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# Usefulness Of Collaborative Family Engagement At CASA Of Montgomery County

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## ABSTRACT

When children are in CPS care, there is a strong desire to ensure that their cases are executed so the children end up in safe, permanent environments as quickly as possible. To facilitate this goal, there is a partnership between CPS and an organization called CASA, which provides advocacy and support to ensure that the children have their rights represented in court proceedings. To help achieve this goal, Montgomery County has implemented the Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) model. This model seeks to obtain better outcomes for children by engaging with the child's family and the community around them. This study is designed to assess the usefulness of the CFE model in Montgomery County. It seeks to identify places where the model could be improved and where it is failing.

*Keywords:* Foster care, kinship placements, family engagement, Court Appointed Special Advocates, Child Protective Services, collaborative

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The Faculty of the Graduate School

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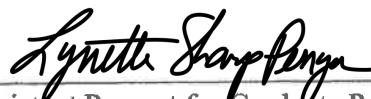
Master of Science in Social Work

By

Chelsea Bankes

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Montgomery County is a small nonprofit organization in Conroe, Texas, approximately 40 miles from Houston. CASA provides critical assistance for government entities working on child welfare. Specifically, CASA works closely with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services to ensure that each child with an active CPS case has an advocate to look after their rights, interests, and needs. CASA representatives work along with attorneys too, filling a critical need when cases go to court. CASA has been extremely effective at fulfilling its mission, taking on 100% of cases in Montgomery County (CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates, n.d.). The organization has been able to do so because of the engagement of advocates that volunteer or otherwise work for the organization. From an ideological standpoint, CASA operates by building rapport with children so that when advocates are asked to help defend the rights of those children, they are more effective at their advocacy. For the parties involved, including state agencies, lawyers, and CASA advocates, the ultimate goal is to ensure that children have a safe and supportive home to go to when their court proceedings have finished (Texas Department of Family & Protective Services (DFPS) – Child Protective Services (CPS), 2016). In looking for the best ways to build that safe and permanent home structure for children, researchers have come up with many ideas. Among the most important has been the Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) model.

The CFE model takes into account the important role that various agencies and stakeholders play in helping children find the best homes. CFE then helps to bring together state agencies and the nonprofit organizations like CASA that are required to work together in some ways for an effective solution to be reached for every child. CFE also looks to ensure that all parties have a similar understanding of where the child is so that when the case makes its way through the court system, there are no surprises that may derail the child's quest toward permanent and safe housing (CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates, n.d.). The model also takes into account the need for a strong community to support a child. It is not exactly an extension of the popular "It Takes a Village" strategy, but it does respect the need for bond building in case initial, preferred plans do not work out. Children, it seems, end up with much better outcomes when they have the support of teachers, advocates, family members, and the like, who can provide them with guidance and help to identify problematic trends before those trends derail the child's future. The theory does not discount parents, of course, but rather, seeks to provide them with support to make them more effective. CFE depends on the idea that parents can eventually trust other people to watch, care for, and support their child (CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates, n.d.). Under CFE principles, it is critical to locate more of a child's family than might be readily identifiable on the surface. In communications with parents, professionals help to explore the support structure that surrounds the family and the child. In some cases, this can help parents identify people who can help support the child, including responsible friends, church groups, or other community-based systems. Because many of the children who find themselves in the court system are from poor or struggling backgrounds, CFE can sometimes be used to

help with logistical issues that make raising a child difficult. Through CFE, friends and community partners with a vehicle can be identified. The program operates with the ultimate goal of shortening the amount of time a child spends in the care of CPS, allowing the child to head to a more productive environment as soon as possible.

The practice of CFE depends heavily on meetings, but there are also risk assessment tools that play a part in the program's administration. The "Three Houses" risk assessment tool is designed to discover what fears a young person might have so he or she can be placed more effectively and so potential challenges can be identified (Weld & Greening, 2011). Also popular is the "Fairy/Wizard" tool, which treats conditions in life like clothing, explaining to young people that they have the power to change many things about their life if they are willing to do so. This tool can often help children identify worries and fears, while also helping them identify strengths of their environment (Department of Child Protection, 2011). Through the collaborative use of this tool, advocates and other responsible professionals can more effectively handle a young person's situation (Department of Child Protection, 2011). In addition, the utilization of genograms helps to standardize the family finding process. Officials operating under CFE protocols use this mapping tool to ensure they have identified every family member because of the understanding that this can assist in determining people who are more likely to care for the child effectively. In non-traditional families, especially those of children who may come from impoverished backgrounds, childcare often falls outside the typical parental norm. Identifying potential caretakers within the family can help officials help children.

There are some weaknesses associated with meetings held under the CFE model. For instance, the meetings prepared and facilitated under the CFE model can sometimes be time-consuming and less than efficient. Given that the information has to be pulled out of children, it can take a tremendously long time for advocates and others to get the knowledge they need to help the child. This impedes the process, takes too many resources, and sometimes harms the overall effectiveness of the protocols. If the goal was to ensure that children were spending as little time as possible in CPS care, then delays in the CFE protocol are especially problematic. Likewise, many children will lose interest in the entire process. Some children take little interest in either the Three Houses approach or the Fairy/Wizard approach and will shut down when asked to participate in these protocols. Those who have actively participated in meetings and other events based on CFE principles have noted the length of the meetings, allowing theorists to identify this as a real problem in need of fixing. In some cases, observers have noted that meetings can last for as long as four hours without anything being accomplished. (Personal communication with CASA staff, 2017). This is the case at least in part because children have fatigue with meetings, proceedings, and being a part of the system in general. When children have this fatigue, a model like CFE, which requires so much active child participation in order to be effective, can run into major roadblocks and suffer in long-term efficiency.

Even though there are notable problems with the CFE approach, it is critical not to discredit the effective benefits of CFE. The CFE approach is still designed to deal with a legitimate problem facing children, and many of the methods being used have shown some effectiveness in many situations. Identifying which things work and which things

do not is a primary goal of those who are working to develop more effective protocols for dealing with children. CASA and CPS both have an interest in ensuring that their resources are being used efficiently and that the approach they have chosen is the right one. CPS resources are limited by a state budget that can be variable and sometimes shrinking. They are accountable to the public for the job they do in helping children in the community. CASA resources are limited by the not-for-profit nature of the work they do. They rely so heavily on volunteers and on donation-based funding that they must be able to deliver results in a way that is demonstrably efficient. Both organizations have requested an analysis of whether CFE is effective, what elements of CFE are more efficient, and how those things could be used in day-to-day meetings to make the entire process more likely to help the children involved. With more effective meetings and more efficient tools, both CPS and CASA will be able to serve their missions better, finding children safer permanent homes while also ensuring that they stay within budget.

