# The Effectiveness of CASAs in Achieving Positive Outcomes for Children

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Using a quasiexperimental design, this study evaluated the effectiveness of CASAs in achieving positive outcomes for children, and examined the process variables believed to lead to permanency for children. Data were collected from court and CASA program files over a two-year period on 200 children, who were compared to children without CASA volunteers on outcome and process variables. Findings indicate that CASAs may have helped reduce the number of placements and court continuances children experienced, and that more services were provided to children with CASAs than to those without. Additional research is needed to further evaluate the impact of CASA services on children.

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The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1976 mandated that children involved in judicial proceedings due to abuse or neglect have a guardian ad litem (GAL) appointed to advocate for their best interests. In 1977, dissatisfied with the effort and cost of using attorneys as GALs, juvenile court judges in King County, Washington, began using citizen volunteers as GALs, calling them court-appointed special advocates (CASA). By 1998, 843 CASA and CASA-affiliated programs were established nationwide, with more than 47,000 volunteers representing 183,339 children [National CASA Association 1998].

CASAs provide a voice for children in judicial proceeding and advocate for the placement of children in safe homes intended to be permanent. They are trained community volunteers who are asked to make a commitment for the duration of a child's involvement with the court and child welfare systems. Because CASA volunteers are usually assigned to only one case at a time, they typically can give more time and attention to it than can attorneys and/or child welfare workers. Additionally, children can benefit from having an advocate who is outside the court system, child welfare system, and parent-child relationship.

CASA programs may follow one of four models: (1) *the GAL model*—the CASA is the child's GAL; 2) *the "friend of the court" model*—the CASA serves as an impartial observer, conducts investigations with key people, and makes recommendations to the court (Children assigned a CASA under this model also have attorney GALs.); (3) *the "team" model*—the CASA and attorney are appointed by the court to perform the functions of the GAL, and the CASA works "for" the attorney by providing the attorney with needed information to represent the child in judicial proceedings; and (4) *the "monitor" model*—the CASA monitors court orders for compliance and alerts the court about failures to comply, but has little, if any, contact with the children and families [Miller & Wolf Survey, in Condelli 1988].

This study adds to the small body of literature presently available regarding the effectiveness of CASAs in helping achieve per-

manency for children who have been abused or neglected and are involved with the court system.

## Literature Review

Since the inception of the CASA program in 1977, only a handful of quantitative studies have been conducted regarding the impact CASA volunteers have on the lives of the children they serve, with inconclusive, yet promising results. Utilizing a true experimental design, Abramson [1991] demonstrated that children assigned a CASA were less likely to re-enter out-of-home care once discharged than were children without CASAs. That study also showed that children with CASAs were more likely to have case goals that reflected permanency than those not served by CASAs.

Three studies have demonstrated that children with CASA volunteers are more likely to be adopted than those who do not have CASA volunteers [Abramson 1991; Poertner & Press 1990; Smith 1992]. Two other studies have demonstrated that children with CASAs experienced shorter stays in out-of-home care than children without CASAs [Oregon Governor's Task Force 1995; Leung 1996]. Other research involving CASAs suggests that children and families served by CASAs have more services provided to them by child welfare agencies than do children without such volunteers [CSR, Inc. 1990; Condelli 1988, Duquette & Ramsey 1987; Poertner & Press 1990].

Although most studies have found few differences between children with CASAs and those without on many variables related to permanency, the findings of "no difference" suggest that children with CASAs do at least as well as children with attorney GALs on certain outcome and process variables. Previous researchers [Leung 1996; Poertner & Press 1990] report that CASA is a cost-effective way to provide representation for children involved in judicial proceedings due to abuse or neglect.*

* The national median cost for a CASA volunteer is $618 per year per child [National CASA Association 1997].

## Method

### *Variables*

This study used a quasiexperimental group design to evaluate the effectiveness of CASA volunteers in achieving positive outcomes for children involved in the child welfare system. Child outcomes were defined as: (1) case closure rates, (2) the length of time children were under court jurisdiction, and (3) the number of children adopted. In addition, the study examined court and out-of-home care process variables that are believed to help lead to permanency for children. The process variables examined were: (1) type of placements children were in while in care, (2) number of court continuances, and (3) number of services provided to children and their families. Children with CASAs were compared to children without CASAs on child outcome and process variables. It was hypothesized that children with CASAs would perform better than children without CASAs on these measures.

