

Ask Claudia: Gifts to our children and families

The mission of CASA is to advocate for our children. It is not our mission to provide goods or services to the children or their families. We all heard that message repeatedly in training, but it is sometimes more difficult to sort out what is and is not appropriate once we start work on real cases with real children and families. It is particularly difficult to restrain the urge to “help out” when we come face to face with children living in poverty.

Recognizing these realities, **the one unbreakable rule for anyone contemplating a gift of any sort to our children and families is *TALK TO YOUR MANAGER FIRST*.** Your manager has many years of experience and can help you sort through the issues presented when you are thinking of giving gifts. It is impossible to address every conceivable situation in this article, but here are a few of the most common situations:

- Never make a gift of used baby equipment without first speaking with your manager. These products can raise serious safety concerns, and, as a general rule, donations of these items are best left to the agency or other sources. Used car seats and cribs are especially concerning; safety standards change frequently for these items. Car seats have expiration dates, and, without a history, it is impossible to tell if a car seat was involved in a previous collision or safety recall.
- It is never appropriate to give gifts or loans of cash to our children or their families. It can be tempting to give a teen money to buy the latest styles or help a parent with grocery money, but it is not your role to support the child, and it is counterproductive to intervene when the court is trying to determine whether a parent can independently support and care for their children. If you have an extraordinary circumstance that you feel justifies an exception to this rule, you must first speak with your manager.
- We are occasionally asked by caseworkers or families whether we can find beds or other needed furniture items. Let your manager know about any such requests. It is never appropriate for the CASA to purchase such items. However, we are often able to find donated items. For example, the CASA swap shop is a great resource for these donations. However, *you must leave the transport and delivery of such items to the agency or the family*. If there is no such assistance available, please talk to your manager. It is never appropriate for the CASA to enlist the aid of their friends, spouses, children or other family members to assist with moving items, because there is a risk that this will violate the confidentiality of the children and family.

- Everyone knows that it can be helpful to bring along books, puzzles, and other activities to a visit. Observing our children at play can be a very informative way to identify a child's strengths and also possible concerns. Consider your local library before you run out and buy materials for your CASA bag. Libraries are a rich source of books and other fun activity items like puzzles, puppets, and other educational toys. Borrowing the items from the library makes it easy to explain why you cannot leave the toys for the children, and you can bring something new and different every time you visit.
- Birthdays are particularly difficult for most of our children who are separated from their families. Remember that the best present a CASA can give a child is the gift of their time and attention and the message that they care.