

2019

Helping Parents Navigate the Child Welfare System: Partnering with CASA to Create Self-Advocacy Resource Kits

Amanda Warnock
Purdue University, warnock@purdue.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/pjsl>



Part of the [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Warnock, Amanda (2019) "Helping Parents Navigate the Child Welfare System: Partnering with CASA to Create Self-Advocacy Resource Kits," *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and International Engagement*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

DOI: 10.5703/1288284316986

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/pjsl/vol6/iss1/12>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).



HELPING PARENTS NAVIGATE THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM:

Partnering with CASA to Create Self-Advocacy Resource Kits

Amanda Warnock (*Human Development and Family Science; Political Science*)

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Amanda Warnock is a senior in developmental and family science and political science with minors in human rights and public policy. She has been with the Child Development, Maltreatment, and Methodology Lab, located in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, since the end of her freshman year. After graduation, she will be attending graduate school at Columbia University in New York City. She will be pursuing a master's in public health in population and family health with a concentration in sexuality, sexual, and reproductive health.

ABSTRACT

There are 442,995 children in contact with child welfare systems in the U.S. today (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Some children represented in this statistic were victims of abuse, such as physical (12%) or sexual (4%). However, many of these children and their families come to the attention of child protection authorities because of neglect (62%), meaning that their parents/caregivers lack adequate resources to properly provide and care for their dependent children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). For some families, involvement with child protection authorities means being separated—with children placed in foster care and parents working through the court-mandated requirements in order to be reunified with their children. For other families, children are allowed to stay at home while their parents work through these requirements under supervision of authorities. In neither case are parents involved with Indiana's Department of Child Services given a “how to” guide for successfully navigating this process—the

amount of guidance given to parents varies drastically based on the caseworker, judge, service providers, and public defenders assigned to their case. The goal of this paper is to describe a pilot effort to provide empirically sound self-advocacy resource kits to parents in the child welfare system in one Indiana county, in partnership with the organization that aims to advocate for the best interests of children at the center of these cases—Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA).

INTRODUCTION

Parents involved with the child welfare system have to meet a number of requirements in order to prove to child protective authorities and courts that they are able to safely and effectively care for their children. The child protective process is daunting, with requirements ranging from obtaining stable housing, maintaining steady gainful employment, complying with the many and often-changing court requirements (e.g., counseling, visitation, addiction treatment), to maintaining sobriety (Barth et al., 2005; Cash & Berry, 2003).

The child welfare intervention process is not a voluntary one, meaning parents are compelled by county and state authorities to be involved—a dynamic that creates tension and stress for many parents, and leaves many feeling as though the goals of the state/authorities are inconsistent with their own (Rice & Girvin, 2014). Qualitative studies have found that parents also typically report feeling ashamed (Sykes, 2011) and guilty (Dunkerly, 2017) about their predicament; they are very aware of the stigma surrounding being a parent in the child welfare system (Scholte et al., 1999).

In addition to stigma, studies also routinely find that parents fear the power that child welfare authorities hold over both them and their children (Dumbrill, 2006, 2010). Additionally, parents are given rather little autonomy and control over the trajectories of their child welfare cases, which can lead to parents viewing helping professionals as adversaries rather than helpers (Rice & Girvin, 2014). This issue may be perpetuated by the fact that many parents feel that their family’s most pressing needs were poorly addressed or ignored by caseworkers and others (Altman, 2005; Yatchmenoff, 2005). However, when child welfare professionals are able to support parents and build relationships without judgment, parents are more likely to positively engage with the process and the provided services (Kapp & Vela, 2004). Working towards strengthening relationships and information-sharing between child welfare professionals and parents is an important part of improving the child welfare system process.

While only a few states have programs in place to formally provide parents with advocates or mentors through the child welfare process, most child welfare systems provide children with advocates—either in the form of attorneys or volunteer court-appointed special advocates (CASAs). In some areas, these programs are called guardian ad litem (GAL). Started in 1977, the CASA program trains community volunteers to serve as objective advocates for the best interests of the child or children at the center of a case (Weisz & Thai, 2003). Eighty-four of Indiana’s 92 counties have CASA/GAL programs (Indiana State Office of GAL/CASA, 2019). Thousands of Hoosiers are involved: in 2018, 4,718 volunteer CASAs/GALs advocated for kids in 26,431 cases (Indiana State Office of GAL/CASA, 2019). While rigorous studies of the effectiveness of the CASA program have been scarce, they have routinely found that involvement of CASAs is significantly associated with improved outcomes for children in child welfare cases (e.g., fewer placement changes, less time in foster care, more complete information provided to courts, greater

access to services; Leung, 1996; Poertner & Press, 1990; Weisz & Thai, 2003).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The overarching goal of this project was to work with CASA to provide self-advocacy resources to parents of the children they serve. In other words, we wanted to assist CASA in their child advocacy mission by helping parents have the tools they need to bring their children home from (or to keep them out of) foster care, and provide them with safe, healthy childhoods long after their involvement with the child welfare system ends. A local CASA observed the difficulties families face in organizing and understanding the overwhelming amount of vital information coming from so many different sources. This project aims to centralize this information and put in easy-to-understand terms, providing parents with a useful resource and helping CASAs by giving them a tool they had not yet developed. Working with CASA leadership, we developed the idea to create a binder of empirically backed resources spanning several topics related to the child welfare system and healthy parenting.