### **Evaluation Question**

What are the most useful aspects of the Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) approach and how can they be used in all cases at CASA of Montgomery County?

### **Supporting Information**

This question is especially relevant because of the potential for misalignment between the goals of the CFE approach and the way different organizations are structured around their mission. It is unclear if the CFE approach, as it is constructed today, is helping CASA of Montgomery County or the CPS office in Conroe manage cases in the way they see fit. Those people who are often involved in CFE-based meetings have questions about what they are doing and which elements may be hindering their

effectiveness. In short, they want more information on what works and what does not so they can be better prepared to serve children who find themselves suffering in foster care arrangements. All parties seem to agree that there are many good things about the CFE model and that some things should be kept in place. Those who have interacted with it the closest have noticed, however, that the CFE approach could be improved in many critical ways to ensure that it is most effective. Over time, it makes sense to re-evaluate any tools and protocols that are used with children to ensure maximum effectiveness of those tools. At first glance, the needs of children appear to be met at this point, but the system could always be improved to ensure both that it is sustainable and that it is delivering the maximum possible amount of effectiveness for the young people involved. When this study is concluded, it will hopefully provide an overview of what works, what does not, and how the CFE model should be improved upon and implemented to better support the hard work currently being done by professionals working both at CASA and with CPS.

### **Collaborative Family Engagement Meetings**

Four types of meetings occur during a Collaborative Family Engagement case. The first type of meeting is a team meeting, which occurs when the CPS worker and CASA advocate have accepted the case. The purpose of this first team meeting is to discuss the way the team will use the family finding tools to locate family members that they may not know about. The main points of this meeting are to schedule the first family meeting and decide which team member is assigned to Family Finding (CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates, n.d.).

The second type of CFE meeting is the blended perspective meeting, and this occurs within 45 days of the child's removal from the home and is typically at the same time as the first family group conference meeting at CPS. The purpose of this meeting is to gather with the family, go over the family plan that CPS has provided to them, and pinpoint the child's biggest unmet need at that point in the case. At this meeting, CPS or CASA will also use other CFE tools for family finding with the family as needed (CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates, n.d.).

The third type of meeting utilized in the CFE model is the decision-making meeting, and this meeting occurs within 60 to 180 days after removal. The purpose of this meeting is for everyone to come together to determine if the child's biggest needs are being met. This meeting is also used to establish how the professionals and community support can help the parents and family complete their family plan of service and have their child returned to them (CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates, n.d.).

The fourth and final type of meeting is the lifetime network meeting, and this occurs around 180 days after removal or at the 5th-month meeting at CPS. At this meeting, the connections commit to being there for the family in their times of need and ensure that their support is maintainable. At this meeting, the family has the opportunity of running it themselves so that they feel in control and determine what they would like to do on their own and with the help of their connections. All meeting information was taken from CASA of Montgomery County's website (CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates, n.d.).

The CFE model is time-sensitive in many respects. It seeks to ensure that young people spend as little time as possible under close observation of CPS. This is critical, of



course, because of the research that suggests that more time spent under the care of CPS can lead to adverse outcomes for children (Roos et al, 2016). Roos stated that time spent under government care is a specific type of adversity that will shape a young person's development over time and can lead to deficits in school performance or anti-social behavior (2016). One thing potentially holding back the CFE approach from maximum effectiveness is the unbounded nature of the time frames. Parents are given some control over how often they meet in teams. They can ideally meet as often as they feel the need to in order to gain a more supportive network within their community. Each time there is a meeting with the family, CASA and CPS representatives must have a meeting before this to converse and make sure everyone is on the same page. This can lead to inefficiency if many meetings are held but those meetings are not leading to immediate results for the child. Under the CFE model, countless meetings are possible, with the hope of finding the child the ideal environment, but this stands in conflict with some of the standing research about the effects of more time spent in CPS custody. The earlier adversity of a child suffers, the more likely that a child is to begin acting out with external behaviors that reflect the chaotic nature of the child's upbringing (Bernard Zwerling, & Dozier, 2015).

CHAPTER II  
LITERATURE REVIEW

**Introduction**

The Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) approach is one that values the engagement of parents and a community network to ensure that the needs of children are met most efficiently (CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates, n.d.). At its core, the program relies on meetings and assessment tools. CPS and CASA are both organizations that work hard to ensure that children are best served, but they can only work effectively to the extent they have the proper information backing their work. This is where the CFE approach comes into play, and it is why so many people working with children are utilizing meetings and tools today.

Understanding the theoretical basis for CFE is critical for those who are going to understand both its problems and how it can be improved. This research, backed by the literature review to follow, will outline the basis for CFE in hopes of revealing whether or not the approach has successfully fulfilled its goals. CFE is all about tools. To obtain the information necessary for helping children, workers and advocates need to have a trust and rapport with children. Children must both open up and provide truthful information in order for advocates to effectively do their jobs. The tools put forward in the CFE approach are dedicated to improving those bonds between advocates and children in hopes that children will reveal more of the truth about their situation (CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates, n.d.). It is not necessarily designed to trap parents, but

rather, it is designed as a support tool that brings the truth to light about the relationship between children and parents within a certain environment.

If done properly, the CFE approach brings out information that can lead to much more permanency for children in their housing situations. The many tools involved in the CFE approach are all quite different in nature, but they work together to form the operating system by which many professionals in child protection are working. The effectiveness of these tools and the overall approach will be analyzed using the literature below to reach a better understanding of the theoretical framework involved.

