

# On a routine day

Coaxing the truth out of an abused and frightened four-year old and finding a home for a baby abandoned by parents unable to cope are all part of the job for Children's Aid Society social workers

By TERESA PITMAN

Thursday, 9 a.m. — Social worker Hazel Ling's first task this morning is to drive to the courthouse in Milton.

Thursday mornings have been set aside for Children's Aid Society cases in Halton Family Court, and today, one of Hazel's is on the schedule.

At 24, Hazel has been a CAS social worker for just over a year, on the Child and Family Services team. Her job is to investigate cases of child abuse and neglect when they are reported to the agency. That's how she became involved in the case that will go to court today.

It began when a neighbor called the CAS, concerned about Jennifer, a baby girl he believed was being neglected. Hazel investigated and found two young parents having considerable difficulty coping with the child. She offered practical help and recommended parenting classes, and continued to meet the family for several months.

Then a call came from another agency: Jennifer had been left with them and abandoned. Arrangements were made to bring her to the CAS, and Hazel and a foster care worker found a foster home for her. Now they must apply to the court to have her declared a society ward.

10:30 a.m. — As CAS lawyer David McKenzie presents other cases to the court, Hazel reviews her notes in a small anteroom off the main Family Court waiting room.

Baby Jennifer is an attractive, very affectionate infant. At an age when most babies will "make strange" and turn away from strangers, Jennifer reaches out to everyone.

Before the case is called, Hazel's supervisor phones her. Jennifer's father has changed his mind about attending the court hearing. A few minutes later, Hazel is in the courtroom answering the judge's questions about Jennifer's case.

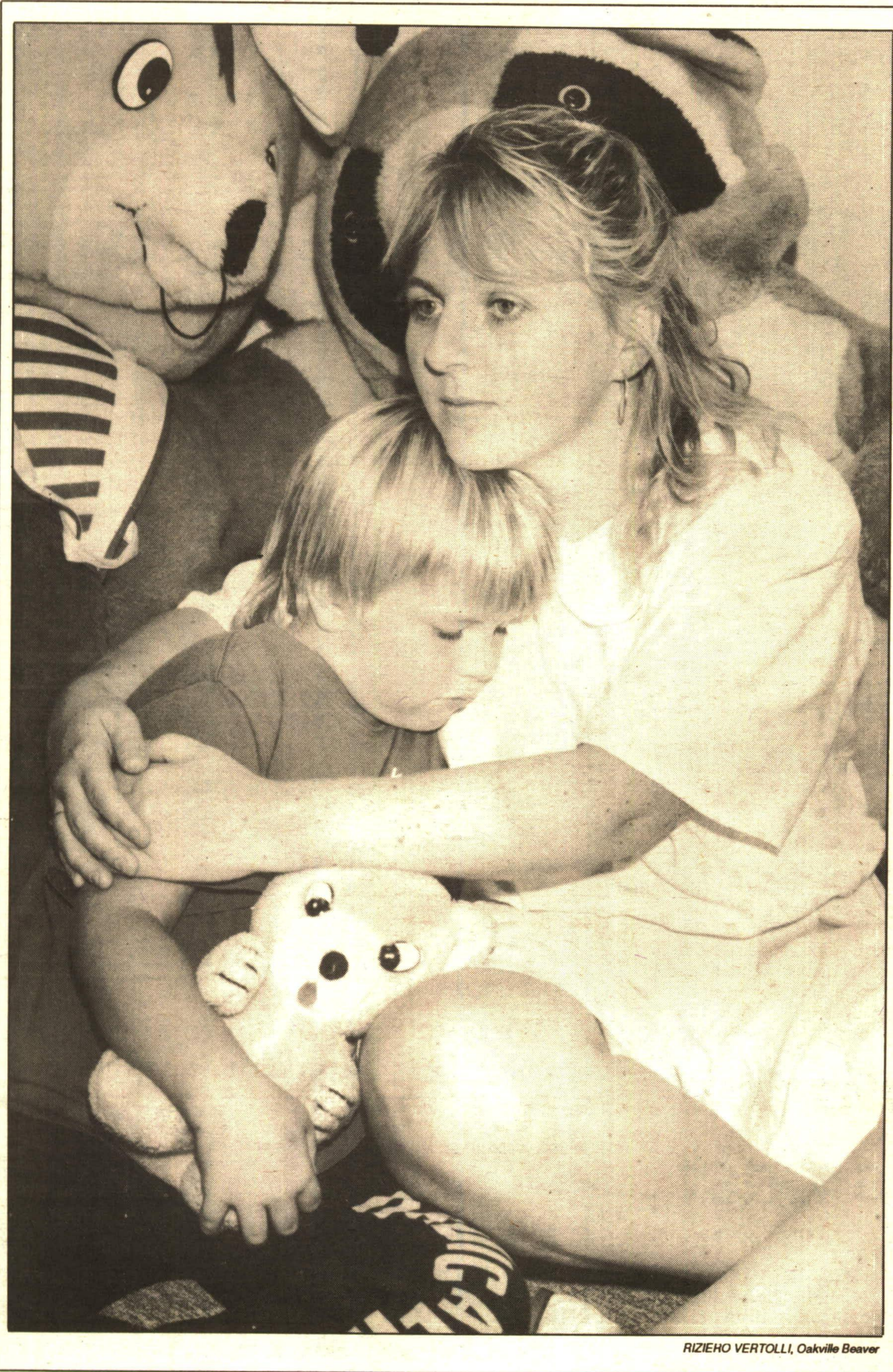
"How long have you been involved with this family?"