Our resource kits featured materials developed by Rise, a New York–based parent advocacy organization that employs parents with histories of child welfare system involvement as advocates and mentors for parents in the system. We worked with Rise director Nora McCarthy to select Rise materials for our kits and to gain necessary permissions for reprinting. Our kits also included copies of the 2018 Bauer Family Resource Guide, an annual community resource guide for Tippecanoe County Families. In addition to these materials, we researched and developed our own materials related to the following topics: Court and Child Welfare 101, Basic Child Development, Attachment, Positive Parenting/Discipline, Parent-Child Interactions, and Making the Most of Visits. We also created note-taking forms for important meetings or court appearances. This project received a service-learning grant from the Purdue University Office of Engagement, which provided funds for the purchase of binders and professional printing.

DISTRIBUTION

Our team was able to distribute the resources we collected through multiple outlets. First, we delivered an in-service training to active CASA volunteers in

Lafayette in November 2017 to get crucial input before finalizing our resource kits, as well as to provide strategies CASAs can use to support and guide parents. We provided relevant resources to the 40+ CASAs in attendance, and delivered an oral presentation on community resources that may be of benefit to their clients. We have been invited to conduct a similar workshop in 2019.

Seventy resource binders, as well as an electronic copy, were given to the Tippecanoe County CASA office for distribution to families in April 2018. Additionally, we provided electronic copies of the resource kits to the Tippecanoe County Office of the Public Defender. These copies were sent out to child in need of services attorneys to be given directly to parents.

Additionally, we applied and were accepted as presenters at the 2018 Health and Human Sciences Extension Roundtable in West Lafayette where extension leadership and educators from all 92 Indiana counties were in attendance. We presented our binders of resources to these leaders, discussed how similar projects would be beneficial in their counties, and explained our research and development process. This presentation led to important conversations about destigmatizing parents of children in the child welfare system, aid for parents in need, and best practices for family reunification. This topic can be challenging for those who have only seen the child welfare system process from the perspective of protective services for children. Seeing all sides of these issues is important to provide the necessary support to bring families together in a healthy, effective, and sustainable manner.

Finally, we were accepted to present a poster on our binder project at the 21st National Conference on Child Abuse & Neglect (NCCAN) in April 2019. Supported by the Administration for Children and Families Children's Bureau, NCCAN is the sole federally sponsored conference devoted to issues related to child maltreatment. This will provide us with an opportunity to reach a larger, national audience that will include child welfare practitioners, researchers, students, policy makers, and individuals affected by the child welfare system themselves—greatly expanding the impact of our work.

STUDENT IMPACT

The process of creating, gathering, and distributing these resources has been very impactful. Learning about the work of Rise was an essential part of our project, as they provided a wealth of resources directed towards our target audience, a group that generally does not receive

much public recognition, empathy, or support. As someone who has not directly worked as a CASA or in child welfare litigation, I found it eye-opening to see all the moving parts and key players involved in the process. It would be overwhelming to be a parent without the resources to fully understand the system and how to navigate it, but knowing that doing so was necessary in order to keep or regain custody of my child. The impact of this experience influenced my decision to attend graduate school to pursue a master's in public health in population and family health.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

As we presented our work to community members and practitioners, we received rather blatant pushback from some who were wary of giving parents in the child welfare system the “benefit of the doubt” or any additional supports. Though this was not something I expected to face, it was indicative of a wider notion that these parents are not deserving of assistance (i.e., as the “unworthy/undeserving poor”), and in the views of some, not deserving of the right to parent their children. This notion generally stems from stereotypes about this population of parents as abusive, overtly neglectful, or choosing their own comfort or vices over the welfare of their children. While these atrocities do happen, they are not present in many child welfare cases. Many of these parents are experiencing our society's criminalization of poverty, addiction, or chronic social disadvantage. In many cases, these parents need support and resources to protect their children. As we continue to present our work to those who have had little exposure to the difficulties these parents face, I believe we can continue to reduce the stigma around being a parent in the system. I am hopeful that this work will help our community choose support, understanding, and empathy over separation and stigma whenever possible. Over time, this



mindset change may bring our community together to rally around not only children but whole families, making a healthier and more cooperative community for all.