### **Kinship Placements**

A large part of the CFE approach is to improve the strength of the family's community support, or in some cases, to expand the family view of what the community is and what it can entail. The reason for this is if the parents are not capable of taking the child or CPS does not feel comfortable giving the child back to his or her parents, a kinship placement is more likely to be available. A study conducted in Canada found that non-kinship placements were four times more likely to fail than kinship placements and it was also noted that children placed in a kinship placement were more likely to return to their parents at the end of the case (Perry, Daly, & Kotler, 2012). However, a study by Font (2015) states the outcome of the child is primarily based on their past and their behaviors; not as much depending on whether or not they are placed in a kinship or non-kinship placement. Perry (2012) hits at Font's point and says that they found that even if their parents had abused the child, the child still did better in a kinship placement. Perry also went on to say "among placements that had already lasted at least 30 or 60 or 90 or 120 or 150 days, kinship placements were in every case significantly more likely than

foster placements to last an additional 30 days" (Perry, 2012). This statistic should not be taken lightly. If all children could be placed in kinship care, it would be very significant for their futures. In all, Perry suggests that kinship placements are proven to endure the behaviors of the child for a longer period than non-relative placements, that a successful reunification with the parents, and the child is less likely to move from placement to placement (Perry, 2012).

Another study showed that children were placed in a kinship placement had fewer external behaviors and fewer total problems than children were placed in a non-kinship placement (Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, De Maeyer, & Andries, 2012). However, this same study goes on to say that in their findings, non-kinship placement families were more inclined to have a positive attitude toward the parents of the child and allow more visits with the child as well (Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012). The studies are in conflict to some extent on the ultimate effect of kinship placements, but there is a reason to suspect that kinship placements may be more effective over the long run than those that do not include kinship. However, this is not a universal truth. While kinship placements seem like they would be the best option for the child, this is not always the case. Placements depend on much more than kinship such as the child's behaviors, the child's history of abuse, and much more. As Alper and Edwards (2016) note in their writing, in those cases where a child has suffered trauma, having a kinship placement could potentially present conflicts of interest. The authors noted that potential adoptive parents who are a part of the child's immediate or extended family may harbor some bias toward the birth parents, and may even be protective of the birth parents and their rights (Alper & Edwards, 2016). In this instance, the child is thrown into a dangerous conflict of

interest, as their adoptive parents may not necessarily be looking out for their best interests at all times, as should be required in a foster care or adoptive situation. This study highlights the differences between various children, with trauma-suffering children requiring a different approach and set of standards. It also shows the complexity with which one must approach these questions, as what works for one child may not work for other children. It will be interesting to see how kinship placement was used in the CFE model and how it worked for the families involved.

### **Family Engagement**

Family engagement is, of course, a tremendous part of the Collaborative Family Engagement model. A study by Mark Horwitz and Time Marshall states, "family engagement is the key to the success of child protection interventions" (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015, p. 288). In social work, it is important to be able to engage the family and ensure the family is involved so they may fully receive and understand the intervention being offered to them. Pruett, Pruett, Cowan, and Cowan (2017) have written about the importance of father involvement for children. According to their research, some family is good and more family is better when it comes to keeping young people from committing crimes, dropping out of school, or going through other traumatic and life-altering events (Pruett et al., 2017). It has been found that developing goals with clients, sharing respect, and open communication with families all support family engagement and success with the intervention (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015). A significant point in CFE meetings is addressing the concerns that CPS and CASA have with the parents and family such as drug abuse, physical abuse, or the fear of neglect. Horwitz and Marshall (2015) make it a point to discuss the importance of informing the family of what the

concerns of the state are in hopes that the parents will understand and engage with the social worker. The social worker must be transparent with the parents, or they may not understand and disengage with the process. Handley and Doyle (2014) stress the importance of transparency not just as a tool to help build rapport with families, but also as a tool to build trust with children. As the authors write, children often have a sense of whether social workers are honest and forthcoming with family members, and this social work still can help determine whether children will be willing to open up with social workers (Handley & Doyle, 2014). The information, even if it is negative, can then start an honest and open relationship between the family and social worker, making it easier for the family to be engaged (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015).

Another study agrees with Horwitz and Marshall by stating that it is essential for social workers to gain their client's trust because there is such a negative connotation about social workers and CPS taking children away from families (Gallagher, Smith, Wosu, Stewart, Hunter, & Cree, 2011). The study indicates that in some cases the social worker would tend to the child and leave out the parents, but this was not beneficial (Gallagher et al., 2015). In the CFE program, it is imperative to include all parties in the engagement piece and make sure that the parents are being helped and completing the services they need to get their children back. Gallagher's (2015) study gives multiple examples of how to engage with a family such as persisting even when there is hostility, maintaining empathy, taking the time to explain what is going on, reducing the number of professionals, and much more. These are all very useful tips that could be used in any meeting with a client but especially in the CFE program.

Another huge part of Collaborative Family Engagement is strengthening the family's community support, which is another topic Horwitz and Marshall discuss. Extended family networks decrease the chance of the child coming back into care, which is one of CPS's primary goals. Active families will count on their network to help them get their child to doctor appointments or to school when unforeseen incidents occur. Extending the family system will overall improve the care the parents can give the child. Griggs, Casper, and Eby (2013) write about how particularly important community support can be for families with long work schedules, low wages, and the potential for significant work-related stress. These authors note in their work that it is often difficult to have a strong family dynamic supported by quality time because of the work requirements of low-income people (Griggs et al, 2013). Community support becomes an important tool, then, because of how it can take off some of the strain that is otherwise placed on families, freeing up parents and guardians to spend more time doing the things normally required to provide a supportive atmosphere for children (Griggs et al, 2013). Woo and Park (2016) indicate that community support may play a major role in producing child happiness. While a majority of the literature concentrates on the survival of children in these scenarios, the research that can lend insight on how children can be happier is also critical for fulfilling the missions of both CPS and CASA.

Horwitz and Marshall (2015) give examples of how to tell if a family is meaningfully engaging with the social worker such as the extended family reaching out to the social worker, the extended family being accessible to the social worker, and believing that the social worker and family have common goals. These examples are important for the social worker to look for when working with a family to know whether

or not the intervention should change or continue. This study states that three things happen when parents effectively engage with the social worker: increased information for the social worker to base an opinion on, greater resources for the family to be supported, and increased empowerment and self-esteem (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015).