Hazel checks her notes. "Since the baby was two months old."

"Are you asking the family to have visitation?"

"Yes." Hazel's first goal, if possible, would be to keep the family together. Wardship is granted.

On an average Thursday morning, the CAS will bring eight or 10 cases to court. There will be some like Jennifer's, in which the CAS feels the child needs to be taken into its care. But there are



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others, like that of Darren, who is going home after a brief stay in a foster home because his parents have sorted out their problems and are ready to welcome him back.

11:15 a.m. — The court session is finished before noon. Hazel talks briefly with other social workers who have presented cases and then drives back to the CAS office in Oakville.

12:10 p.m. — After a quick lunch, Hazel heads for her office and finds that, as usual, her secretary has a fistful of phone messages for her to return. Hazel sorts them out, but the first call on her priority list is to Jennifer's parents. She wants them to know the outcome of the court hearing and what it will mean to them and their baby.

Each call Hazel makes represents another family in crisis. As an investigative worker, she initially checks out the validity of abuse reports. Some turn out to be mistaken and the case is promptly closed. If Hazel does find cause

for concern about a child's safety or wellbeing, she continues working with the family for 60 days. If the situation has not been resolved by then, it will be turned over to one of Hazel's co-workers who deals with ongoing cases.

1 p.m. — Hazel is on the phone listening to an Acton mother: "I can't get a ride to the therapy session next week."

Hazel makes some suggestions, but public transport is a problem in Halton. Families in Halton Hills with appointments in Oakville face a real challenge if they don't own a car. But the CAS has a group of volunteer drivers who will help out. Hazel promises to arrange something.

2 p.m. — Phonecalls completed, Hazel meets other staff members to decide the best foster care placement for three siblings who have been brought into care. It's a challenge: foster homes continue to be in short supply, and Hazel knows it will be hard to keep the three children together. Finally, a placement is decided:

two of the children will go to one home and the third to another, with visits scheduled.

3:25 p.m. — Hazel's supervisor, Lou Morris, brings her one of the dreaded intake forms — dreaded because it means another case added to an already hectic day. Workers on Hazel's team carry an average of 35 cases at any one time.

This case involves a four-year old boy who resisted being undressed during a routine doctor's appointment. When the doctor asked him why he didn't want his pants taken off, the boy replied, "That's what Uncle Bob does to me." CAS was contacted from the doctor's office.

Little Steve is at home with his mother now, a bouncy child who eagerly shows Hazel the presents he got at his birthday party two weeks ago. Hazel's good with small children, and he clearly feels comfortable with her, although he hovers close to where his mother sits a little nervously on the couch.

Once Steve seems relaxed,

Hazel begins to ask questions, gently.

"Can you tell me what you told your Mom about Uncle Bob?"

He tenses up. "I don't remember."

Hazel nods. "Is it hard to talk about?"

"Yes."

Now his mother intervenes. "It's okay," she says. "I want you to tell her."

He looks at Hazel again and asks about her earrings.

"You have a lot of dots on your face," he points out.

"They're freckles," Hazel says, smiling.

Steve is quiet for a second. Then he says suddenly, "Uncle Bob was bad."

Hazel's voice is quiet. "Why was he bad?"

"I don't know."

"Did he ever try to hurt you?"

"He pulled my pants down."

Now Steve is sitting right next to his mother, pressing himself against her.

"Why did he do that?"

"I don't know."

"Did he want to touch you?"

"Yes." Steve says this quietly, then more loudly, "I told him 'no.'"

There are more questions about where the incident happened, exactly how Steve was touched, who was around at the time. Uncle Bob, his mother explains, is not a real relative, just a family friend who often took Steve on little outings or on errands. Yes, they were often alone together.

"Steve," Hazel says, "what Uncle Bob did was wrong, and we need to tell the police about it. I'm going to call them now, and a police officer will probably want to talk to you. They might even make a video of you."

He's a little apprehensive at first, but Hazel reassures him that she'll be there if he wants her to. He does. And now he's feeling braver: "Yeah, you call the police and tell them to get Uncle Bob. He's bad."

4:30 p.m. — Hazel calls the police station and sets up an appointment for Monday. Meanwhile, she gives Steve's mother a brochure about counselling for families of abused children and gathers the rest of the information she needs: Uncle Bob's name and address and the names of other children who have been in contact with him.

5 p.m. — Hazel's workday officially ended half an hour ago, but now she's on her way back to complete the paperwork on Steve's case. Lou is waiting for her, and they discuss the next steps to be taken. She'll have to call "Uncle Bob" first thing in the morning and set up a time to talk to him.

5:45 p.m. — Hazel heads for home. It's been an average day, not as busy as some, when several investigations come in at once, more varied than those she spends most of the time doing paperwork and returning phonecalls. She feels good about Jennifer, who is flourishing in the foster home, and pretty positive about Steve, who seems to be coping with his experience well. But she wonders what tomorrow will bring.

Teresa Pitman is an Oakville-based freelance writer. Names and some details in this story were changed to protect the children's privacy.

