

I Am Isabella



You're going through a lot right now.

Things probably feel really confusing. You might have a lot of questions and different feelings about what's going on.

This book is here to help you figure some of that out.

You'll find stuff about:

- Who the people you might see or talk to are
- What could happen next
- How to deal with your feelings and ways to feel better

This is Isabella's story. Her experience might be different than what you're going through, but it might help you understand what's going on.

No matter what happens, you should know that you're not alone. These kinds of things happen to other kids, too.

There are lots of ways to get help and support. Don't be afraid to ask for it.

This book is yours to keep. Read it, write in it, draw on it, or do whatever you want with it. We hope it helps.

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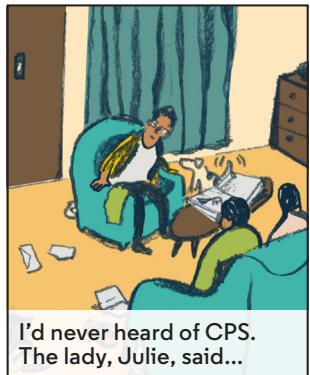
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Part 1.

Julie



Someone from CPS came to my house today.

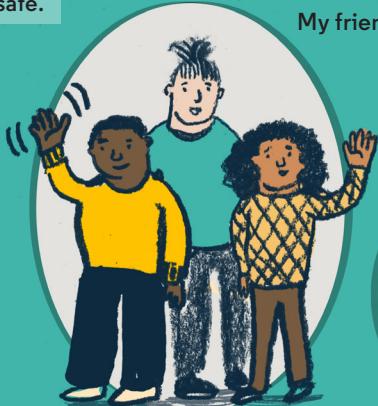


If we think a kid might not be safe at home, we have to look into things to make sure they're okay.



I feel safe.

My friends



My mom

Bruno



I have friends at school who look out for me and my mom does, too.



Julie wanted to talk to me. And she said then she would talk to...



...some of my teachers and neighbors.



I don't like that.



It feels like...





Julie wanted to talk to me alone.



I could tell Mom was mad.





What About You?

Have you talked to someone like Julie?

If you did, how did it feel?

If you haven't, how do you think you would feel if you did?

The next day
at school...

What's up,
Isabella? You're
not eating.



I don't know.
Just...things
are weird at
home.

Yesterday,
I had to
talk to this
caseworker
who came to
our house.

A case-
worker?



One came
to my cousin's
house after
his parents
had a fight.

Really?!







WHAT'S HAPPENING?

A caseworker named Julie came to Isabella's house to find out if she was safe. Most communities have an office whose job it is to keep kids safe. Where Isabella lives, it's called Child Protective Services, or CPS, but it has different names in different places.

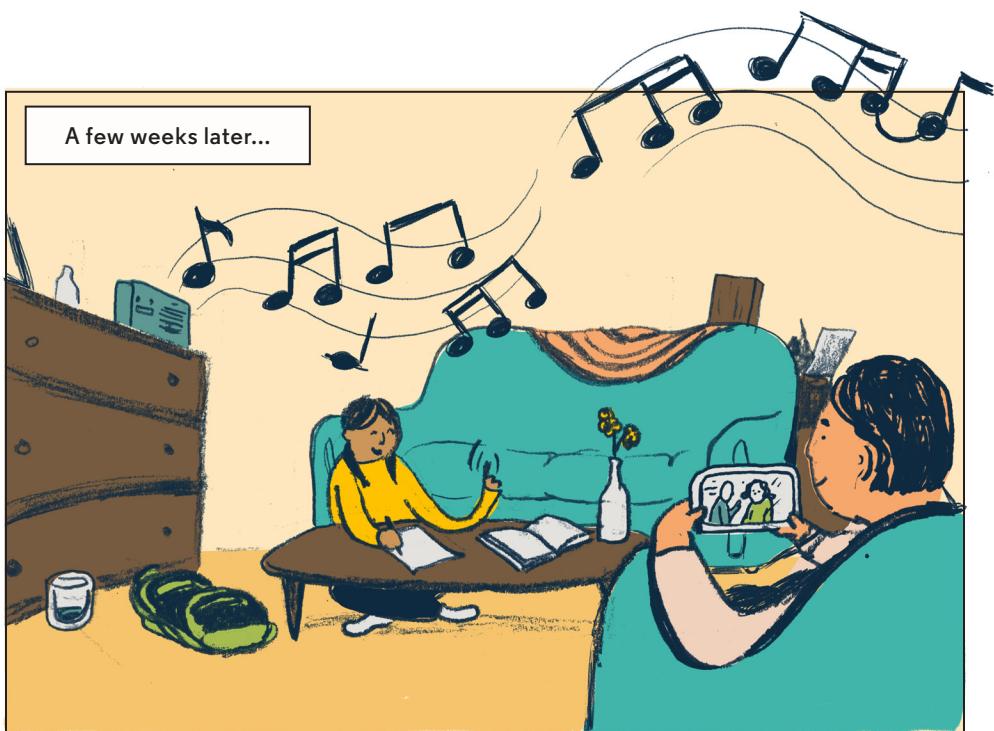
If someone tells them a kid might not be safe, it's their job to find out. They do that by talking to the family and other people, like neighbors and teachers, to figure out what's going on.

At the end of this process, which might be called an investigation, if the caseworkers think the kid is safe, the case will be done. If the caseworkers think the family needs more help, they will meet with them to figure out what kind of help they need.