### **Public and Private Agency Collaboration**

A massive part of Collaborative Family Engagement is to enhance communication and collaboration between CPS and CASA. Often, CPS takes on more than it can handle and ends up taking much longer than needed. CASA's role in the partnership is to help CPS by retrieving a holistic view of the cases and make a recommendation when the case is over. CFE is supposed to help CPS, and CASA speaks more openly and assists them in continuing contact throughout the entire case. For a private and public child welfare agency to be able to collaborate, they must maintain appropriate contact, be respectful of each other's opinions, and make an effort to stay in regular contact (Spath, Werrbach, & Pine, 2008). Spath, Werrbach, and Pine (2008) frequently discuss how important communication is in a setting where a private and public agency are collaborating to find permanency for a child.

One study found that when private and public organizations are in collaboration there were many power struggles and this made it difficult for the two to communicate with one another (Chuang, Mcbeath, Collins-Camargo, & Armstrong, 2014). Although this study did not find any long-term effects of this collaboration, they did conclude that communication between the agencies was very beneficial to the case and how the family reacted to the case as well (Chuang, Mcbeath, Collins-Camargo, & Armstrong, 2014). One aspect that the study done by Chuang, McBeath, Collins-Camargo, & Armstrong



brought to light was that the collaboration between public and private agencies encourages much accountability and will keep the agencies focused on the outcome of the child (2014). A study by Bunker, Collins-Camargo, McBeath, Chuang, Pérez-Jolles, and Wells (2014) states that competition arises between agencies when collaboration is used. It brings competition between workers to determine who is correct but also brings competition between the pay of the agencies. If one agency is being compensated more than the other, the employees making less money may react negatively or burn out at a rapid rate.

Based on all of the references listed above, it is clear that private-public agency collaboration works if the personnel are effectively communicating. Likewise, McIndoe (2013) writes that collaborations and partnerships between nonprofit organizations and the government are primarily effective when there is a strong alignment of different skills. In the case of CPS and CASA, it may be an alignment of skills that can make the collaboration work more effectively. CASA, for instance, has a way of bringing in people who tend to have deep and abiding compassion for the children who are being served and for the families that are involved. The people choose to advocate with CASA because they have been in some way moved by a presentation or mission video in many cases (Ridgeway, 2013). CPS, on the other hand, may seem to be full of rigid administrators. While it is not always true that people who work for CPS lack empathy or care, their skill set tends toward more administration. This combination of skills can produce the right approach for trying to get things done with children who are often in crisis mode. They are in need both of people to advocate from a place of passion and add people who can execute the routine details of the administration and law. Communication has been the

overall theme and the most important aspect to make the collaboration work. Even though there are negative things that may happen during collaboration such as disagreements, the overall idea is that collaboration is beneficial for the families working with these agencies.

### **Genograms**

A genogram is used not only to learn about the family's history but also to engage with a family. "Genograms are visual maps that graphically display complex multigenerational patterns in families" (Altshuler, 1999, p. 778). Altshuler (1999) goes on to say that the use of genograms at the beginning of the case could help start permanency planning much earlier in the case. Walsh (2016) frames the need for genograms by discussing the search for resilience among families. By looking at genograms, one can identify not only weaknesses within families but also strengths (Walsh, 2016). This is critical to the CFE approach because it involves seeking to cultivate a more complete and comprehensive picture of family and community.

### **Family Finding**

Kevin Campbell created the Family Finding model in efforts to prove that extended family is a resource to foster youth that is often not utilized (Garwood & Williams, 2015, p. 116). The family finding model uses engagement techniques and extreme search processes to find family members and other adults that are close to the child to achieve permanency (Garwood & Williams, 2015, p. 116). Family finding is a significant part of the CFE model. There are many different ways to find families such as a Seneca search, genogram, eco-map, quick finds, diligent search, and a culturagram. In a study by Leon, Saucedo, and Jachymiak (2016), there was no significant difference

between children who had a family placement and those who did not. Another study conducted by Garwood and Williams (2015) found that family finding for children who had been in the foster care system for many years was very helpful to them and they spoke about how important family was to them often. This study, however, was focused on children who had been in the foster care system for numerous years and could be more beneficial to the children who have family finding implemented at the beginning of their case (Garwood & Williams, 2015, p. 130). As evidence has repeatedly shown, there is a significant difference in approach needed for people who have been in protective care over a substantial amount of time and those who are in the early stages of the process (Kaspar, 2014). A study conducted by Landsman, Boel-Studt, and Malone concluded that family finding was indeed very helpful for the children and did grow their community support (2014). This study talks about team meetings to speak about the permanency of the child and these meetings are a large portion of the CFE model. The great family finding tools resulted in finding families and increasing the likelihood that a relative would adopt the child (Landsman, Boel-Studt & Malone, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

In summary, there appears at present to be some disagreement in the research, underscoring the difficulty of determining a unified theory of the most desirable approaches to use in crafting interventions for families within the CPS/CASA system. The surveys and interviews with participants will better equip CASA and CPS to determine the best approach to take with their clients. This literature review exposed multiple disagreements regarding Child Protective Services and the effects of where the child is placed. The positive aspects and hardships of a private and public agency

relationship were also revealed in this literature review. Family engagement was indicated to be a crucial ingredient in the amount of success a family would achieve in their CPS case. Overall, this literature review has shown the importance of prolonged research on these topics, and the proposed study and survey will be beneficial for future CPS and CASA employees.

CHAPTER III  
METHODOLOGY

**Research Design**

This study is being used to measure the usefulness of Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) meetings and tools at CASA of Montgomery County. A survey is being administered as well as interviews with participants to determine the usefulness of the CFE meetings, making the study qualitative in nature. The survey is attached in Appendix B. This research is a process assessment, as this program is new and should be evaluated to determine if CFE is being administered in the correct way. It is also significant to determine if the meetings are helpful to the participants and if the professionals are experiencing more family engagement. The CFE model has now been used in a few counties in Texas for two years and is being considered for many more counties in the upcoming months; therefore, it is essential to determine if the program is effective before it is expanded to a broader population. The survey is designed to elicit responses directly from people involved in these proceedings so it can gather first-hand information to be analyzed later.

**Data Collection**

The researcher is conducting in-person structured interviews and asking participants to respond in writing to written questions that the researcher has provided to them. All interviews and surveys are being analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the CFE tools and meetings. Ethical considerations are essential to the success of this study.

