

4 Tips for Saying a “Good” Good-Bye

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Susan Packwood with grandson Cameron

How can we say good-bye to a child who has already suffered so many losses? What is the best way to terminate our relationship with children we have gotten to know while advocating for them? Will saying good-bye cause more grief? Should we just quietly slip away?

These are questions that often worry the volunteer child advocate. The children I have seen as a therapist are very attached to their CASA or GAL volunteer. But what do we do when that relationship must come to an end when cases are complete? Here are some tips to remember when saying good-bye:

1. Make termination an important part of the process.

Too often in our culture, people walk away without saying good-bye. The children we see who have been in the protective services system have often gone through many losses and many good-byes. Most of those have been abrupt or without closure. As the child’s CASA volunteer, usually a very important person in the child’s life, you have a unique opportunity to help the child to both develop an important skill and heal from past losses. *Be a person in the child’s life who models the skill of saying good-bye rather than running from uncomfortable feelings.*

2. Prepare the child for closure well in advance.

We can help children and youth by letting them know at the beginning that the relationship will end at a certain point. Tell the child what the parameters of the relationship will be. For example, “I’ll be helping you until we find you a permanent home (or until your court case is over).” Continue to bring this up from time to time.

As termination approaches, you can briefly share some of your feelings with the child—remember to keep it simple and not cause the child to worry or feel guilty. A few weeks before saying good-bye, let the child know what to expect. Tell her how the process will work so that she can be prepared. Consider planning a small good-bye celebration together.

Courts and CASA programs vary in terms of whether continuing contact is encouraged—or even allowed—once a case closes. If your program does allow an ongoing relationship—and it is acceptable to the child and his placement—discuss appropriate ways to maintain that contact with your volunteer supervisor. For example, you might say, “After we have our good-bye party, I’ll call you on the phone once in a while to see how you’re doing.”

If continued contact is not appropriate, be honest with the child about what to expect. The child is likely to go through the normal process associated with terminating a relationship. These might be the usual stages of grief: denial, anger, depression and finally acceptance, although the sequence may vary by child. Keep in mind that some children might not start their grieving process until after you are gone.

3. Give the child strengths and memories to take with them.

Many children have heard few positive statements made about them. The volunteer advocate is in a special position to help the child begin to develop his own cheering section and plans for the future. Talk to the child about how to find people who believe in him. These could be foster parents, teachers, coaches and friends. Remind the child that he never deserves to be

hurt or treated badly and can surround himself with people who support him as you have.

Help the child to see the future as a positive time, a time when she will be able to make good choices for herself. I like to remind children of people who have overcome adversity: young Clark Kent was adopted and went on to become Superman; Marilyn Van Berber was sexually abused but was later chosen as Miss America; and Lance Armstrong overcame cancer and won the Tour de France.

4. Remember that listening and being present is “doing something.”

On your last visit, encourage the child to draw or write you a good-bye letter as you draw or write one for her. Don’t be afraid or shut down if she expresses sadness. One of the greatest gifts we can give a person is our presence with their pain. Let the child know that you are sad too and will miss her.

I try to tell children at termination that I will always carry them in my heart, and they can do the same with me. I give an example of something special about them that I like. For instance, “I will always remember the cute way you lose your breath when you laugh hard.”

When the time comes, following these recommendations—and the advice of your volunteer supervisor—will make for a better good-bye for the children you serve. 📩

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