Finally, this work is impacting our community by both indirectly and directly supporting vulnerable families in the child welfare system. Because the child welfare system process has not been clearly explained to many parents, our work may provide some of the first opportunities parents have to get their questions answered and feel empowered to take control over their situation. With the many facets of the child welfare process, these resources can help parents navigate the process with more autonomy and understanding. For those with limited or no Internet access, these hard-copy resources can be an equalizer by providing extensive explanations, guided notes pages for court appearances and important meetings, and ideas for making the most of parent-child visits—all things that those with Internet have greater access to.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

We received feedback from local CASAs that the resource kits were a valuable addition to their toolkit. As such, there was interest in a continued partnership. Our team received a second service-learning grant for a partnership with Tippecanoe CASA to provide empirically sound resource kits for practicing CASAs, including sections on adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed practice/care, education-specific advocacy, issues at the intersection of the opioid crisis and the child welfare system, and the newly signed Family First Prevention Services Act. We will deliver 100 hard copies to events that include CASAs and caseworkers during April 2019 in honor of Child Abuse Prevention Month.

CONCLUSION

By better understanding the child welfare process and receiving targeted supports, parents can have a better chance at successfully navigating the child welfare process and being safely and sustainably reunited with their children. Children in these families can reap the benefits of a stronger, safer home life and will have the chance to be raised in a stable home by their own parents. Supporting families in the child welfare system is essential for communities who want to build up families, support the well-being of children, and break pervasive, intergenerational cycles of poverty and family separation.

REFERENCES

- Altman, J. C. (2005). Engagement in children, youth, and family services: Current research and promising approaches. In G. Mallon & P. Hess (Eds.), *Child welfare for the twenty-first century: A handbook of practices, policies, and programs* (pp. 72–86). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Barth, R. P., Landsverk, J., Chamberlain, P., Reid, J. B., Rolls, J. A., Hurlburt, M. S., . . . Kohl, P. L. (2005). Parent-training programs in child welfare services: Planning for a more evidence-based approach to service biological parents. *Research on Social Work Practice, 15*, 353–371.
- Cash, S. J., & Berry, M. (2003). The impact of family preservation services on child and family well-being. *Journal of Social Service Research, 29*, 1–26.
- Dumbrill, G. C. (2006). Parental experience of child protection intervention: A qualitative study. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 30*, 27–37.
- Dumbrill, G. C. (2010). Power and child protection: The need for a child welfare service users' union or association. *Australian Social Work, 63*, 194–206.
- Dunkerly, S. (2017). Mothers matter: A feminist perspective on child welfare-involved women. *Journal of Family Social Work, 20*, 215–265.
- Indiana State Office of GAL/CASA. (2019). Indiana GAL/CASA 2019 local program directory. Retrieved from <https://www.in.gov/judiciary/galcasa/files/galcasa-directory.pdf>
- Kapp, S. A., & Vela, R. H. (2004). The unheard client: Assessing the satisfaction of parents of children in foster care. *Child and Family Social Work, 9*, 197–206.
- Leung, P. (1996). Is the court appointed special advocate program effective? A longitudinal analysis of time involvement and case outcomes. *Child Welfare, 75*, 269–284.
- Poertner, J., & Press, A. (1990). Who best represents the interests of the child in court? *Child Welfare, 69*, 537–549.
- Rice, K., & Girvin, H. (2014). Engaging families, building relationships: Strategies for working across systems from a social exchange perspective. *Advances in Social Work, 15*, 306–317.
- Scholte, E. M., Colton, M., Casas, F., Drakeford, M., Roberts, S., & Williams, M. (1999). Perceptions of stigma and user involvement in child welfare services. *British Journal of Social Work, 29*, 373–391.
- Sykes, J. (2011). Negotiating stigma: Understanding mothers' responses to accusations of child neglect. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*, 448–456.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). (2018). The AFCARS Report. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcars_report25.pdf
- Weisz, V., & Thai, N. (2003). The court appointed special advocate (CASA) program: Bringing information to child abuse & neglect cases. *Child Maltreatment, 8*, 204–210.
- Yatchmenoff, D. K. (2005). Measuring client engagement from the client's perspective in non-voluntary child protective services. *Research on Social Work Practice, 15*, 84–96.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Brittany Mihalec-Adkins and Dr. Sharon Christ for their mentorship and guidance in the project.

Warnock, A. (2019). Helping Parents Navigate the Child Welfare System: Partnering with CASA to Create Self Advocacy Resource Kits. *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and International Engagement, 6*, 59–62. <https://doi.org/10.5703/1288284316986>