With that in mind, a survey and consent form are attached in Appendix B. Establishing better community support, CPS and CASA collaborating efficiently, and CFE tools being proven to serve their purpose will define the effectiveness of the CFE model. All employees in the CASA office are completing the survey because they have all taken part in the CFE process. Given that this study is being conducted in the early stages of the implementation of the CFE approach, collecting varied opinions from people in various capacities can reveal different perspectives on the effectiveness of the approach. When attending a CFE meeting at CPS, the researcher consistently hands out the survey to all the parties present at the meeting, which include CPS, CASA, and the family. This study is also determining which of the CFE tools is the most effective by researching the tools and learning which tool has helped the most when working in the foster care system.

Because this is a qualitative study, statistical analysis will not be involved. To measure community support for families, the families who have participated in CFE will be asked via phone interview if they felt like their community support grew while participating in CFE and how this was established. Their answers are being recorded, compared, and analyzed from a qualitative perspective. Families are asked orally if they consent to answer questions regarding CFE over the phone, and their consent is documented. Because it is critical to protect the identities of the children involved and because it is likely to lead to more honest answers, identifying information is not being used regarding the family. However, this sort of information is used when speaking about CASA or CPS employees, and consent will be gathered to do this as well. To determine which CFE tool benefits the agencies and families the most, the survey will provide a list of the tools, and the participants are asked to rank these tools in order of usefulness. To

build this survey in a way that is likely to provide the most relevant information, these measures of effectiveness were taken from the CFE FAQs sheet on the CASA website. These measures are the standards that the CFE model should achieve. Determining which tools are most effective will also assist CASA in deciding what elements of the CFE meetings and tools to use in their day-to-day meetings with clients.

### **Participants**

To determine whether or not these meetings and tools are effective enough for continued use, participants will include CPS caseworkers, CASA supervisors, CASA advocates, and parents over the age of 18 who have completed the CFE approach. These participants will be identified by speaking with the CFE administrator to determine who has completed the CFE meetings successfully. The CFE administrator is in charge of the administration of the CFE meetings in the Conroe area and has constant access to the names and people involved in the CFE meetings. The administrator has agreed to email the data to the researcher so that the researcher may analyze meetings and tools usefulness. The researcher is using the administrator to avoid barriers to accessing confidential data. Once the participants are identified, the researcher will contact the eligible parents by phone. The sampling plan of the proposed study is to survey and speak to participants of CFE meetings whose case has been closed. This study was projected to give the researcher a sampling size of 20 to 30 participants. This study had 16 participants because eligible individuals did not return completed surveys to the researcher. After the researcher contacted eligible individuals numerous times with no reply, the researcher continued on with the study. If it is not possible to conduct interviews of CPS or CASA personnel in person, phone interviews are used. No

participant will be under the age of 18. Participants' rights to confidentiality will be protected by not using any identifying information unless they have consented otherwise. No names of the participants will be used. Interview transcripts will be identified by a code (e.g., 1, 2, 3, 4, ...) and stored in an Excel sheet that is not available to anyone except the researcher. The Excel sheet will be on a password-protected computer owned by the researcher. All paper documents pertaining to the study (written responses to interview questions) will be stored in a locking file cabinet when not in use by the researcher. Only the researcher, or other investigators, will have access to data.

### **Instruments**

The tool being used in the proposed study is a survey asking participants how they feel about the CFE process and this survey can be found in Appendix B. The survey's purpose is to determine if the goals of the CFE process are being met. All participants will sign a consent form before completing a survey or interview, and the consent form can also be found in Appendix B.

### **Data Analysis**

The goals of the CFE approach are to establish a more effective partnership between CASA and CPS; build the family's community support; and ensure the child has a safe place to live. The surveys and interviews will be compared to the CFE goals to determine the effectiveness of the approach. This comparative approach will be used to determine if the participants perceive that the CFE goals are being fulfilled. The interviews will be used to ascertain the effectiveness of the tools and meetings with the family members that were involved. They will be asked if they felt that their community support was strengthened during their time with CPS and how this was done. This will



determine if CFE is helping the families in the way it was intended. By interviewing participants who have gone through the program fully and finished with a positive outcome, it will be more informative than the survey currently being used at CPS. After all of the data have been collected in survey and interview form, the researcher will categorize the data into subjects that were talked about most often. This will be the most efficient way to compare and contrast the information being given to the researcher and will be helpful to see the most common topics being spoken about regarding the CFE program. These surveys and interviews will also be essential in deciding what aspects of this program are useful for CASA and CPS to use in every case.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### **Participants**

The sample of this study consisted of 16 participants who have completed at least one Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) meeting or have used the CFE tools. Participants included CASA supervisors, CASA advocates, CPS caseworkers, and family members of parents who were involved in a CPS case. One male participant and 15 female participants completed an eight-question survey for the purposes of this study. Participants' experience with CFE and the tools was a year or less because the CFE pilot program has just ended its first year.

#### **Themes**

The first question asked in this survey was "What do you (the participant) believe the purposes of the CFE meetings are?" The themes that arose from this question were support and connections or "building a network." There were ten statements about support from the 15 participants who answered this question. There were seven statements identified that included building connections or a network for the families. One CASA advocate stated, "It (CFE) gives the parents support so they realize they aren't alone." A CPS caseworker stated, "I believe the purpose is to support the parents and children and at the same time to encourage outside family to support the family and children." Out of the data collected from the first question, only two responses, both from

family members of parents involved in a CPS case, did not include any statement of “support,” “building connections,” or “networks.”

The second question was “What are your expectations regarding CFE meetings?” Out of the 14 responses to this question, nine of the responses included the word support. There were different types of support mentioned, such as family support, supporting connections, support after reunification, support systems, and support for parents. Another theme that emerged from the responses to this question was the sharing of information. Six responses referred to the sharing of information between CPS and the family involved. Two respondents reported that they expect honesty in these meetings and a family member stated, “I expect honesty on every aspect of where things stand and what progress is being made.”

The third question in this survey was “How do CFE meetings benefit you?” Two major themes stood out, which were “creating a team approach” and the meetings being “informative.” Participants stated that the meetings informed them of services provided to the parents, revealed certain unexpected attitudes, and informed the professionals about the families in general. Participants also said these meetings benefitted them by being able to see the family dynamics in which the abuse occurred.

