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Advocating for Children is Everyone's Responsibility

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Advocating for Children is Everyone's Responsibility

By Melody Bowdon
UCF Forum columnist
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Florida drew national media attention in 2008 when 2-year-old Caylee Marie Anthony of Orlando was reported missing. In the months and years that followed, her mother, Casey, was charged and ultimately acquitted of Caylee's murder.

Along the way she became society's public example of a bad mother. During the months leading up to and after Anthony's trial, the family's neighborhood was often overrun by the media, but also by people described as protestors.

Every time I heard the news stories about protestors marching and carrying signs outside the home of this child who could no longer be helped, I was puzzled and angered. What could it mean to protest a person? And if these people were so passionate about protecting children, why weren't they advocating for the many living children facing peril every day?

According to the national CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) website, 1,900 children in the United States become victims of abuse or neglect every day, and on an average day, four of those children die. Communities everywhere need volunteers willing to actively advocate for kids whose parents or guardians are accused of abuse, abandonment or neglect.

A few years ago, I served as a guardian ad litem in Seminole County. I represented children whose parents struggled with a variety of challenges, including mental and physical illness, extreme poverty, substance addiction, and criminal charges not directly related to the children. The 20 or so children I worked with came from a range of socio-economic classes and demographic categories, for no part of our community is immune to this problem. Every month I visited with the children, their parents, other caretakers and family members, teachers, health care professionals, counselors, case workers, and

others to gather and report information that helped judges make decisions in the best interests of the children.

Being a guardian is challenging and rewarding, but you don't have to necessarily take on such a large role to make a difference. After a standard background check, you can volunteer at a Boys & Girls Club, serve as Big Brother or Big Sister, or spend time working with and mentoring kids at a local religious organization, school or hospital. Supporting parents is critical, too. Even something as simple as lending a hand to a mom or dad struggling to manage the parenting load in a tough moment can make a profound difference in the welfare of a child.

I reached out to my network of friends and family who work directly with children in crisis to capture the advice below for people interesting in helping.

- When you encounter a child in crisis (and actually this advice works for people of any age in crisis) **let them feel and express their emotions**. Shannon, a judge, noted that he works every day with children who are caught in custody battles or have been severely abused, and says that allowing kids to vent about their feelings can sometimes help. Lisa, a teacher, wrote: "I have seen middle school students plow through the death of a loved one with the stoic demeanor of a battle-hardened soldier, but fall apart emotionally at the imagined slight of their peer group...Telling a child to 'cheer up' is not only unhelpful, it tells them that there is something wrong with them, at a time when they are already very vulnerable."
- Terri, a longtime volunteer guardian, noted the importance of "**learning the system and speaking up if something doesn't look or feel right.**" Reaching out to a teacher or other authority in a child's life to mention concerns is a perfectly appropriate thing to do, though it's important to remember that not all differences in families constitute a danger to children.
- Do what you can to **stabilize the child's situation**. Aimee, who has worked professionally with children in crisis, wrote: "Help to limit the trauma. Offer support to the entire family in a variety of ways. By limiting stressors and helping to improve their family dynamic, you can help the child. This can be world changing."
- **Encourage the children in your influence to be kind to their peers** who are having a hard time. Amy wrote: "In our experience, friends who didn't disappear when my girls were going through their father's death and some other hard stuff were their best support."

- **Practice empathy.** Arthur, a long-time child advocate who works with children and teens in crisis, underscored “the power of empathy as a means of bridging the gaps of understanding.” He noted that this process “takes practice, intention and focus.”

You can learn more about opportunities to help kids at <http://www.casaforchildren.org/> or <http://guardianadlitem.org/>. These organizations report a number of ways in which children benefit from working with adult volunteers. They are more likely to find stable homes, get supportive services, minimize their time in foster care, and do better in school. They are likely to be more socially stable, optimistic, and focused on the future.

If people focused more on taking positive action for children than on sensational coverage of family tragedies, the world would be safer for children in jeopardy.

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