Practitioners Guide

This practice guide gives users a quick overview of how to use the Casey Life Skills website to assess youth's knowledge, skills and abilities. It includes a high level look at the skill areas assessed in the Casey Life Skills Assessment (CLSA), information about the importance of permanent connections for older youth and a listing of other assessments available. It outlines a six-step framework for how to administer an assessment, determine a youth's strengths and challenges through a meaningful conversation, build an effective learning plan and help a youth gain useful life skills. If you have questions about CLSA, please contact the Casey Life Skills Assessment Team at cls@casey.org.

How have you acquired life skills?

If you're like most adults, you've learned the most through experience. *Classes can provide information and exposure on the cognitive level, but youth need the real world experience of managing money, preparing food, preparing for a job interview, making a dental or medical appointment, or opening a bank account to fully develop these skills…. Youth need to internalize and personalize what they have learned and develop confidence about using the skill in the future.*[1]

What is the Casey Life Skills Assessment (CLSA)?

The CLSA is:

- A free, online youth-centered tool that assesses life skills youth need for their well-being, confidence and safety as they navigate high school, postsecondary education, employment and other life milestones.
- A measure of youth confidence in their future and their permanent connections to caring adults.
- Designed to be as free as possible from gender, ethnic and cultural biases.
- Appropriate for all youth ages 14 to 21 regardless of living circumstances (i.e., in foster care, with bio-parents, in group homes or other places).
- Comprehensive with 113 assessment items categorized within eight areas for skills, knowledge and awareness. Youth can complete one area at a time or finish the whole assessment in approximately 30-40 minutes.

The CLSA is not a test!

- It is a self-reporting instrument that gives youth and their caregivers the opportunity to assess their strengths and challenges.
- It promotes young people's active engagement in planning their learning goals and making decisions (within the safety of adult mentoring) about their future.

[1] Smith, W.B. (2011). *Youth Leaving Foster Care: A Developmental, Relationship-Based Approach to Practice.* New York: Oxford University Press.

- The CLSA was designed for use with youth in foster care but can be useful for other youth involved in juvenile justice facilities, employment centers, homeless shelters or with other social service providers.
- The CLSA does not collect personal identification information and the results are kept anonymous in a secure database.
- The tool may help states meet the transition requirements of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. Fostering Connections requires that older youth in foster care be better prepared for adulthood and provides federal support for transition programs to age 21.
- The CLSA can also be a support tool for states' Chafee Foster Care Independence Programs. These programs deliver instruction and services for young people in areas such as obtaining a high school diploma or GED, career exploration, job placement, daily living skills, money management and preventive health education, etc. Check with your state's Independent Living Coordinator to get more information on the Chafee benefits for which youth in care may be eligible (e.g., Education and Training Vouchers). http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/chafee

What Areas Are Assessed in the CLSA?

Life Skills	Number of Items	Competencies Assessed
Daily Living	17	Meal planning and preparation, cleaning and food storage, home maintenance and computer and internet basics.
Self Care	17	Healthy physical and emotional development such as personal hygiene, taking care of one's health and pregnancy prevention.
Relationships and Communication	18	Developing and sustaining healthy relationships, cultural competency and permanent connections with caring adults.

Life Skills	Number of Items	Competencies Assessed
Housing and Money Management	23	Banking and credit, finding and keeping affordable housing, budgeting and living within one's means.
Work and Study	20	Basics of employment, legal issues, study skills and time management.
Career and Education Planning	9	Planning for career and postsecondary education pertinent to older youth.
Looking Forward	8	Youth's level of confidence and internal feelings important to their success.
Permanency	20	Embedded within all of the skill areas of the assessment are 20 items that assess a youth's connection to trusted adults, community of support and overall interdependent connections. It is recommended that practitioners pay attention to these areas as young people need a strong safety net of support as they learn the skills they need to move to young adulthood.

To preview the Casey Life Skills Assessment click here and go to page 3.

Why does the CLSA emphasize permanency?

Youth tell us, and Casey Family Programs believes it is best practice that every youth needs and deserves to grow up in a safe and permanent family as well as a supportive community.

Ideally, all youth who experience foster care will attain legal permanency, in which the youth is reunified with his or her biological parents, is adopted or lives with a legal guardian. Regardless of the achievement of legal permanency, ensuring that youth establish permanent connections is essential to help them prepare for and succeed in adulthood. A permanent connection is a stable, lasting, unconditional, emotional and relational connection that one has with family members and significant others in their lives, whether or not the youth resides with them. When youth have trusting connections with adults who care about them and their success, this gives them optimism and encouragement that they can grow and learn. When youth transition from the assistance provided by programs and services, permanent relationships continue and provide support.

