/event they mentioned they were going to be doing since your last visit. Ask the child about their life and career goals.

Regardless of your own challenges, always be attentive, engaging, and positive when meeting with the youth because they may easily interpret your demeanor as a reflection of your attitude toward them.

Self-Care

Try to remember that you have one of the most important—and difficult—jobs out there. You work with children who rely on you with their entire lives.

Still, the best way to help youth, is to take care of YOU first. Nobody can be perfect 100 percent of the time, but everyone can learn and grow in their field of work.

If you're struggling, and you know that it will affect your work, let your supervisor know. It's okay to not be okay. Being able to recognize that self-care is important and that no one is perfect is crucial to your mental health, and overall happiness, in and out of the workplace.