### *Study Sites*

The study took place in Kansas, where state legislation outlines the roles and responsibilities of CASA volunteers:

> It shall be the primary duty of a CASA to personally investigate and become acquainted with the facts, conditions, and circumstances affecting the welfare of the child for whom appointed, to advocate the best interest of the child, and [to] assist the court in obtaining for the child the most permanent, safe, and homelike placement possible. [Kansas Supreme Court 1995]

In Kansas, CASAs follow the "friend of the court" model and are primarily responsible for investigating and becoming familiar with the facts through interviews with children, family members, and other interested parties, and for making written recom-

mendations to the court regarding child placement and services. Children in Kansas are also assigned attorneys as GALs to represent them in judicial proceedings.

Two sites were chosen for inclusion in the study, representing a medium and a large CASA program. The large CASA program was located in an urban area with a county population of 421,000. In 1994, the year the study began, there were 509 confirmed cases of child abuse or neglect and approximately 1,175 children in out-of-home placements in the county; the program had 70 active CASA volunteers who served 186 children. The medium-size CASA program began in 1991. The county population was 84,000 and, at the time the study began, the program had 45 active CASAs representing 90 children. There were 192 confirmed cases of child abuse or neglect and 211 children placed in out-of-home care in the study county.

### *Sample Selection*

All children who were adjudicated to be "children in need of care" at both sites during an 18-month period and who were assigned a CASA were included in the study (the treatment group). A comparison sample of children who entered the system at the same time but were not assigned CASAs were chosen from court records. Because age, race, and type of maltreatment (i.e., physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect) have been demonstrated to be related to child outcomes, comparison cases were matched to CASA cases on those variables. Children who were adjudicated juvenile offenders were not included in the study.

The final study sample included 119 CASA and 81 comparison cases. More CASA than comparison cases were included because judges would often refer cases to the CASA program when volunteers were available for appointment (usually following a training class). At times, no comparison cases were available that entered the system at the same time as those assigned to CASA.

### *Data Collection*

The study used current information from juvenile court and CASA program records for data collection. A data collection form was developed that included demographic information and the variables under study. Data were collected on each child in the study every six months for a two-year period. This type of data collection allowed the researcher to "follow" the children and track their movements and the services provided to them as they proceeded through the court process. Using this longitudinal and prospective data collection process also helped assure the data's accuracy. The six-month follow-ups allowed for comparisons to be made between groups at different points in time on certain variables.

### *Sample Characteristics*

The sample case characteristics for each group (CASA and comparison) are presented in table 1. Bivariate statistical analyses using *t*-tests and chi-squares were performed to determine if the CASA and comparison groups differed in terms of these case characteristics. The analysis revealed three case characteristic variables with statistically significant differences between the CASA and comparison groups at the .05 level of significance: (1) severity of abuse, (2) caregiver substance abuse, and (3) number of siblings in care.

Children with CASA volunteers were more likely to be in care because of physical and/or sexual abuse combined with neglect than were those in the comparison group. The CASA cases were also more likely than the comparison cases to be involved with the courts due to neglect only. Comparison cases were more likely than CASA cases to have experienced physical or sexual abuse only and to be involved with the courts by parent's request [$\chi^2$ (1, 4) = 15.20, $p$ = .0043]. Caregiver substance abuse was found more frequently in the CASA cases than the comparison cases (53% compared to 35%, [$\chi^2$ (1, 200) = 6.18, $p$ = .0128]. Children with CASA volunteers had, on the average, more siblings who were in

