

5 Ways to Maintain Perspective

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I was sworn in as a CASA volunteer in March 2001. A month later I received my first case, an 8-year-old girl we'll call Debbie. Debbie had come into care when she was 6. She had been abused, neglected and ultimately abandoned. Both of her natal parents had been incarcerated, and she was found living alone with three siblings in the care of her 11-year-old brother. Debbie was then adopted by a couple who in turn abused her. We met for the first time when she was removed from that home and placed again in foster care.

Debbie just celebrated her 15th birthday in a residential treatment center. Change has come very slowly for Debbie, who has been diagnosed with a range of significant mental health issues. She has spent more than half of her life as a ward of the court and unfortunately is likely to remain in the system until she ages out of care. Her situation, and as a result mine, is somewhat unusual. In my CASA program, most cases last an average of 26 months, and some cases close in as little as six. It's been seven years for us. As Debbie's CASA volunteer, I have learned that I have to keep my hopes high, my expectations realistic and my perspective clear, which can admittedly be a challenge at times. Here are some tips that have helped along the way.

1. Find tangible ways to measure progress.

Debbie and I share a journal. We take turns writing in it and—since she lives an hour and half away—mail it back and forth. It is a terrific tool for staying in touch, sharing thoughts and keeping track of progress. Because Debbie has a hard time talking about her feelings, the fact that the journal has become so important to her is

progress in and of itself. The dated entries help me chart her ups and downs as well as ferret out areas of growth that I might not be aware of otherwise. The journal's secret pocket is the repository for the little gifts we include. For example, Debbie draws pictures, cuts things out of magazines and once included her report card.

2. Seek out the perspective of others.

Debbie came into care along with an older brother who was also assigned a CASA volunteer. The fact that I trained with this gentleman was a real bonus. We quickly decided to team up with both children, an arrangement that allowed us to work to our strengths and ensured continuity when one of us was out of town. This arrangement was also tailor made to bolster perspective. Not only did we both have a thorough knowledge of the children and their cases, but we had also come to know each other well. When one of us faltered, became frustrated or slumped under the weight of these children's problems, the other was there to say: "Now wait a minute. Let's take another look at this."

Of course most CASAs don't have the advantage of a teammate, but we all have others to whom we can turn when our own perspective begins to get shaky. The first person to call upon is your case supervisor, who in my situation is worth her weight in gold. Other volunteers who have faced similar challenges can also offer valuable insight. These individuals are not as close to the situation as you are and can therefore come at it from a much more objective angle. The empathetic ears and practical advice they offer broaden your perspective and get you back on track again.

Talk to the child's teachers, foster parents and social workers as frequently as possible. They not

only give you the facts you need to advocate effectively for her best interests but can also provide another point of view. Sometimes that's all it takes to start seeing possibilities rather than problems.


3. Listen to your family.

Although confidentiality and privacy concerns prevent volunteers from sharing case information with others, family members seem to get a pretty good idea of how a case is going. I've learned to listen when my husband suggests that perhaps I'm getting too close to the situation or spending too much time trying to sort out problems that are not my job to solve. He's not callous or cynical; he just knows me well and is offering a reality check. His perspective comes from 40 years of watching how I function. He knows when I'm on my game and when I'm not.

4. Take a break.

Take a walk, go for a run, do whatever works for you, but find a way to separate yourself from your concerns about the child. For me it's gardening. There's something about digging in the dirt that centers me. Since I tend to work problems out subconsciously, the reflective state that gardening seems to induce invariably freshens my perspective. I have a friend who says that fishing does the same for him and another who gets the same result by playing the piano.

5. Be thankful.

Remember to celebrate the fact that the glass is half full rather than half empty. Acknowledge that your gifts of time, energy, advocacy, compassion and consistency may very well be the reasons why the child you advocate for still has hope for the future. 

Dorothy Whitcomb is a journalist and editor who has served as a CASA volunteer in Talbot County, MD since 2001.