“What do you dislike about CFE meetings?” was the fourth question on this survey. Five out of the 14 responses for this question reported, “Sometimes the meetings were too long.” Three participants stated that they did not have any dislikes at this point in time. One family member represented in this study referred to “The stress and anticipation before the meetings and the emotional ups and downs”. The mother of a parent involved in the study stated, “Because of the intense surroundings of a case

involving the love of a child, sometimes you feel discredited if you express your honest feelings. At times you feel like you have to watch what you say or it could possibly be misinterpreted. I am sure that is not the intention.” Also, a CPS caseworker stated the meetings were “another appointment meeting that I had to schedule and keep up with,” which was an aspect he disliked.

The fifth question in this survey was “What suggestion do you have regarding ways to enhance CFE meetings?” Five out of 14 of the respondents reported that they did not have any suggestions to enhance CFE meetings at this time. Two participants suggested that toward the end of the case, the parents should take control of the meetings instead of the facilitator on staff. A CASA supervisor and a CPS caseworker suggested that CFE be “expanded to more cases.” The mother of a parent involved in a CPS case stated, “Maybe help the people involved to not feel off the bat that they have to be guarded of their feelings. Meaning fear of what they say can be used against them. I feel the meetings would move quicker and maybe not need as many, if people could just feel free to say what they want.” One CASA supervisor also suggested that “all CASA and CPS staff should be trained on the process”.

The sixth question was to rate the CFE tools, 1 being the most useful and 5 being the least useful. The “tools” listed to be rated were the “Three Houses” tool, “Fairy/Wizard,” genogram, mobility mapping, and an eco-map. Participants rated genograms the most useful tool with an average rating of 1.8. The next most useful tool was mobility mapping with an average rating of 2.1. The third most useful tool was the “Three Houses” tool with an average rating of 2.6. Eco-maps were rated the fourth most

useful tool with an average rating of 4. Finally, the least useful tool was revealed to be the “Fairy/Wizard” tool with an average rating 4.75.

The seventh question in the survey was “What recommendations do you have concerning the use of the tools in the CFE model?” A theme revealed by the participants was that advocates should receive more training on the tools. Many participants did not have any recommendations regarding the tools. A CASA supervisor suggested “a formal feedback tool be used; 3 questions: What went well? What did not go well? What changes can we make?” Some participants stated that they had only used one tool at this time.

The final question on the survey was “Has the CFE approach made you feel more like a team with CPS/CASA? How or why not?” Out of the 13 responses for this question, 11 participants affirmed that they felt more like a team with CPS/CASA because of the CFE approach. The two participants that did not confirm the team approach said, “I have always had a good relationship with CPS” while the other stated that her case had been “thrown out” and she did not have a chance to see if the CFE model did, in fact, create more of a team approach. A theme within the participants’ answers was that this approach has also helped them become more unified with the families. Participants revealed the theme of “everyone starting to be on the same page” because of this approach. However, two family members in the participant group both stated that CPS and CASA seemed to be on “different pages” and was “hard to follow.”

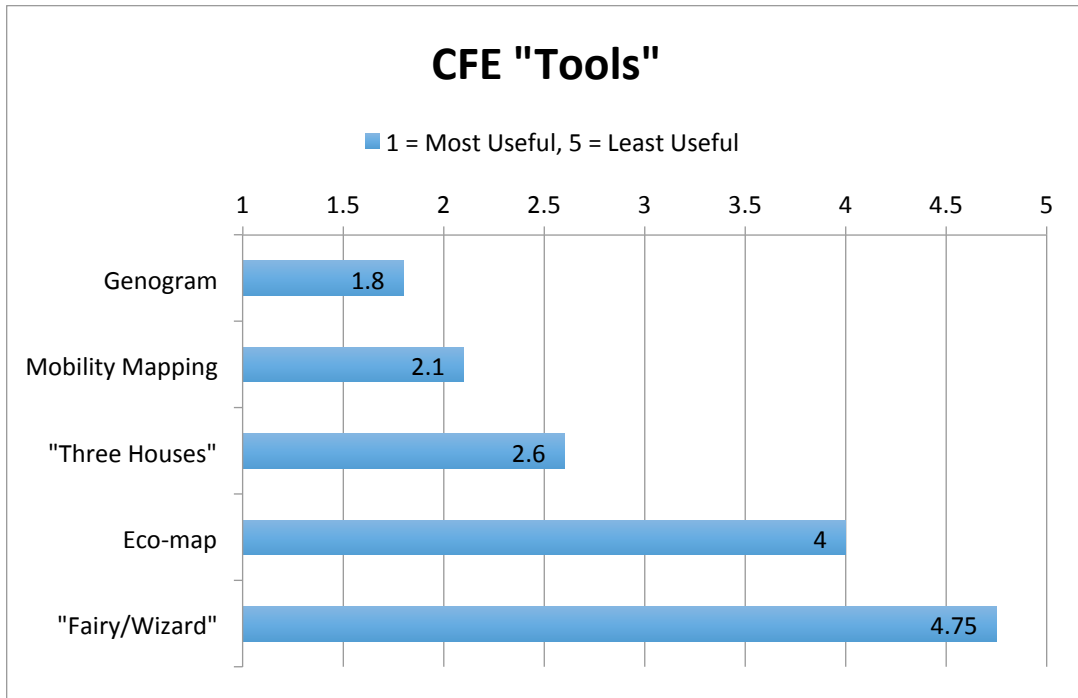


Figure 1. *CFE Tool Ratings*

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the most useful aspects of the CFE approach and how to use these methods in every case. This study was also conducted to determine if CFE was achieving the goals for which it was purposed. The themes that arose from this study were building networks, support, connections, information gathering, team-based approach, length of meetings, and training on tools.

Participants in this study believed that the purpose of the CFE meetings was to build support for the parents, family, and children involved in the case. The CASA website states that the CFE approach is one that values the engagement of parents and a community network to ensure that the needs of children are met most efficiently (CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates, n.d.). The only response that did not include a statement regarding support for the family was a family member participant who stated the CFE meetings were to “chart progress and make sure everyone has the same information.” This may indicate that the meetings should be even more focused on building support for the families or making sure the child’s needs are being met. This may also indicate that CFE meetings should be better explained to the families so that they are fully aware of the purpose for these meetings.