**TABLE 1**
**Characteristics of the Study Sample**

| *Characteristic* | *CASA (N = 119)* | *Comparison (N = 81)* |
|---|---|---|
| *Child's Age* | $\bar{x}$ = 8.01 | $\bar{x}$ = 8.86 |
| *Child's Race* | | |
| Caucasian | 66 (55.4%) | 39 (48.1%) |
| African American | 26 (21.8%) | 17 (20.9%) |
| Other | 27 (22.6%) | 25 (30.8%) |
| *Child's Gender* | | |
| Male | 62 (52.1%) | 36 (44.4%) |
| Female | 57 (47.8%) | 45 (56.5%) |
| *Type of Maltreatment**** | | |
| Physical and/or sexual abuse and neglect | 25% | 11% * |
| Physical or sexual abuse only | 14% | 27% * |
| Neglect only | 38% | 26% * |
| Parent request | 10% | 13% |
| Other or unknown | 12% | 14% |
| Caregiver Substance Abuse | 53% | 35% * |
| *Number of Siblings in Care* | $\bar{x}$ = 1.79<br>SD = 1.8 | $\bar{x}$ = .85 **<br>SD = .96 |
| *Child is from a Single-Parent Home* | 73 (61.3%) | 48 (59.2%) |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

***Note: More than one type of maltreatment may have occurred

out-of-home care than did the children in the comparison group (1.7 compared to .8) [$t$ (189) = -4.76, $p$= .000].

Based on the differences between the CASA and comparison groups, it might appear that the CASA cases are "more difficult" than the comparison cases. These case characteristics were entered as covariates in the analysis to statistically control for the influence they may have had on the dependent variables. Analyses were also conducted to examine the effects of site differences on the case characteristics. These analyses suggested that there were no differences between the large and medium program sites on the characteristics of the children and families in the study.

## Results

### *Case Closure Rates*

During the two-year data collection period, 71 cases (35%) (table 2) in the study sample experienced case closure with the courts (32% of the CASA cases and 41% of the comparison cases). Although this finding indicates that a higher percentage of comparison cases reached closure, it is not statistically significant [$\chi^2$ (1, 200) = 1.63, $p$ = .2013].

### *Length of Time under Court Jurisdiction*

The length of time children were under court jurisdiction was examined for group differences. The child's court adjudication date was used as the date of entry into the system and the last day of data collection or court case closure date was used as the end date. There were no statistically significant differences found between children with CASAs and those without CASAs on the average length of time under court jurisdiction. The average length of time for CASA cases was 29.9 months; for comparison cases, it was 29.4 months.

A second analysis examined the length of time under court jurisdiction for the 71 cases that had reached case closure during the study period (38 CASA cases and 33 comparison cases) (table 3). Of those cases that had reached closure, CASA cases averaged 26.12 months and comparison cases averaged 23.64 months under court jurisdiction. This difference was also not statistically significant [$t$ = -.82 (70), $p$ = .416].

### *Adoptions*

Of the 71 cases that had reached court closure, only eight (11.3% of the closed cases) had a completed adoption. During the course of the study, three children with CASAs (7.8% of the closed cases) and five comparison case children (15.1% of the closed cases) were adopted. Although a higher percentage of comparison group chil-

**TABLE 2**

**Analysis of CASA and comparison cases on outcome and process variables considering all study cases (N = 200)**

| *Outcome Variables* | *CASA (N = 119)* | *Comparison (N = 81)* |
|---|---|---|
| *Case Closure Rate* | 38 (31.9%) | 33 (40.7%) |
| *Time in the System (all cases)* | $\bar{x}$ = 29.95 mo. | $\bar{x}$ = 29.40 mo. |
| | *SD* = 13.73 | *SD* = 15.07 |
| *Adoptions* | 3 (7.8%) | 5 (15.1%) |
| *Number of Placements* | $\bar{x}$ = 3.9 | $\bar{x}$ = 6.62** |
| *Placement at the End of Study**** | | |
| Home/relative/adoptive home | 39 (48.1%) | 20 (41.6%) |
| Foster homes | 24 (29.6%) | 15 (31.2%) |
| Group homes/shelters | 13 (16.0%) | 5 (10.4%) |
| Institutions | 5 (6.1%) | 8 (16.6%) |
| *Type of Moves* | | |
| Positive | 23 (19.3%) | 18 (22.2%) |
| Negative | 22 (18.4%) | 17 (20.9%) |
| Same level | 74 (62.1%) | 46 (56.7%) |
| *Number of Court Continuances* | $\bar{x}$ = 2.0 | $\bar{x}$ = 2.5 |
| | SD = 2.5 | SD = 2.9 |
| *Number of Services Provided* | $\bar{x}$ = 8.5 | $\bar{x}$ = 6.35 ** |
| | *SD* = 5.0 | *SD* = 3.9 |