A young person's permanent connections are assessed throughout the CLSA. In addition to assessing knowledge, skills and ability to access community resources, each skill area has one or more statements to help determine if youth have trusted adults with whom they are actively engaged in an enduring relationship. For example, in the area of relationships, there is "I know at least one adult I can depend on when I exit care." In Housing and Money Management there is "I know an adult I could live with for a few days or weeks if I needed to." Practitioners can use the CLSA to assess whether or not youth have a safety net of support underlying all the skill areas.

It is essential for those who work with young people to help them establish meaningful lifelong connections with family members and other significant adults who will support them as they prepare for adulthood and beyond. This work is an essential part of each youth's learning or service plan.

For more information about foster care and permanency, please visit the Casey Family Programs website at www.casey.org. An additional tool to help youth develop a network of caring people is **FosterClub's *Permanency Pact***. FosterClub is a national network for young people in foster care. To access this free comprehensive checklist for youth go to www.fosterclub.com/files/PermPact.pdf.

How to assess young people's knowledge, skills and awareness

STEP 1 | Motivate youth to take the assessment

Be enthusiastic and positive about the assessment and its purpose. Make sure that youth know that it is not just a requirement or a test but a tool for them to use to learn what knowledge and skills they really need. Let them know that you and others will work with them to use the information from the assessment to develop a plan to meet their wants and needs. Arouse their curiosity about the results. Encourage active participation – invite them to share what they hope to get out of completing the assessment. Let them know this is an excellent opportunity for them to practice making decisions about their future—what they want to do tomorrow, next week, or next year.

Be creative in administering the assessment to best engage the youth

- Youth can work at their own pace and work on one skill area at a time or they can complete the entire assessment in about 30 – 40 minutes.
- All of the Casey Life Skills Assessments are available in printable form, so they can be completed in any location with the results entered into the computer later. You can print them after logging into the website.
- For group work, peer-to-peer communication about the assessment can be a good method of engagement.
- Let youth have experience with the computer! Computers run our world – youth need hands on experience to keep up with technology that could help them stay in school, get a job, and attain other achievements.
- An alternative method is to use the assessment as an interview tool. Make it a conversation rather than having the youth sit at the computer. This can be especially helpful for youth with reading challenges or short attention spans.

STEP 2 | Review the youth's assessment results

The results will appear once the youth (or other person entering the data) clicks "Save Assessment." The "At-A-Glance" page will show the youth's name, their agency and their average scores. The average score for each life skill area, including permanency, will be shown on a scale of 1 – 5, with 5 indicating high strength. Practitioners can quickly see where a youth's strengths are, as well as areas with gaps in knowledge and proficiency. The next page of the assessment results will list all of the statements for a particular skill area and the youth's answers. Part of reviewing a youth's assessment results is looking at how they answered each statement. See Step #4 for more information about talking to a young person about their assessment results.

STEP 3 | Invite caregivers in a youth's life to complete an assessment (optional but recommended)

Caregivers who know the youth (i.e., foster parents, social workers, teachers, etc.) can also assess the youth's strengths and challenges using the CLSA. Explain to youth and their caregivers how getting this additional perspective can add to a rich conversation, open doors for productive communication that might not happen otherwise and gain additional "buy in" and support for the youth's learning plan activities (see more detail about including the caregiver(s) perspective in the following steps).

STEP 4 | Let's Talk--Engage youth in a conversation about the results of their assessment

Share a copy of the results with the youth for the conversation and let them tell you about what the results mean. Start with the positive. Ask the youth to start by identifying their strengths—those areas where their average scores are closer to a 5. Then move to looking at lower average scores. Ask the youth where they felt unsure and where they think they need help – what is challenging for them right now? Ask if there were any surprises for them in the results, if so, discuss why.

- The best expert on a youth's knowledge and behavior is the youth. There will be exceptions where young people are incapable of self-reflection or self-perception because of psychological, physical or developmental challenges, and the additional perspective of a caregiver assessment is especially helpful. In most cases, however, youth are very capable of offering self-reports on what they know and can do.
- The cognitive development and life experiences of youth ages 14 – 17 years will be, most times, behind that of their 18 – 21 year old peers. Practitioners can prepare younger youth to expect some items in Career and Education Planning, Work Skills and Housing and Money Management to be out of their range of knowledge and experience. When reviewing the scores for these more advanced skill areas with younger youth, you can remind them that they simply haven't had opportunities to gain experience in these areas yet. Use the opportunity to have them think about their futures. For example, draw connections between their favorite school subjects or activities and how they can begin thinking about related postsecondary training and education that will prepare them for careers that interest them. Remind them that learning simple budgeting techniques now will help them with more advanced money management skills in years to come.
- If a youth's results are being compared with a caregiver's assessment results, this should be part of a conversation including both the youth and caregiver. Review the results that

compare assessments between the youth and caregiver and facilitate a conversation about areas of agreement and difference.