Participants agreed that their expectations regarding the CFE meetings are to gain honest information about the case or family and continue to build support for the family. Since one of the purposes of CFE is to build networks, support, and connections for the

family, it makes sense that the respondents would expect support from these meetings. The participants also felt that the CFE meetings benefited them by informing them about information they typically would not know as well as making them feel like a team with the other participants in the meetings. This may suggest that CFE is adequately completing the goal of making CPS and CASA feel like a team.

When asked what they did not like about CFE meetings, five out of the 14 participants stated that the meetings were too long. Therefore, it is clear that time is not being used as effectively as it could be. Since it is difficult for people to state negative things, I think five people stating this is significant information especially since the length of the meetings was a concern at the beginning of the study. The CFE meetings currently range between two and four hours long. Three participants said there was nothing they disliked about the meetings. Two family member participants both referred to the meetings being “stressful” and “intense”. The responses to this question may indicate that CFE meetings need to be shortened, timed, or better organized. The family members’ responses may signify that there needs to be more consideration of the family’s feelings in these meetings.

The participants in this study did not have many suggestions for how to enhance the CFE meetings. Two participants suggested expanding CFE to more cases. Two other participants suggested that the parents should become more involved in the facilitation of the meetings. These suggestions may indicate that CFE is well liked but the professionals should step back and let the families control the meetings near the end of the case.

Participants were asked to rank the CFE tools 1 to 5, 1 being the most useful and 5 being the least useful. The respondents concluded that genograms were the most useful



with an average of a 1.8 ranking and the “Fairy/Wizard” tool was the least useful with an average ranking of 4.75. This may indicate that genograms are the most useful CFE tool and should be used on a day-to-day basis in every case. These results may also suggest that the “Fairy/Wizard” tool should be explained more efficiently or should stop being used altogether. When the participants were asked to make recommendations for the use of the tools, many reported that CASA advocates should be trained more effectively on how and when to use the tools. Other participants claimed that they had either not used the tools at all or had only used one tool at this time. These results suggest that more training needs to be given to the advocates before they use these tools with children.

Finally, when asked if the CFE approach made CPS/CASA feel more like a team, participants overwhelmingly agreed that CFE did create a team atmosphere. Participants also agreed that CFE also made the families feel like part of the team. The family member participants, however, said that CPS and CASA were often on “different pages,” which may indicate that more team meetings need to be held between CASA and CPS. The “team” aspect of the CFE approach seems to be one of the more useful aspects and should be used in every case at CASA.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study has numerous limitations such as sample size, the design of the study, and the newness of the Collaborative Family Engagement approach. A substantial limitation of this study was the sample size consisting of 16 participants. This is not a truly representative sample since there are hundreds of professionals and families using this approach throughout Texas. This sample also only represented one male opinion. Half of the sample was CASA supervisors, making it possible for considerable bias. A

larger sample size could significantly alter the results of this study. The design of this study is a limitation because results were transferred from surveys into Microsoft Word, leaving much room for error or misinterpretation. The way the researcher collected data also limited the amount of information obtained. A skilled researcher could have obtained much richer data. Since this study was exploratory research, this made it difficult to find information regarding CFE. Additional research will need to be conducted to determine if the Collaborative Family Engagement approach is effectively fulfilling the goals.

### **Implications**

#### **Meeting Length**

The results from the surveys imply a number of things for practice in the future. Since respondents agreed that meetings ran too long and got off topic at times, an implication may be to re-organize or set a time limit for the CFE meetings so that the meetings do not last unnecessarily long. Since these meetings typically last around 2.5 to 3 hours, the recommendation would be to set a time limit of 1.5 hours for these meetings. This would allot the facilitator enough time to go over the main topics of the meeting and give the participants ample time to discuss their needs. This would keep all participants on topic in the coming meetings.

#### **Facilitation**

Respondents stated that having the parents participate more in the meetings would be a massive step for CFE so these results suggested that the professionals involved in CFE should set a specific meeting that the parents or family in the case take over facilitation. If this step were taken, the parents and family would be empowered in developing their own goals to have their children returned to them. In the future, this may

develop into having more family than professionals in the meetings and allowing the family to have almost full control over their case and determining the steps they need to take to have their child returned to them.

### **Genograms**

Participants ranked the CFE “tools” from 1 to 5, 1 being the best and 5 being the worst, and these results suggested that genograms would be a good tool to use in every case since this tool proved to be the most useful. This tool should be used at the beginning of every case in order to help the CASA advocates learn about the child and family. An outline of a genogram could be given to all CASA advocates before the start of a case to be used as a guideline for every case. Genograms should be explained to the CASA advocates in their training to make sure they get full usage out of this tool. The “Fairy/Wizard” tool proved to be the least useful tool, and this suggests that there should be further training on this specific tool.

### **Training**

Training for advocates was a large theme gathered from this study. It was asked that advocates get more training on the CFE meetings but more importantly on the tools being used in CFE. Many participants, including CASA advocates, requested more training on the CFE tools, which suggests that there should be more training for the advocates so that they know when and how to use these tools. There is an ethical issue at hand when the advocates use the tools without being trained. Advocates need to be competent and make sure they are not causing any harm to the children when they use the CFE tools. The advocates could receive this training in their training before they are sworn in to be advocates. The training would include but is not limited to learning how to

use the tools, when to use the tools, and what to do if the child reacts negatively to the memories that the tools resurface. If it was not possible to add the training into their advocate training, a special training for all current advocates to come to should be held and be required in order to be eligible to use the CFE tools. To ensure that advocates do receive an adequate amount of training, the researcher will go to the executive director at CASA and stress the importance of ethical guidelines for the advocates to follow.

### **Team Aspect**

The family member participants in this study had numerous statements about confusion when speaking about the CFE meetings. Specifically, they complained that CPS and CASA were not on the “same page” in their meetings. This suggests that CASA and CPS need to have pre-meetings before the CFE meetings, without the family, to make sure that they are on the same page. This should provide the family a sense of “team” and professionalism. This will eliminate confusion and will allow CASA and CPS to remain on the same page throughout the meetings.