*p < .05; **p < .01

***Represents children still in care at the end of the study (*n* = 129).

dren were adopted during the course of the study than children with CASAs, the small number of cases means that statistical analysis to assess these differences could not be performed. Information regarding the number of children in the study with adoptions pending or planned could not be obtained.

### *Number of Placements*

In examining all cases in the study, children with CASA volunteers had on average statistically significant fewer placements than children without CASA volunteers (3.9 compared to 6.6) [$t$ (104) = 2.86, $p$= .005]. When considering the cases that reached

**TABLE 3**
**Analysis of CASA and Comparison Cases Considering Only Cases That Experienced Closure ($N = 71$)**

| *Process Variables* | *CASA (N = 38)* | *Comparison (N = 33)* |
|---|---|---|
| Time in the System | $\bar{x}$ = 26.12 mo. | $\bar{x}$ = 23.64 mo. |
| | *SD* = 13.67 | *SD* = 11.67 |
| Number of Placements | $\bar{x}$ = 2.56 | $\bar{x}$ = 5.25* |
| | *SD*= 3.2 | *SD* = 2.0 |
| Number of Continuances | $\bar{x}$ = 1.07 | $\bar{x}$ = 2.93** |
| | *SD* = 1.3 | *SD* = 3.23 |
| Number of Services Provided | $\bar{x}$ = 6.2 | $\bar{x}$ = 5.48 |
| | *SD* = 4.5 | *SD*= 3.8 |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

closure, children with CASAs also averaged fewer placements than children without CASAs (2.5 compared to 5.2) [$t$ (42) = 1.98, $p$= .042].

### *Child's Placement at the End of the Study*

For the purpose of analysis, placements were catagorized from least to most restrictive : (1) home, relative home, adoptive home, and independent living; (2) family foster home; (3) emergency shelter or group home, and (4) residential treatment, hospitals, and institutions. Cases that had not yet experienced court case closure ($n$ = 129) were examined for the type of placements children were in at the end of the study period. Findings indicated there were no differences between the percentage of children with CASA volunteers and the percentage of children without volunteers in each placement category at the end of the study.

### *Child's Placement at Each Data Collection Period*

The next analyses included all study cases and examined the child's placement at each data collection period (initial entry; 6 , 12 , 18 , and 24 months postentry) to determine differences between the two groups on the percentage of children placed in each level

of placement. No statistically significant differences were found in the percentage of CASA and comparison cases for each of the placement categories upon entry or at 6, 12, or 18 months after entry into the system. Because of the small number of cases still in the system and being tracked for the study after 24 months (38 cases), statistical analysis could not be performed at this data collection period. An examination of the number of children in each placement category at the 24-month data collection period, however, showed a higher percent of children with CASAs in placement with their parents or relatives, or in adoptive homes, than comparison cases (62% compared to 33%). In addition, a higher percent of children without CASAs were placed in institutions compared to children with CASAs (25% compared to 0%).

*Types of Moves*

Cases were examined for the types of moves experienced (positive, negative, same level) by the children during the course of the study. As suggested by Leung [1996], moves by children from more restrictive (i.e., group homes and institutions) to less restrictive (i.e., parent, relative, family foster home) placements are considered positive. Moves by children from less restrictive to more restrictive placements are considered negative. In comparing CASA cases and comparison cases, no significant differences were found in the number of children who experienced positive or negative moves while in care or the number that remained at the same level of placement.

*Number of Court Continuances*

On average, children with CASAs had 2.0 court continuances and comparison cases had 2.6 court continuances during the course of the study. The difference was not statistically significant. When considering the closed cases only ($n$ = 71), CASA cases experienced statistically significant fewer court continuances while under court jurisdiction than comparison cases (1.07 compared to 2.93) [$t$ (41) = 3.10, $p$ = .004).