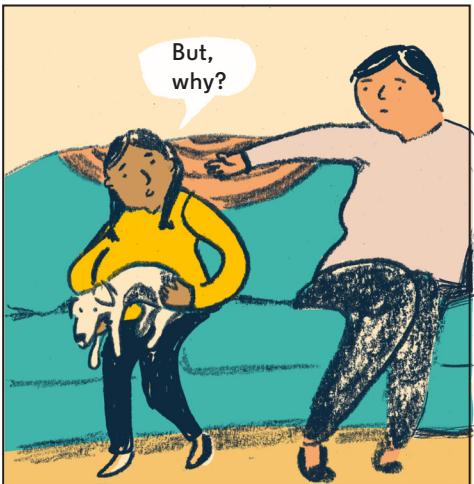
Part 2.

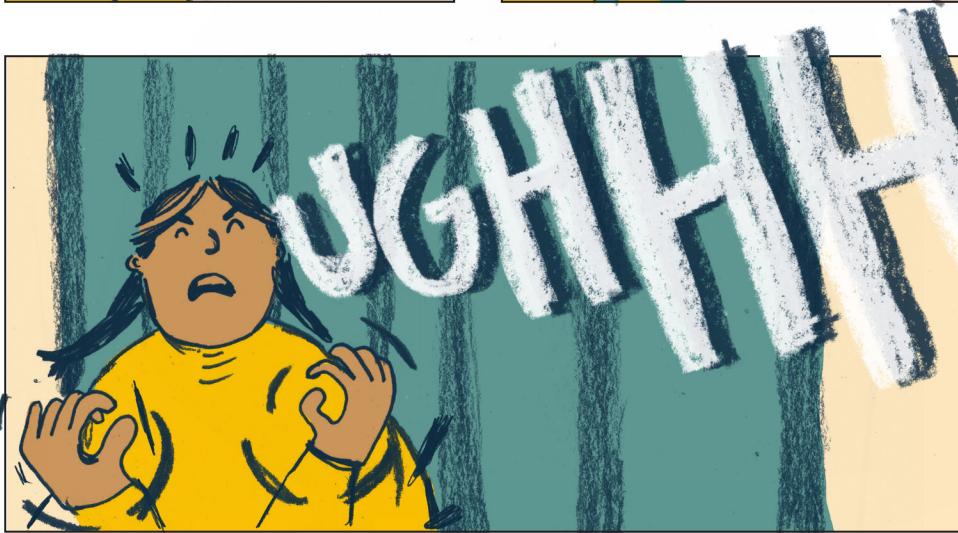
The Phone Call











WHAT'S HAPPENING?

The caseworkers asked Isabella's mother to come in for a meeting. In their meeting, they will try to figure out what kind of help the family needs to be safe.

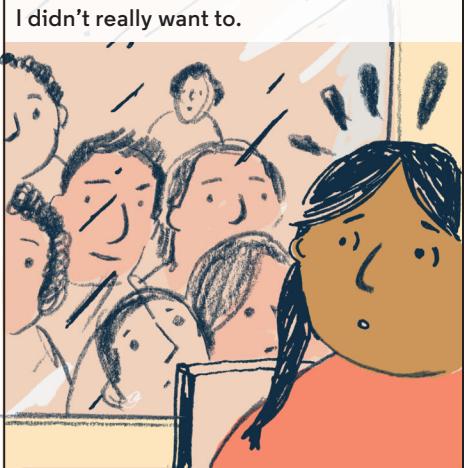
Part 3.

Ms. Mary

The next day, after school, I went to talk to a lady called Ms. Mary.



I didn't really want to.



I feel like everyone knows my business.



It's embarrassing.

Do other kids come here, too?
Why do they come?



I just went because of Julie and my mom.



I don't think my mom is a bad mom.



What will we even
talk about?



Alex said that her cousin talked to Ms. Mary before...



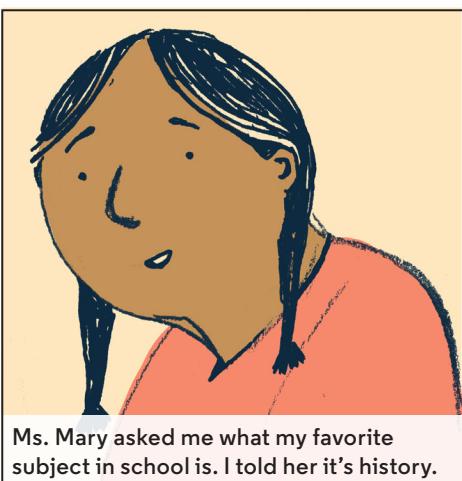
...and that she's really nice.



I guess I could give it a try.







Ms. Mary asked me what my favorite subject in school is. I told her it's history.



Then she gave me a coloring book. Not a baby coloring book, one of those cool ones for grown-ups.

It kind of made me feel better to have something to do while we talked.



I know you might not want to talk about it. But lots of kids go through what you're going through.

Really? It's not just me?



