



## What does a quality caseworker look like?

Caseworkers have one of the most important and rewarding jobs. The OCFS Youth Advisory Board created this document to help you be better equipped for meetings with the youth in your care and their foster parents.



### What should caseworkers keep in mind when working with youth?

- **Private communication**: Meet with youth in a private space where they can talk without being overheard. Do not rely on a foster parent's assurances.
- **Consistency**: Youth need a consistent caseworker. Understand the importance of consistency; if you need to reschedule be sure to adequately discuss this with the youth.
- **Trust/Engagement**: Help to build trust by being open and honest. Talk about your own interests/family. Treat each youth as an individual, not one of many cases. Show interest in the youth as a person and the purpose for your visit, which is to assess the youth's safety and well-being; to evaluate or re-evaluate the youth's permanency needs and permanency goal; and to guide the youth towards a course of action aimed at resolving problems of a social, emotional or developmental nature. Follow up on conversations you had during past visits. Ask the child about their goals in life. Regardless of your own challenges, always be attentive, engaging and positive when meeting with the youth; they may easily interpret your demeanor as a reflection of your attitude toward them.
- **Safety**: Assess the environment at every visit. Be attentive to red flags in the child's behavior, and take the time to explore (and follow-up) if anything seems "off," or if the parent doesn't allow the child to communicate.
- **Support**: When meeting with foster parent and child together, be consistent in language. To prevent the appearance of being aligned with one or the other, avoid communicating with the parent differently from the child. Make sure your actions and behaviors convey that you are supportive of the youth.
- **Cultural Competence**: Be culturally competent in honoring each youth's "affiliation"; do not use "assuming pronouns."
- **Inform**: Provide youth with the contact information for the attorney for the child.



## **Monthly Visits:**

### **What should they look like? Why are they so important?**

Try to make sure that when you're making a home visit with a youth that you remember the reason for your visit is primarily to assess the youth's current safety and well-being and to evaluate or re-evaluate the youth's permanency needs and goal, and to guide the youth toward a course of action aimed at resolving the youth's problems of a social, emotional or developmental nature. In some cases, it may be easier to focus on the foster parent, but this can lead to the youth feeling uncomfortable and unheard. You may want to talk to the youth in what feels like an open space, but it's best not to assume that being out in the open is safe for them. Remember, it is a right to speak to their caseworker in private. Sometimes a youth's foster parents may try to interrupt conversation between you and the youth. A private setting will help the youth feel more comfortable when talking about the foster home, family, and themselves. Meeting with youth face to face consistently can provide reassurance about you as their caseworker, and about their placement.

**Body language and listening:** is important in almost any setting. When meeting with a youth try to be as attentive as possible. Good body language consists of making eye contact, leaning toward a youth, showing you are giving the youth your undivided attention. Having an open, friendly, posture without crossing arms always feels warmer. If a caseworker tends to habitually cross their arms, a smile can soften her image. If you're having a bad day, please remember that it can affect the youth. If you can't set those feelings aside during your visits, just let the youth know so they aren't left wondering if it's something they did. Be a good listener. That may sound obvious, but sometimes it goes unpracticed. Try not to just nod your head, or give simple responses. Try to engage with the youth, it will help build your relationship with them, because it shows you genuinely care.

**Be aware:** Is the child acting the same as they usually do? Does anything seem "off?" Always follow your gut. If you have any doubts about the child's state—if, for example, they appear to be putting up a front or faking some emotions—investigate it further. Doing so can't cause any harm, so spend that extra time. Be aware of the environment in which the child is living. Does it always smell like it's been recently cleaned? Does the food look like it's all been stocked, just in time for each home visit? One thing to be aware of is scheduling and time. Time matters. The monthly casework contact is an excellent way to build a trusting relationship with the youth. You cannot build a relationship if there is not consistency. However, sometimes a caseworker cannot make it or may have to reschedule. The most important thing about this is that you talk to the child about it, and not only their foster parent. Lastly, just remember to be open.

