

Children's Aid

helping Hamilton children & families



Family Services: Supporting Families to Thrive

In the field of child welfare, no two outcomes are ever the same; family crisis resolutions can vary greatly depending on the unique characteristics of each family.

Working under a strengths-based child welfare model, The Children's Aid Society (CAS) of Hamilton has seen a growing number of kin caregivers come forward to open their homes to children in need. Over the last year, the agency experienced an increase from 108 kin caregivers to 146.

The Simpson family's story illustrates how one family went from a state of turmoil to a strengthened and thriving family through the collaboration of the Society, community partners and a special kin caregiver.*

The Simpson Family

Late one evening, the Society's After Hours Emergency Services Unit was called by police due to a domestic disturbance with children present. No charges were laid against the parents - Ms. Simpson and Mr. Jones - however, a child protection investigation found Mia (10) and her brother Jacob (8) were being exposed to physical discipline and harm, as well as domestic violence. Ultimately, it was determined that Ms. Simpson's children were not currently safe in her care and a child protection worker from the Family Services department was assigned to work with the family.

Ms. Simpson has not had an easy life. She had Mia at a young age, followed by Jacob a couple of years later. Now, many years later, she was once again pregnant and struggling to keep it all together. At the time of CAS intervention, Ms. Simpson admitted she was lacking a support system, was overwhelmed, emotionally unstable and as she said, "in a bad place". Her volatile, and sometimes physically abusive relationship with her partner was also contributing to her already fragile emotional state and inability to cope. While she loved her children dearly and no attachment concerns were identified, they were not safe or thriving in the current situation.

A Turning Point

Despite being suspicious of the Society, Ms. Simpson and her partner wanted their family together and over the course of the Society's involvement, took the steps necessary to address all of the identified

About Kin Care

Whenever possible, The Children's Aid Society of Hamilton (Society) works with caregivers to address child protection concerns while the children remain in their own homes. When this is not possible, the children are placed in foster care, or when appropriate, with extended family and friends in a kin caregiver arrangement. This type of placement is referred to as kin care as it allows the child(ren) to forego being placed in the Society's care and minimizes the disruption for the child.

When it is determined a child(ren) cannot remain in the care of their biological parent(s), the Society works with the parent(s) to explore possible extended family and friends who may be willing to temporarily care for the child(ren) through a kin care placement.

concerns which included Mr. Jones moving out of the family's home for a period of time, and the children being placed in a kin care home.

With the Society's encouragement, Ms. Simpson reached out to extended family for help. Fortunately she had an aunt step forward. Not only was her aunt willing to provide a temporary home for Mia and Jacob, she also wanted to be a support for Ms. Simpson in getting the help she needed to adequately care for and protect Jacob and Mia, as well as the future baby.

During the family's involvement with the agency, Ms. Simpson, the child protection worker and the maternal aunt worked together to ensure that Ms. Simpson maintained a relationship with the children through consistent visits and contact, all the while confirming their safety and emotional health remained a priority. As Mr. Jones completed programs based on a risk assessment and addressed his own violent tendencies, he too maintained visits (supervised) with the children. Though kin care arrangements often have differing schedules for visitation, many families - 321 last year - engage in regular visits at the agency's Dofasco Family Visit Centre.

The Society connected the children to services to aid in their emotional healing and self-esteem building, such as the community based SNAP program offered through BANYAN Community Services. Their medical needs were prioritized and necessary appointments made. Mia in particular, experienced tremendous gains in confidence and social skills due in part to the special connection she made with a Hamilton CAS volunteer through the PAL Friendship Program (a mentoring/role modelling program).

The time Mia and Jacob spent in their aunt's care provided the opportunity for them to heal emotionally from the constant turmoil and to truly thrive in a supportive, stable and nurturing environment. Issues that had previously been neglected were also addressed. Both children flourished and began to excel in their new school, particularly Mia who was previously experiencing extreme difficulties with her academics.



Addressing Concerns

In the weeks leading up to the birth of Ms. Simpson's baby, and thereafter, the child protection worker connected her to numerous community service providers to engage in programs such as Good Beginnings, the Healthy Babies, Healthy Children program, the Ontario Early Years Program, etc.

Regular monthly CAS visits with the child protection worker were based on the Signs of Safety model of strengths-based, safety-focused child protection work that was implemented by the Society. A typical visit would include checking in on how the new baby was doing, how he was sleeping and eating. Medical appointments and baby milestones were discussed. The conversation would also focus on the activities Ms. Simpson was involved in such as Healthy Babies, Healthy Children, how she was coping, any frustrations and how she was progressing in achieving Society requirements.

As the child protection worker explains, the Signs of Safety model is about self-identifying successes and concerns and working in collaboration with the CAS, community supports and family to address concerns and to be proactive in establishing a safety plan.

Not only did Ms. Simpson's aunt provide a loving and nurturing temporary home for her children to thrive, she took an active role in mentoring and advocating on behalf of her niece. She attended community service meetings, participated in Family Group Conferencing and was often in attendance at meetings with the CAS.

With the necessary tools in place, Ms. Simpson's dedication and strong desire to turn her life around helped her to make the necessary changes. The child protection worker could see her confidence in herself and her role as a caregiver increase dramatically to the point that she could persistently advocate for supports she knew she needed.

This awareness aided the family in successfully reuniting after Ms. Simpson's baby was born.

Empowered Safety Planning

A key to the successful reintegration of the children in this family was the ability to self-identify problems and concerns and then develop resolutions in collaboration of extended family and community supports.

Working together through Family Group Conferencing, the family, aunt and community supports developed a safety plan that was endorsed by the Society based on identifying what had changed, what was going well, what the current worries, etc. Not only did the unconventional plan of care see Mia continue to reside with her aunt during the school year, it incorporated respite care provided by the aunt on a regular basis.

What struck the child protection worker most about this family's turnaround, was Ms. Simpson's ability to get to a place whereby she could put the needs and safety of her children before her own desires. In this case, it meant that Ms. Simpson would allow her older child to spend weekdays with her aunt so that Mia could continue to attend the school she was excelling in, as well as schedule weekends of respite care so that Ms. Simpson did not become overwhelmed.

The role of the child protection worker is not to solve the family's problems, but to help guide and connect the family to the appropriate resources so that they can be empowered to address current and future issues. With no remaining child protection concerns, the family file was closed and the family's involvement with the agency has come to an end knowing that the family is well equipped to handle challenges in the future and should a concern arise, they will reach out to CAS directly.

**Names and some details have been changed to protect the identity of those involved*

What is Family Group Conferencing?

Families involved with a children's aid society will often incorporate Alternative Dispute Resolution to develop a safety plan for their family that is acceptable to both the family and CAS. This process is empowering for those involved and is less intrusive than court involvement. Facilitated by a neutral Family Group Conferencing coordinator through Catholic Family Services of Hamilton, FGC is a decision-making process which involves gathering children, their extended family, close friends and community network to create a plan to address concerns outlined by the CAS. Through the process, the families have a strong voice in developing a plan for their children.