Even though the family member participants were confused at times, the professionals involved in CFE stated that they enjoyed the team aspect of CFE and thought it was a crucial aspect of the model. The team aspect of CFE was a large theme throughout the entire study. An implication of that may be that CASA and CPS should use pre-meetings before all meetings with families, not just CFE meetings. These pre-meetings would be no longer than 10 minutes for everyone to collaborate and discuss what the steps for the family are. If CPS and CASA disagree on the steps that need to be taken, this disagreement needs to be discussed with the family so that the professionals do not confuse the family in the case. The “team” approach should be considered the

standard when working together to achieve permanency for a child. This much collaboration should be used throughout all cases at CASA and CPS in order to effectively work together. Implications for further research may include having a much large sample size than what was represented in this study as well as involving participants across Texas.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study was conducted to determine the most useful aspects of the Collaborative Family Engagement approach and how these aspects could be used on a day-to-day basis. A survey was conducted to question CASA supervisors, CASA advocates, CPS caseworkers, and family members about their opinions regarding CFE meetings and tools. The results were reviewed to determine the most useful CFE tool, which proved to be the genogram, and this tool should be considered for use in every case. Participants agree that the CFE meetings are useful in gathering information but are generally too lengthy. The professional participants agreed that CFE made everyone feel like a team. Further intentional effort may be required by the CFE facilitator to alter the involved family's "team" perception. Information from the literature review and the surveys suggests that more research still needs to be conducted on CFE to determine if it is useful and effective.

There are many small implications from the literature review and survey results that can be implemented at CASA and CPS in Montgomery County, such as setting a time limit on meetings, better training for advocates, and making sure CPS and CASA are on the same page before meeting with the families. Overall, there is evidence that shows Collaborative Family Engagement is collaborative, practically fulfilling its purpose add comma but there are changes that should be made to make it more practical for the participants involved.

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## APPENDIX A

### ACU IRB Letter

#### ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885

2/9/2017



Chelsea Bankes  
Department of Social Work  
ACU Box 27866  
Abilene Christian University

Dear Ms. Bankes:

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled **Effectiveness of Collaborative Family Engagement at CASA of Montgomery County**

was approved by expedited review (46.110(b)(1) category 7 ) on 2/9/2017 for a period of **one year** (IRB # 17-006 ). The expiration date for this study is 2/9/2018 . If you intend to continue the study beyond this date, please submit the [Continuing Review Form](#) at least 30 days, but no more than 45 days, prior to the expiration date. Upon completion of this study, please submit the [Inactivation Request Form](#) within 30 days of study completion.

If you wish to make **any** changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the [Study Amendment Request Form](#).

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the [Unanticipated Events/Noncompliance Form](#).

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

## APPENDIX B

### Survey

1. What do you (the participant) believe the purposes of the CFE meetings are?
2. What are your expectations regarding CFE meetings?
3. How do CFE meetings benefit you?
4. What do you dislike about CFE meetings?
5. What suggestions do you have regarding ways to enhance CFE meetings?

For CASA and CPS

6. Please rate these “tools” from 1 – 5, 1 being the most helpful and 5 being the least helpful.

\_\_ “Three Houses” \_\_ “Fairy/Wizard” \_\_ Genogram \_\_ Mobility Mapping \_\_ Eco-map

7. What recommendations do you have concerning the use of “tools” in the CFE model?
8. Has the CFE approach made you feel more like a team with CPS/CASA? How or why not?

## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent Document

**Title of Study: Effectiveness of Collaborative Family Engagement at CASA  
of Montgomery County**

You may be eligible to take part in a research study. This form provides important information about that study, including the risks and benefits to you, the potential participant. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions that you may have regarding the procedures, your involvement, and any risks or benefits you may experience. You may also wish to discuss your participation with other people, such as your family doctor or a family member.

Please let the researchers know if you are participating in any other research studies at this time.

Also, please note that your participation is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Please contact the Principal Investigator if you have any questions or concerns regarding this study or if at any time you wish to withdraw. This contact information may be found at the end of this form.

## **Purpose and Procedures**

**Purpose of the Research**—The purpose of this study is to determine what tools are most effective in the Collaborative Family Engagement meetings held at CPS. This will help CASA determine which tools to use on a day-to-day basis in order to help children find their forever homes more effectively.

**Expected Duration of Participation**- If selected for participation, you will be asked to answer any questions this researcher may have. Researcher may contact by phone for no longer than 30 minutes.

**Description of the Procedures**- Once you consent to participation in the study, you will be asked to participate in the following procedures:

**Screening**— You will initially be screened to determine your eligibility for participating in the study. This screening will involve asking if you have participated in a CFE meeting.

**Study Procedures**—This study will take into account surveys, interviews, and research regarding the different tools used in the CFE meetings.

## **Risks and Discomforts**

There are risks to taking part in this research study. Below is a list of the foreseeable risks, including the seriousness of those risks and how likely they are to occur:

Thinking of processes and outcome of your CPS case, which is less serious and likely to occur.

The researchers have taken steps to minimize the risks associated with this study. However, if you experience any problems, you may contact Alan Lipps at 325-674-2072.

The researchers and ACU do not have any plan to pay for any injuries or problems you may experience as a result of your participation in this research.

## **Potential Benefits**

There are potential benefits to participating in this study. Such benefits may include helping CASA and CPS serve the community you live in more effectively. The researchers cannot guarantee that you will experience any personal benefits from participating in this study. However, the researchers hope that the information learned from this study will help others in similar situations in the future.

## **Provisions for Confidentiality**

Information collected about you will be handled in a confidential manner in accordance with the law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board or Barbara Robertson at CASA of Montgomery County. Aside from these required disclosures, your confidentiality will be protected by not using names in any data collection and coding names by using numbers.



## Contacts

You may ask any questions that you have at this time. However, if you have additional questions, concerns, or complaints in the future, you may contact the Principal Investigator of this study. The Principal Investigator is Alan Lipps, Ph.D. and may be contacted at 325-674-2072 and/or [alan.lipps@acu.edu](mailto:alan.lipps@acu.edu).

If you are unable to reach the Principal Investigator or wish to speak to someone other than the Principal Investigator, you may contact Tom L. Winter, Ed.D. at 325-674-2072 or [winter@acu.edu](mailto:winter@acu.edu).

If you have concerns about this study or general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at

(325) 674-2885  
[megan.roth@acu.edu](mailto:megan.roth@acu.edu)  
320 Hardin Administration Bldg, ACU Box 29103  
Abilene, TX 79699

## Consent Signature Section

Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all of the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You should receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Participant	Signature of Participant	Date

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent	Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Date