

CANS as a Mental Health Strategy

The CANS is organized into parts: You can start with any of the sections—Life Domain Functioning or Behavioral/Emotional Needs, Risk Behaviors or Individual Strengths, or Caregiver Needs—this is your judgment call. Sometimes, people need to talk about needs before they can acknowledge strengths. Sometimes, after talking about strengths, then they can better explain the needs. Trust your judgment, and when in doubt, always ask—“we can start by talking about what you feel that you and your child/youth need, or we can start by talking about the things that are going well and that you want to build on. Do you have a preference?”

It also is a good idea to know the CANS. If you are constantly flipping through the pages, or if you read verbatim without shifting your eyes up, it can feel more like an interview than a conversation. A conversation is more likely to give you good information, so have a general idea of the items.

Also, some people may “take off” on a topic. The great thing about the CANS is that you can follow their lead. So, if they are talking about anger control and then shift into something like—“you know, he only gets angry when he is in Mr. S’s classroom”, you can follow that and ask some questions about situational anger. So that you are not searching and flipping through papers, have some idea of what page that item is on.

Making the best use of the CANS

Children and youth have families involved in their lives, and their family can be a great asset to their treatment. To increase family involvement and understanding, encourage the family to look over the CANS prior to the time you sit down to fit it out. The best time is your decision—you will have a sense of the timing as you work with each family. Families often feel respected as partners when they are prepared for a meeting or a process. A copy of the completed CANS should be offered to each family. Encourage families to contact you if they wish to change their answers in any area that they feel needs more or less emphasis.

Listening using the CANS

Listening is the most important skill that you bring to the CANS. Everyone has an individual style of listening. The better you are at listening, the better the information you will receive. Some basic elements of active listening to keep in mind that will help elicit the best information:

- **Use nonverbal and minimal verbal prompts.** Head nodding, smiling and brief “yes”, “and”—things that encourage people to continue
- **Adopt a nonjudgmental stance.** In listening to another person’s story, it is important to focus on listening to their point of view and their experience, and avoid making judgments about their actions. Listening without judgment will help the child, youth, and/or family feel better able to share their experience without fear of receiving negative feedback or unsolicited advice.
- **Be empathic.** Empathy is being warm and supportive. It is the understanding of another person from their point of reference and acknowledging feelings. You demonstrate empathetic listening when you smile, nod, maintain eye contact. You also demonstrate empathetic listening when you follow the person’s lead and acknowledge when something may be difficult, or when something is great. You demonstrate empathy when you summarize information correctly. All of this demonstrates to the child or youth that you are with him/her.
- **Be comfortable with silence.** Some people need a little time to get their thoughts together. Sometimes, they struggle with finding the right words. Maybe they are deciding how they want

to respond to a question. If you are concerned that the silence means something else, you can always ask “does that make sense to you”? “Or do you need me to explain that in another way”?

- **Paraphrase and clarify—avoid interpreting.** Interpretation is when you go beyond the information given and infer something—in a person’s unconscious motivations, personality, etc. The CANS is not a tool to come up with causes. Instead, it identifies things that need to be acted upon. Rather than talk about causation, focus on paraphrasing and clarifying. Paraphrasing is restating a message very clearly in a different form, using different words. A paraphrase helps you to (1) find out if you really have understood an answer; (2) clarify what was said, sometimes making things clearer; (3) demonstrate empathy. For example, you ask the questions about health, and the person you are talking to gives a long description. You paraphrase by saying “Ok, it sounds likeis that right? Would you say that is something that you feel needs to be watched, or is help needed?”

Redirect the conversation to parents’/caregivers’ own feelings and observations

Often, people will make comments about other people’s observations such as “well, my mother thinks that his behavior is really obnoxious.” It is important to redirect people to talk about their observations: “so your mother feels that when he does X, that is obnoxious. What do YOU think?” The CANS is a tool to organize all points of observation, but the parent or caregiver’s perspective is the most important at the time when you are doing the CANS. Once you have his/her perspective, you can then work on organizing and coalescing the other points of view. In addition, the statements made by others can be noted in the comments section.

Acknowledge Feelings

People will be talking about difficult things and it is important to acknowledge that. Simple acknowledgement such as “I hear you saying that it can be difficult when ...” demonstrates empathy.

Wrapping it Up

At the end of the CANS, we recommend the use of two open-ended questions. These questions ask if there are any past experiences that people want to share that might be of benefit to planning for their young adult, and if there is anything that they would like to add. This is a good time to see if there is anything “left over”—feelings or thoughts that they would like to share with you.

Take time to summarize with the individual and family those areas of strengths and of needs. Help them to get a “total picture” of the individual and family, and offer them the opportunity to change any ratings as you summarize or give them the “total picture”.

Take a few minutes to talk about what the next steps will be. Now you have information organized into a framework that moves into the next stage—planning.

So you might close with a statement such as: “OK, now the next step is a “brainstorm” where we take this information that we’ve organized and start writing a plan—it is now much clearer which needs must be met and what we can build on. So let’s start.....”