- If the youth has taken the assessment before, compare results to previous assessment results. Again, start with the positive and first look for the areas of most improvement. It is important to note that sometimes a youth's scores may be lower than their first assessment. They may have been overly confident in a particular skill, given answers because they thought they were the expected answers or simply guessed. Discuss why the scores are the same or different. Ask the youth if they feel more or less confident in particular areas.

For a more detailed description of The Conversation with suggested discussion guides click here.

STEP 5 | The conversation continues—Help youth develop learning plan goals and activities

The best and most effective learning or service plan is the one that a youth will actually implement. To get "buy in" develop the plan with active input from the youth and the results of their assessment. Let youth lead the way in determining which behaviors, knowledge or skills are most important to them and choosing what learning goals they want to work on first. Some providers may have a service plan that can be used to incorporate new goals and activities that youth want to work on. If not, click here for a sample template.

Including caregivers in the planning process will increase learning opportunities and support for the youth. Even if the youth's caregivers have not been involved in the assessment process, encourage the youth to share the assessment, set goals and plan activities with them so that they, too, can provide and support "real life" learning experiences.

When considering which activities to include in a youth's plan, talk to them about how they like to learn. Then, with the help of the practitioner and caregiver, let the youth identify the steps to take to learn or achieve something and how they will proceed with those steps. Remember to ask them how they will know they have achieved success/knowledge/a particular skill and include that measure or outcome in the plan. (click here for a description about learning styles and levels)

Use the Resources to Inspire Guide click here to print

The resource guide is a reference for caregivers indexed by skill area. It lists goals, learning objectives and a sample of youth-appropriate resources that may be useful additions to a youth's plan. It is written to complement a developmental approach to learning. Practitioners can copy the content into their service plans or into the template provided on the CLS site. Almost all of the resources listed are free or very low cost and many are printable PDFs.

The resources can be used in group, individual or self-instruction formats. For group learning, try an icebreaker or game activity that will assist youth with learning about goals, practice setting simple goals and inspire them to identify areas of interest. What do they want to tackle first?

The resources offered are suggestions. We encourage practitioners to use Google or similar search engines to find resources in their geographic area or to use resources specific to their child welfare system or agency.

STEP 6 | Help youth implement, monitor and update their learning plan

Use the plan. Bring it out or refer to it in your interactions and communications with the youth and caregiver. Ask about progress. Celebrate successes! If youth fail in a task, use it as a teachable moment and encourage them to try again. Ask what's working and what's not (be prepared to hear the truth) and modify the plan, activities and supports accordingly. It is critical that young people practice new skills in the real world on an ongoing basis; help provide these opportunities.

Use the CLSA to chart progress and set new goals. Formally review the learning or service plan at regular intervals and update the plan with new goals and activities. Sections of the CLSA can be used alone as a post-assessment if the youth has focused on increasing skills or abilities in a particular area, or the entire assessment can be retaken to assess total progress over a longer time interval. Intervals between pre/post assessments can vary from monthly to quarterly to annually. It depends on the youth's needs, the service provider's IL program requirements, and a jurisdiction's compliance requirements.

Information about the Looking Forward section for practitioners

The items in the Looking Forward section of the CLSA are intended to represent a desired future state or eventual place you are trying to move youth toward. They strive to help articulate the eventual outcome you are striving for your youth if the 'intervention' or other methods/ trainings succeed.

These items are not behavioral. They are about internal feelings or overall readiness. Therefore, they are not aggregated or reported in the same way as the skill area items. The Looking Forward items are meant to tell you more information about the youth than what is visible or teachable. It is the added level of confidence and internal feelings that will help them to be successful.

For more information on interpreting the results of the Looking Forward section with young people and using the information in their learning plans click here.

Other assessments available for populations with particular characteristics or circumstances

Casey Life Skills has other assessments available to help practitioners and caregivers attend to life skills relevant to youth with particular characteristics or circumstances. Click here to access a list of these assessments and brief descriptions.

- Healthy Pregnancy
- Parenting Infants
- Parenting Young Children
- Youth Assessment Level I (elementary ages)
- Youth Assessment Level II (middle school ages)
- Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth

- Homeless Youth
- American Indian
- Education: Upper Elementary School
- Education: Middle or Junior High School
- Education: High School
- Education: Postsecondary or Training
- Educational Supports

Important resources for practitioners

- Foster Club's Transition Toolkit: www.fosterclub.com/files/transition_toolkit_v3.pdf
- Foster Club's Permanency Pact: www.fosterclub.com/files/PermPact_0.pdf
- Youth Leaving Foster Care: A Developmental, Relationship-Based Approach to Practice Author: Wendy B. Smith
- The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning From Foster Care (2011): www.jimcaseyyouth.org/new-adolescent-brain-study-full-report