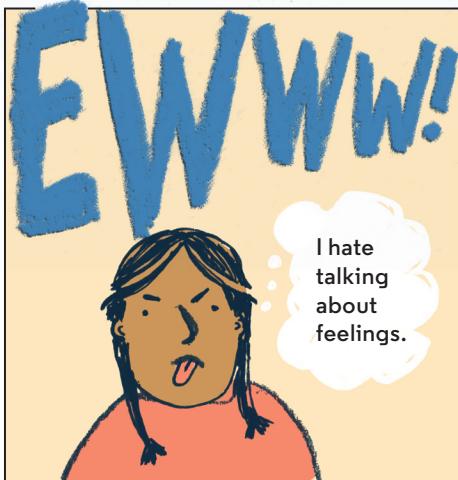
Other kids at your school have had caseworkers visit their family.

They can visit a family for lots of reasons.

It's okay for families to need help sometimes.

Like what?





But...it actually made me feel better. I know it sounds corny. But, whatever.

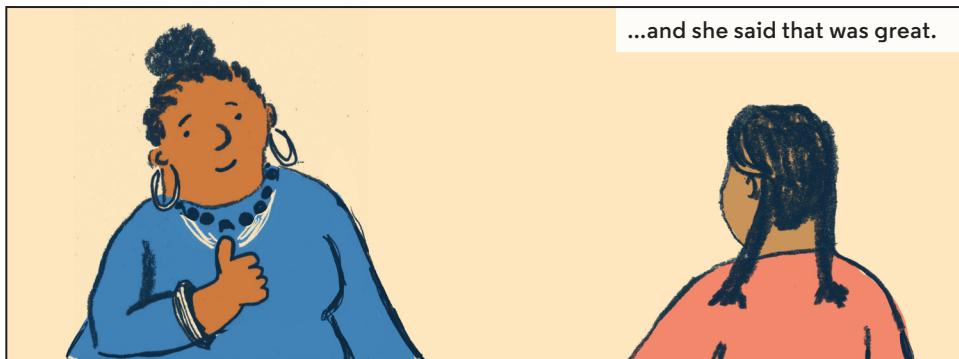


She told me it's good to get my feelings out by talking or writing.

I told her about my journal that I write in every night...



...and she said that was great.



She showed me some things I can do on my own to help me calm down when I start to feel stressed.



Like taking deep breaths and counting down from 10 in my head.



Or humming along to my favorite song.



The Breathing Trick

Ms. Mary showed Isabella how to use breathing exercises to feel calm. You can try this when you're feeling stressed or worried.

Put your hands on your stomach. Take a big breath in for a count of three, letting your belly fill up with air.



Hold your breath for a count of two.



Then breathe out slowly and let out all the air in your stomach.



Repeat this three times.



You can also close your eyes while you breathe.

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Ms. Mary helped Isabella work through some of her feelings about everything that was happening.

You can ask for help, too. There might be a social worker or counselor you can talk to. You might have an advocate helping you, or a caseworker.

Don't be afraid to ask one of the adults working on your case for help or to help you find someone else who you can talk with about how you feel.



Part 4.

Mom's Meeting

Things went back to normal for a little while...



Well, except...



...Ms. Mary became part of that.



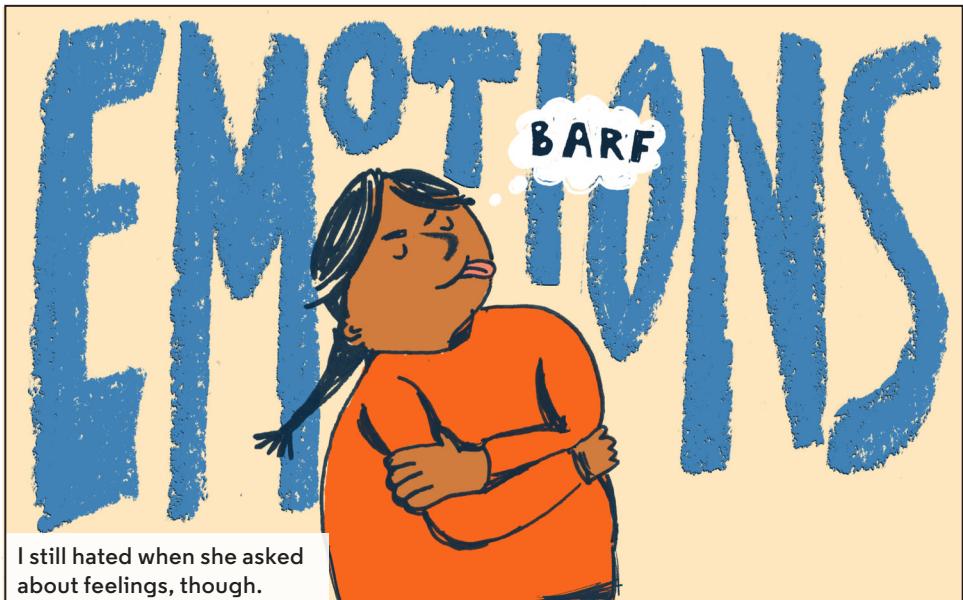
I don't hate seeing Ms. Mary every week.



I feel like teachers are always looking for the right answers...



...but not Ms. Mary.



Circle of Support

Isabella had people in her life to support her. Her best friend, Alex, her mom, and Ms. Mary helped her in different ways.

It can be helpful to remind yourself of the people in your life who you can ask for help. Who is in your circle of support? What do they do to help you?

Friends & Other Adults

Family

You

One day, Mom seemed nervous.



