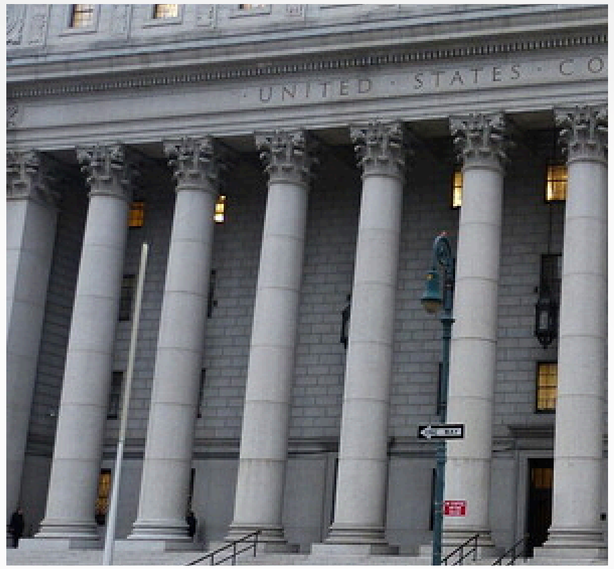


CASA TESTIMONY: COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY IN COURT

Practical Skills for Clear, Credible Testimony

Judge Amy Lewis

October 1, 2026

TRAINING OBJECTIVES



- How to conduct interviews with children exposed to trauma and engage parents who are distrusful
- Where to obtain useful information to include in reports
- How to turn information into facts for your CASA report
- Testifying in Court and how to maintain credibility



BEFORE THE INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

- Review the case information and current court orders
- Know your CASA program's policies
- Identify what information is already documented
- Identify what information is missing
- Determine whether an interpreter or accommodation is needed
- Plan an appropriate setting



THE CASA'S ROLE WHEN GATHERING INFORMATION

THREE PRINCIPLES



1. Be Curious, not accusatory
2. Observe without diagnosing
3. Separate facts from conclusions

INTERVIEWING A CHILD WHO HAS EXPERIENCED TRAUMA



- Start with establishing a safe relationship
- Let the child control the pace
- Avoid asking the same question
- Start broad, then become more specific
- Be open-ended

WHO SHOULD BE INTERVIEWED?

- Teachers
- Neighbors
- Service providers
- Parents - but what if they do not want to cooperate?



WHY CASA REPORTS MATTER

- Helps the Court understand what is happening in the child's life
- Reflects the child's wishes
- Shows what services are being provided
- Reports any case plan progress
- Addresses any remaining concerns
- Shows what the child needs
- Information supporting the CASA recommendation is included

THE FIVE TYPES OF INFORMATION IN A CASA REPORT

1. Direct fact
2. Statement from another person
3. Professional opinion
4. CASA observation - What did you personally see?
5. CASA recommendation

Who? What?
When? Where?
How do you know?

TURNING INTERVIEWS INTO REPORT LANGUAGE

- Trauma and subjective language – The “Delete the Adjective” exercise
- Documenting different accounts
- Fact to recommendation formula:
  - Identify the child’s needs
  - Document the facts supporting the need
  - Identify barriers
  - Make the recommendation



THE “DELETE THE ADJECTIVE” EXERCISE

"Mother is irresponsible."
Ask:
"What did Mother actually do?"
"Mother missed two scheduled visits and did not contact the visitation supervisor regarding either missed visit."

"The home is filthy."
Ask:
"What did you actually see?"

"During the visit, CASA observed dirty dishes in the kitchen sink, clothing on the living-room floor, and food containers on the kitchen counter."

“The child is doing terrible in school”
Ask:
"The teacher reported that the child's grades declined during the current grading period. School records reflect three Ds and two Fs."

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS PARAGRAPH?

"Mom is completely uncooperative and doesn't care about the child's therapy. The child is clearly traumatized and is afraid of going home. The teacher says the child is doing terrible in school. CASA believes Mom needs to take parenting more seriously."

IDENTIFY THE PROBLEMS

- "Completely uncooperative" — subjective
- "Doesn't care" — assumes motivation
- "Clearly traumatized" — potentially clinical conclusion
- "Afraid" — may not be what the child actually said
- "Doing terrible" — vague
- “Take parenting more seriously" — subjective
- No dates
- No sources
- No specific observations
- No distinction between fact and opinion
- No explanation of how CASA reached the recommendation



REVISED VERSION

"CASA attempted to contact Mother on September 5 and September 12 regarding the child's treatment. Mother declined to participate in an interview on both occasions. Mother stated that she disagreed with the current treatment plan. The child reported that they do not want to return home and stated that they feel 'scared' when discussing returning home. The child identified [specific concern]. CASA did not independently determine the cause of the child's reported fear. The child's teacher reported that the child's academic performance has declined during the current grading period. According to school records provided to CASA, the child's grades changed from [information] to [information]. The teacher also reported [specific observed behaviors].

The child's therapist reported that the child has missed three scheduled appointments during the past six weeks and recommended consistent participation in treatment. Based on the child's statements, school records, teacher observations, and information provided by the treatment provider, CASA recommends that the court consider the child's continued access to mental-health services and request that the parties identify and address barriers to consistent attendance." That version doesn't require CASA to call anyone a bad parent. It doesn't require CASA to diagnose the child. It doesn't require CASA to determine which adult is lying. It gives the court specific information, identifies the sources, acknowledges limitations, and connects the recommendation to the child's documented needs.