*Services*

More services were provided to families with a CASA than to those without one (8.52 compared to 6.39) when considering all study cases. This difference was statistically significant [$t$ (195) = -3.34, $p$ = .002]. When examining the closed cases, no differences were found for the number of services provided to children with CASAs (6.2) compared to children and families without (5.4).

## Summary

Results from this study indicate that the presence of a CASA on a case did not influence permanency outcomes for children as the outcomes were defined in this study. Children who were assigned a CASA and children who made up the comparison group achieved about the same outcomes. Findings from this study do suggest, however, that the presence of a CASA on a case may have some influence on the process variables believed to influence child outcomes. Specifically, the findings indicate that children with CASAs had statistically fewer placements while in care and fewer court continuances than children without CASAs. Findings from the study also suggest that children with CASAs had more services provided during the course of the study than children without CASAs. Results indicated no statistically significant differences between children with CASAs and children without CASAs with regard to the level of placement restrictiveness or the type of moves the children experienced during the course of the study.

Analyses were also performed to determine whether there were group differences on outcome and process variables based on individual program sites. No differences between the treatment and control groups could be attributed to the study sites, thus ruling out site differences as an alternative explanation for the findings.

### *Study Limitations*

The researcher was unable to gain permission for random assignment of cases to the CASA programs from the juvenile court personnel and judges. The quasiexperimental design used matched comparison cases with "like" characteristics of the CASA cases. Due to the lack of random assignment, however, there is no way to know if the groups (CASA and comparison) are equal on other characteristics that may influence the findings. For example, judges reportedly assign CASAs to the more "difficult" cases, which suggests that in the absence of the CASA intervention, these cases may have less positive outcomes than the comparison cases. Because of this selection bias, there is no way to know if the findings of the study can be attributed to the CASA intervention. Random assignment would assume that the groups are equal on other variables, except for "chance differences," that may influence the outcomes, such as case severity. This assumption can not be made for quasiexperimental designs.

Another potential study limitation was the sample size. The sample may not have been large enough to find statistically significant group differences when they did exist. The sample size calculation estimated a sample of 600 (300 in each group) would be needed to detect group differences on the dependent variables if they existed. Therefore, the sample of 200 may not have detected group differences when they did exist.

## Discussion

Although this study's findings must be considered sample specific, in that they only apply to the programs under study, other CASA programs will likely find the information helpful.

Findings from this study indicate that CASAs may have an influence on the process activities (i.e., number of placement changes, number of court continuances, and number of services

provided to children and families) that are believed to lead to permanency for children. There has been little consistency among previous CASA studies regarding which child outcomes and process activities are impacted by CASA volunteers. Perhaps one reason for the inconsistent findings across studies is study site differences. CASA programs throughout the country follow different program models (as previously described) with volunteers performing various roles and functions and perhaps working toward different outcomes for children.

The absence of additional positive findings from the present study may also suggest that the CASA programs studied are not focused on these child outcomes and process activities. Outcome and process variables not examined in this study that might be considered for future studies include re-entry or recidivism rates, frequency of court and child welfare case reviews, number of planned versus unplanned moves for children, number of sibling groups placed together, and length of time from petition to adjudication hearings.

The 1996 reauthorization of P. L. 93-247 (allowing volunteer CASAs to serve as GALs), federal funding increases to CASA programs through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the increase in the number of participants at the national CASA conferences are all indications that the CASA movement is continuing to gain momentum. As CASA programs grow and develop, training programs should have a strong emphasis on child outcomes, permanency, and least restrictive placement concepts, as well as on aggressive advocacy strategies. To track the status of the children they are serving, CASA programs need to implement a child-tracking database system. It may also prove beneficial for future CASA research to examine exactly what CASA volunteers do on behalf of children that may influence permanency outcomes. Given the cost-effectiveness of CASA and the overburdened child welfare and juvenile court system, the use of citizen volunteers sanctioned by CASA programs remains a viable option to provide a voice for children who have been abused or neglect and who might otherwise become lost in the system.◆

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