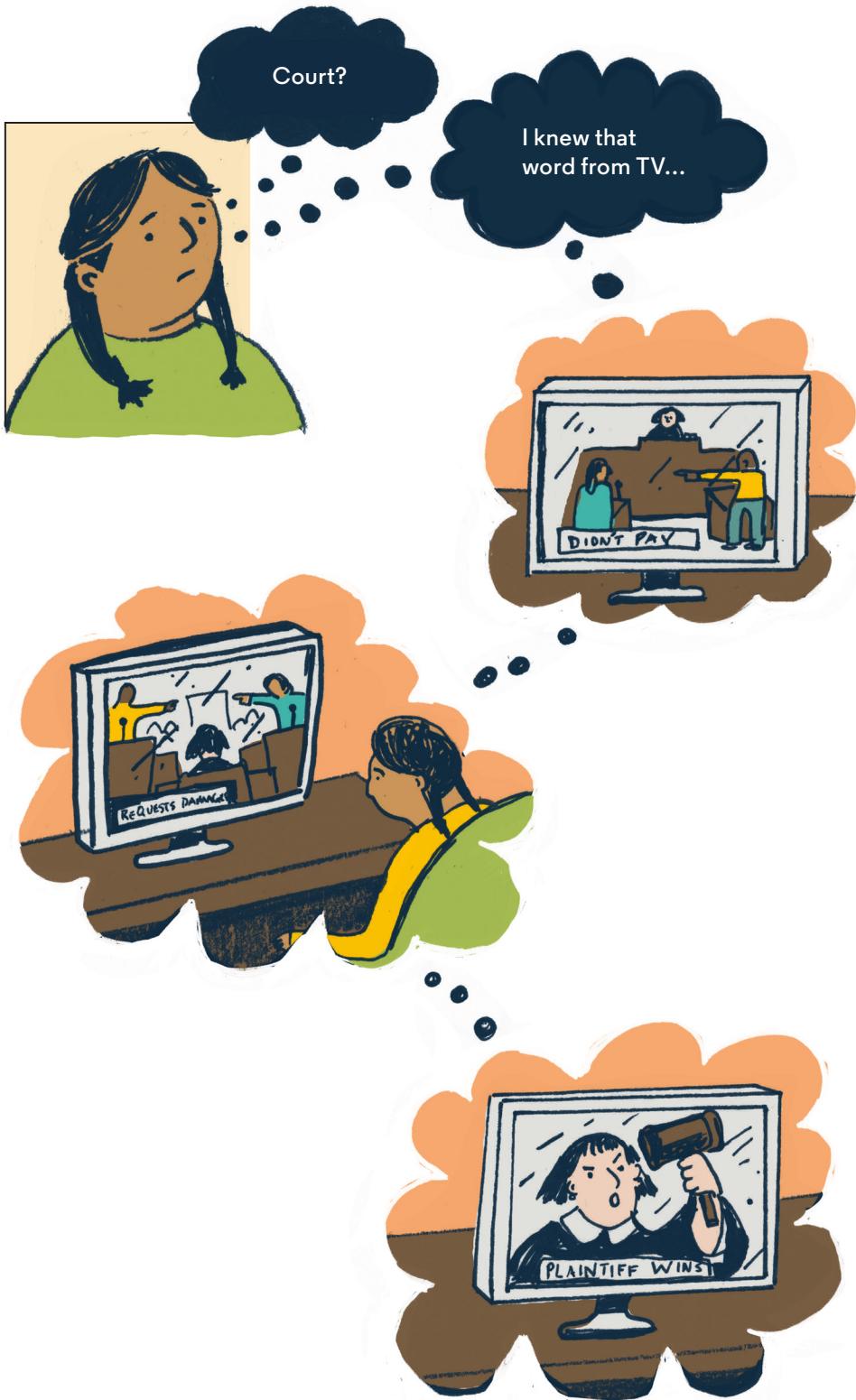
Like I am when I have a big test at school.

She wore different clothes than what she usually wears to work, too.



This is the day I have to go meet with her at court. She says she needs a little more information, so I have to tell them about us.







I was thinking
about what my
mom was doing.



If she was okay.



If things would change.

A stylized illustration of a young girl with dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. She has a neutral expression and is wearing a light green long-sleeved shirt. Her hands are clasped in front of her, holding a large, white, hand-drawn-style word "HOME". In the upper left corner, a dark blue thought bubble contains the text "I didn't want things to change.". In the upper right corner, another thought bubble shows a small illustration of two figures in a room, one pointing and gesturing while the other looks on. The background is a soft yellow.

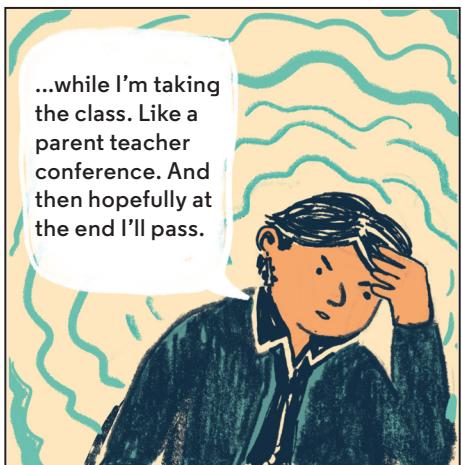
I didn't want things
to change.