ROLE OF A CASA IN COURT

- Independent voice for the child’s best interest
- Provides fact-based observations
- Makes informed recommendations
- Not an advocate for parents or agencies

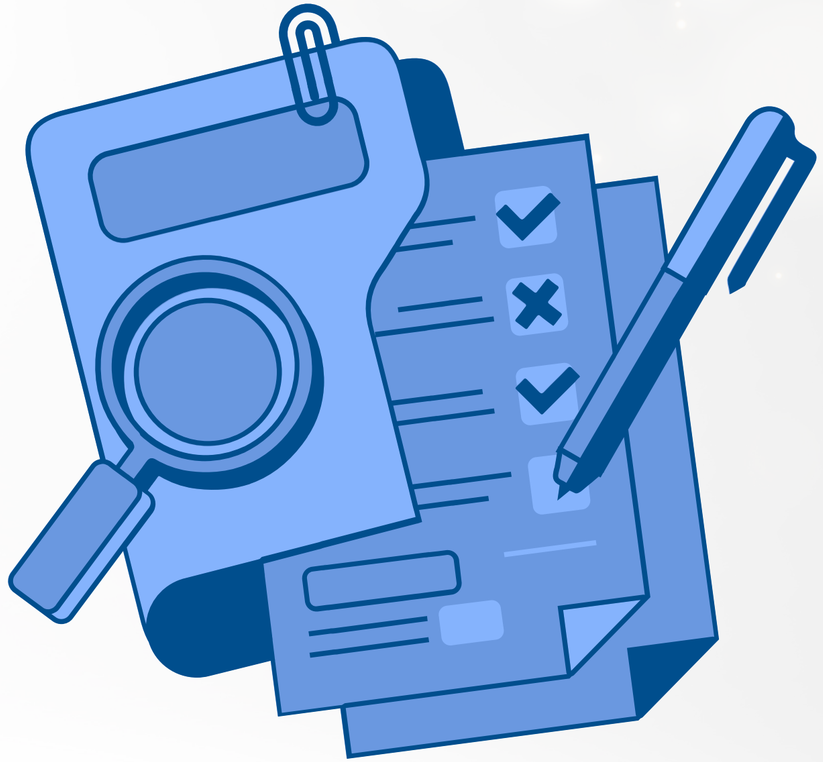


WHAT MAKES STRONG TESTIMONY

- Clear and Concise
- Fact-based (not opinion driven)
- Supported by specific examples
- Neutral and professional
- Consistent with written reports
- Credibility is your greatest tool

PREPARING FOR COURT

- Review your court report thoroughly
- Know key dates, visits, and observations
- Identify 3-5 main recommendations
- Be ready to explain the “why” behind each recommendation
- Anticipate difficult questions





ORGANIZING YOUR TESTIMONY

For each Recommendation:

- Personal observation - What did you observe?
- When did it happen?
- Who was involved?
- Why does it matter for the child?

COMMUNICATION BASICS

- Speak clearly and slowly
- Use plain language
- Answer only what is asked
- Pause before responding



PROFESSIONAL COURTROOM DEMEANOR

- Address judge as “Your Honor”
- Maintain calm tone
- Sit/stand upright
- Make appropriate eye contact
- Avoid defensive body language





FACTS VS. OPINION

Facts:

- “I observed…”
- “The child stated…”
- “Based on this, I recommend…”



Always support opinions with facts

USING SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

Weak:

- “The home was unsafe”

Strong:

- “On March 10, I observed exposed wiring and no running water”

Specific details increase credibility

HANDLING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS



- Listen carefully
- Pause before answering
- Ask for clarification if needed
- Stay calm
- Do not argue

CROSS-EXAMINATION

- Keep answers short and accurate
- Do not argue or speculate
- It’s okay to say:
  - “I do not know”
  - “I do not recall”
  - “I was not present”



AVOID COMMON PITFALLS

- Rambling or over-explaining
- Guessing or speculating
- Showing frustration
- Using absolutes (“always”, “never”)
- Speaking beyond your role

MAINTAINING CREDIBILITY

- Be consistent with your report
- Acknowledge limits of your knowledge
- Correct mistakes honestly
- Stay focused on the child’s best interest

SAMPLE Q & A (DIRECT)



- Q: What is your role as a CASA?
- A: To gather information, observe the child’s situation, and make recommendations based on their best interest

SAMPLE Q & A (CROSS)

- Q: You don’t know what happens every day, do you?
- A: I am not present daily. My testimony is based on my observations and information from reliable sources.



STRONG RESPONSE TECHNIQUES

- “Based on my observations…”
- “I cannot speak to that…”
- “I don’t recall…”
- “That information is in my report…”

KEY TAKEAWAYS



- Be prepared and organized
- Stick to the facts and observations
- Communicate clearly and calmly
- Stay neutral and professional
- Focus on the child’s best interest



QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION



- What feels most challenging about testifying?
- What strategies will you use in court?



QUESTIONS?