

VFC CASA Volunteer Bouree Kim*

Not every child's story is the same. During my training as a Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) for abused and neglected children, I learned about the situations I might face: children exposed to methamphetamines, undiagnosed signs of dyslexia, and abnormal behavior exhibited by sexually abused children. But the training could only prepare me for so much. Spending time with two young siblings, Maggie and David*, taught me how to communicate and build a relationship with abused and neglected children. Maggie and David showed me that forging relationships can be as complex as the range of emotions people feel, but also as simple as sharing hugs and kind words.

As a CASA, I build a rapport with the children in order to fulfill two goals. I help the children's guardian ad litem attorney, Sharon Plettner, determine what is in the best interest of the children. Because Sharon handles several dependency and neglect cases simultaneously, she requests a CASA to help serve as her "eyes and ears." In addition, I strive to be a continued presence in the children's lives. While transitioning from one home to another or upon Social Services closing a case, the children are often forced to part with people with whom they have closely bonded. Particularly for young children, such rapid changes in a short period of time can leave them feeling insecure and confused. My job is to decrease any anxiety the children may have by helping them adjust to new environments.

When I arrived at the foster home, I met Maggie first. I knew that Maggie had speech difficulties, a developmental impediment most likely the result of fetal alcohol syndrome. Knowing this information was helpful, but also led me to wrongly assume that it would be difficult to get to know her. How do you get to know someone whose words you don't understand? But Maggie started talking to me without hesitation. She didn't seem to notice that her words were mispronounced and jumbled together. Although I was only able to understand bits and pieces of her sentences, I could see that we were communicating more through our body language and the intonation of our voices than with words. Maggie eagerly showed me her meticulously dressed dolls and announced that it was naptime for her babies. I asked which doll was her favorite. She picked one up and, with deft hands, changed her doll's clothes into pajamas, to prepare for naptime of course. I told her that I had a doll just like hers when I was little. Maggie asked where the doll was now. After a pause I confessed that I wasn't sure. Maggie clutched her doll to her chest as if refusing to believe she could ever forget about it. When I met David, he eyed the way I played with Maggie before deciding it was safe to join us. Soon he was quick to pull me into games or to tell me about the huge horses he saw that day. I noticed that it was during play that the children would comment about what happened at supervised visits with their parents or about incidences at school. With Maggie, I make an extra effort to listen to her carefully without interrupting. I tell her honestly when I don't understand something she says. She then happily repeats her previous statement. Sometimes I catch myself paying more attention to Maggie because the last thing I want her to feel is that she is not important enough to listen to. Thus I make sure to balance my attention between Maggie and David as best as I can. I listen to both Maggie and David patiently and let them control the

direction of the conversations. My assignment may be to learn about the children's needs and wants, but I never do so by asking them intrusive questions. Sharon's rule about interviewing children is easy: you don't. Unless, she qualifies, there is a dire situation in which a question must be asked directly. When I spend time with the children, I ask them playful and open-ended questions: What did you eat at the fair? Do you think if Batman fought Spiderman he could win? I try to gauge how willing the children are to further discuss a topic and if they change the subject, I let it be. Sometimes it is the children who ask questions. David once asked me what Sharon does. I explained that Sharon's job is to make sure children, like him and his sister, are happy and safe. The concept of a lawyer and details about his judicial case would have been difficult for him to understand. Still, neither Sharon nor I discourage children from asking questions or by any means lie to them and create false expectations.

It is mostly through actions that Maggie and David's real feelings surface. Maggie and David are not afraid to cringe away from people with whom they feel uncomfortable or to show affection for the ones they like. Two signs clued me in to the fact that Maggie and David were beginning to trust me. First, they initiated more hugs with me, a gesture they did not show everyone. Second, they started to run to me after they scraped their knee or tripped over a rock. Wanting consoling words, they would cling to me until their tears dried. Sharon emphasizes the importance of these nonverbal cues because they are the most telling. Having the sensitivity and the motivation to read and interpret behaviors allowed me to understand what Maggie and David wanted without them telling me in words.

During training, I heard horror stories about children misbehaving and lying without compunction to their CASA. Such stories inflated my fears about building relationships with Maggie and David. I expected the worst and as a result lost sight of what was most important: the trauma does not define who the children are. Maggie and David's past experiences surely inform their behavior, but at the heart of everything is the fact that they are both human and therefore deeply affected by the way people act and react towards them. It is our actions that resonate in the lives of children, more so than any words. I showed the children respect by upholding my promises, actively listening to their stories, and being supportive. In turn, they gave me their trust and welcomed me into their lives.

* Names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals mentioned.

<http://vfccasa.org/casaKimBouree.php>

1,084 words