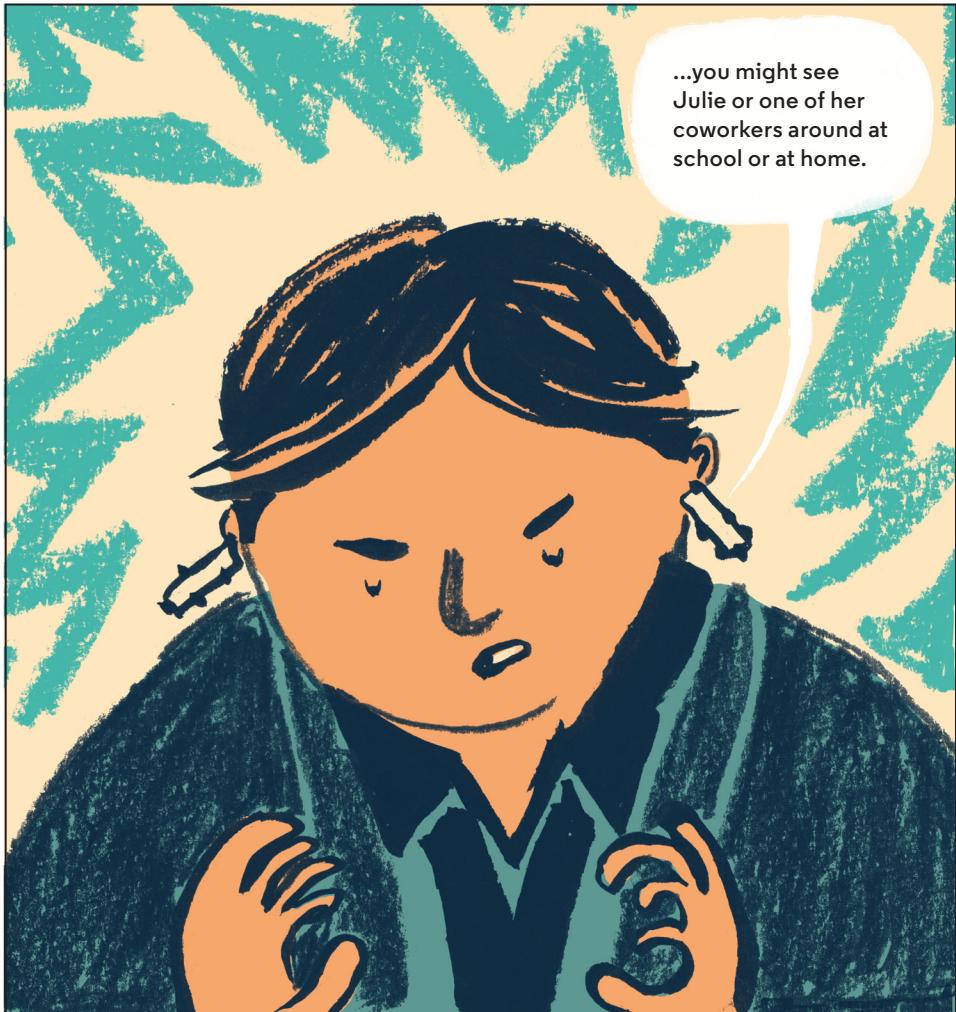
It's not always great at home, but
isn't that true for everybody?

As soon as the bell rang, I rushed home.









These Are The People In The Courtroom.



Child Protective Services (CPS)



Child Protective Services Lawyers



Respondent



Attorney for Child (AFC)



Guardian Ad Litem (GAL)



Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)



Social Worker



Family/Victim Advocate

You can put these stickers on the courtroom drawing on pages 66-67.



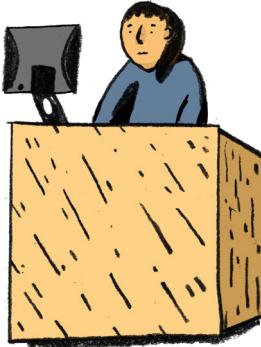
Judge



Attorney or Assigned Counsel



Court Attorney



Court Clerk or
Court Assistant



Court Officer



Court Reporter



Interpreter



WHAT'S HAPPENING?

The caseworkers decided Isabella's mom needed help taking care of her. They met with her mom at court to talk about it and figure out what kind of help she needed.

Caseworkers can work with a family to help make their home safer. They can recommend "services" like parenting classes, therapists to help with feelings and stress, and help with things at home like cleaning or having enough food. They can also ask the family to follow rules, like how Isabella's mom's boyfriend couldn't come over anymore.



Part 5.

Julie's Visits

Nothing really changed after my mom had her meeting at court.



But Julie came over every month.



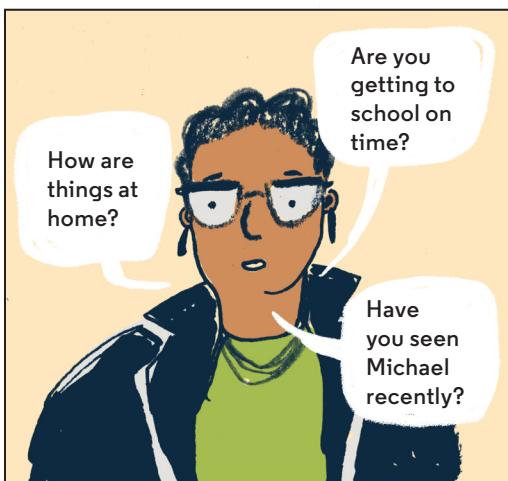
And sometimes my mom got angry at me, like always.



I could tell she was tired from going to work and those classes.

It was always the same when Julie came to visit. Mom would send me to the other room.





WHAT'S HAPPENING?

After the caseworkers gave Isabella's mom services to do, Julie checked in on the family regularly to see how they were doing.

The caseworkers will keep following up to make sure the help is working. When they feel that the home is safe, they will leave the family alone and the case is done.

If the services are not making things better at home and it's still unsafe for the child, the caseworkers could ask the family to go to court.



Part 6.

Another Visit

Then one month
when Julie came, it
was different.



Hi, Isabella. Can I come
in? Is your mom home?









I knew something wasn't right.



Julie asked me her usual questions:



Then she left.

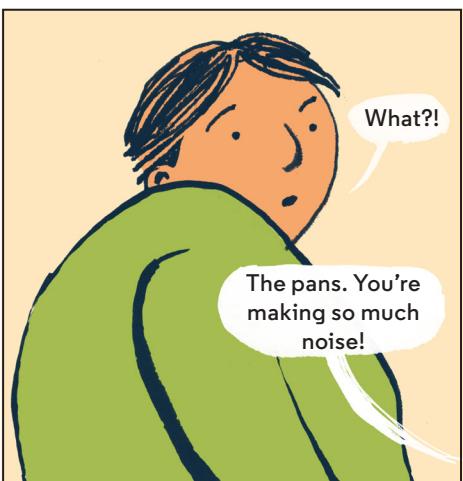


And then she asked me more questions about being left home alone and seeing Michael.

Mom, what happened?
What did she say?

I don't know—we'll
have to see.











The Noodle

Ms. Mary showed Isabella another way to relax her body when she was upset.

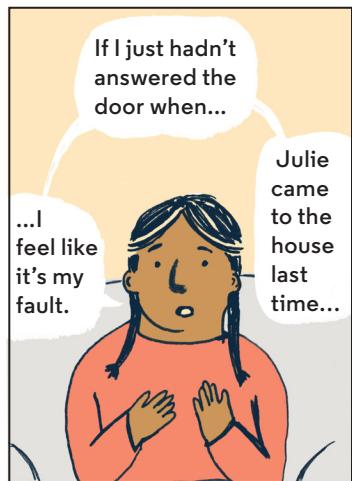


First, stand up really straight, with your hands at your side, like an uncooked noodle.

Take a deep breath, and then relax your whole body liked a cooked noodle.

Try doing it a few more times. It's kind of silly, but it works!







WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Isabella found out she had to go to court.
Sometimes kids have to do that. If you do have to
go to court, you can ask for help understanding
what it's like and what's going to happen there.

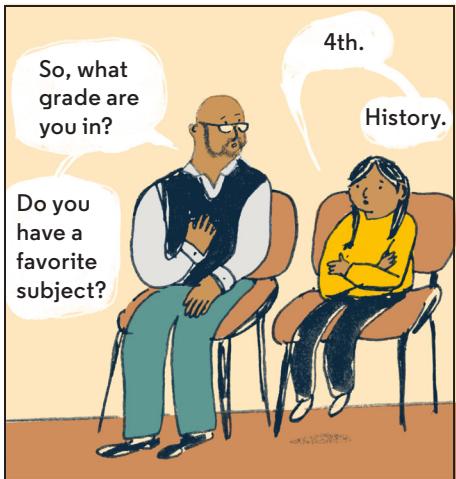


Part 7.

Court





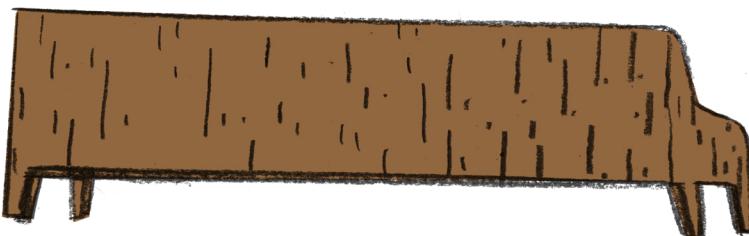


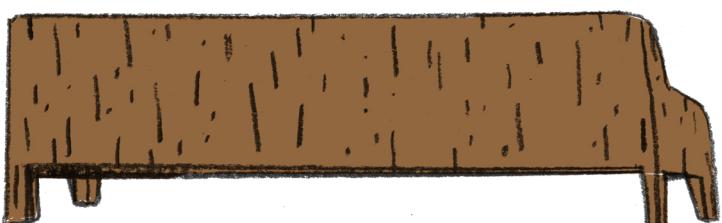
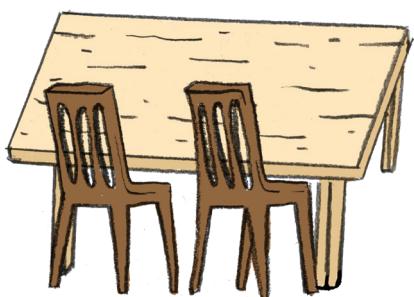
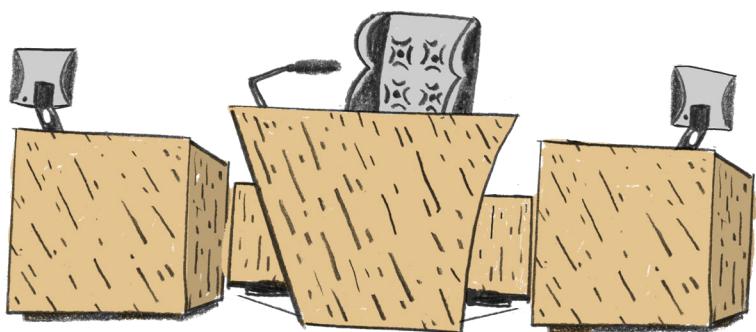
The Courtroom

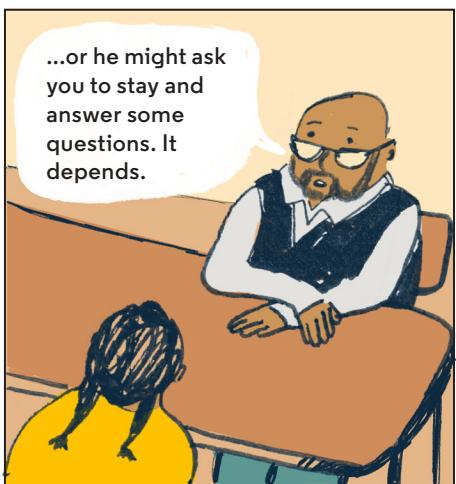
Chakri took Isabella to see the courtroom, and told her who all the people there would be and what their jobs in court are.

If you have to go to court, your courtroom might look a little different, but you will probably see some of the same people.

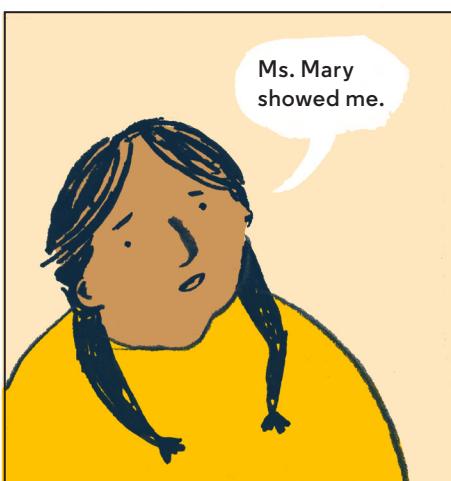
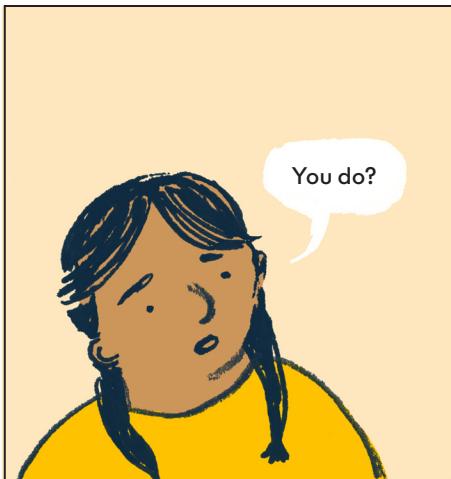
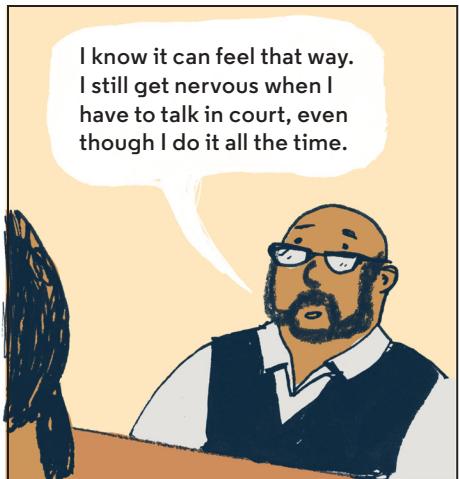
You can use this drawing to talk with one of the grown-ups on your case about who everyone is and what they do.













Getting Ready To Go To Court

Chakrii showed Isabella different things she could do to feel less nervous, and some things she could do to get ready for court.

Here are some of the things he told her about.

Getting ready

- Try to get lots of sleep the night before.
- Try to eat something before you go to court. It will help you feel better and have the energy to get through it.
- You don't have to dress up, but wear something a little nicer than usual if you can. You should wear something that makes you feel good.
- You'll probably spend a lot of time waiting, so bring something to read, play, or do while you wait.
- If you have a special object that helps you feel calm, bring it with you.

Getting nervous

If you feel nervous, try one of these things:

- Try to picture how you want to react if different things happen. It may sound silly, but picturing things can help you feel calmer.
- Try taking deep breaths in and out a few times. It really helps!
- Tighten your muscles and then relax them. Do this a few times.
- If you can, take a walk or move your body to get rid of some of your extra energy. You can also try walking really fast for a few seconds, then taking a deep breath and walking really slowly for a few seconds, then going fast then slow, fast then slow a few more times.
- If you have a special prayer or song that is important to you, try saying or singing it, either out loud, or in your head.

Getting support

- Think about who can help you figure out how you're feeling and who can help you in court.
- Is there an advocate, friend, or family member who can come with you to court? If so, you can look at them if you get nervous.

Getting through it

- It can feel good to do something you like when it's over, like watch a movie, eat a favorite meal, or spend time with a friend. Think of something you can look forward to.

My Court Day Plan

Isabella used Chakrii's list to come up with a plan for her court day. If you want, you can use this page to make your own plan.

Things I will do to get ready:

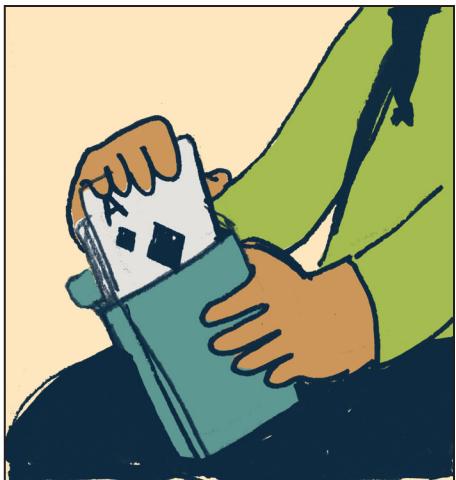
If I get nervous, I will:

I will talk about how I feel with:

After, I will do something I like:

The next week we both got ready for court.





The judge was different than I pictured, but he was nice.



I talked about me and my mom.



It was weird because there was a microphone and the judge said they were recording what I said.



I got nervous when they asked about Michael, but I looked at Chakrii the whole time...



...and took deep breaths before answering and that helped.



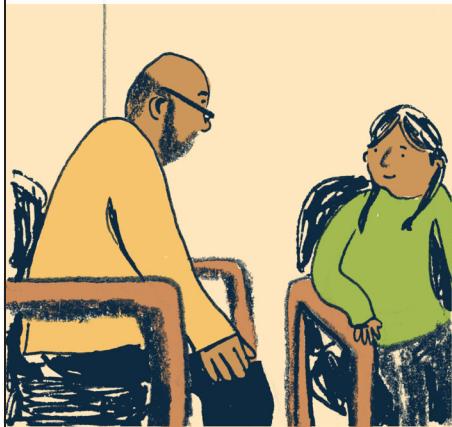
1..
2..



Before I knew it,
it was over.



After, Chakrii said I did really well.



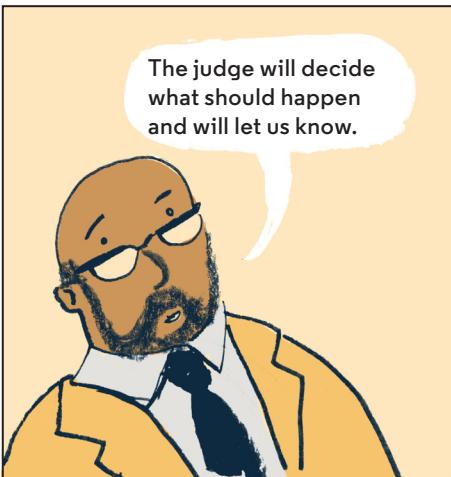
It wasn't so bad, I guess.



What happens now?



The judge will decide
what should happen
and will let us know.





I'd been so busy that I hadn't seen her in a really long time.



It felt really good to just be a regular kid again.



WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Isabella and her mom went to court and talked to a judge. Sometimes a judge will just want to meet a kid, but other times they want the kid to come to court and answer questions. This is called testifying.

Isabella got help from an advocate, who explained to her what it would be like to testify and helped her get ready.

After hearing what everyone has to say in court, the judge can decide if it's safe for a kid to stay at home or not, and if the parent or guardian has to keep doing services like taking classes or following more rules.

If the judge thinks it's not safe for the kid to be at home, they can ask them to stay with someone else, like a family member, a family friend, or another helping family, until it's safe for them to be home.





Afterword.

Isabella's story shows some of the things that can happen in Family or Dependency Court.

Your experience might be different than hers because a lot of different things can happen. But the more you know about what can happen, the more ready you'll be and the more power you'll have to ask for things you want or need.

You can have a voice in what happens. Don't be afraid to ask for help, to ask questions, and to find out what rights you have in court.

The Center for Court Innovation's Child Witness Materials Project is a collaborative effort between the Center for Court Innovation and the Center for Urban Pedagogy, and is supported by cooperative agreement #2016-VF-GX-K011, awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office for Victims of Crime. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this document are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

The Center for Court Innovation works to create a more effective and humane justice system by performing original research and helping launch reforms around the world.

www.courtinnovation.org

The Center for Urban Pedagogy is a nonprofit organization that uses the power of design and art to increase meaningful civic engagement, in partnership with historically marginalized communities.

www.welcometoCUP.org

Illustration: Ryan Hartley-Smith

Design: Anabelle Pang

The Center for Court Innovation is grateful to the project partners and stakeholders; and the children, caregivers, and justice system practitioners all over the country who contributed to the development of this product.

NCJ 300644

The Office for Victims of Crime is committed to enhancing the Nation's capacity to assist crime victims and to providing leadership in changing attitudes, policies, and practices to promote justice and healing for all victims of crime.

www.ovc.ojp.gov

The Office of Justice Programs is a federal agency that provides federal leadership, grants, training, technical assistance, and other resources to improve the Nation's capacity to prevent and reduce crime, assist victims, and enhance the rule of law by strengthening the criminal and juvenile justice systems. Its six program offices—the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office for Victims of Crime, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking—support state and local crime-fighting efforts, fund thousands of victim service programs, help communities manage sex offenders, address the needs of youth in the system and children in danger, and provide vital research and data.



Office for Victims of Crime
OVC

