

# International Review of Parent Advocacy in Child Welfare

STRENGTHENING CHILDREN'S CARE AND PROTECTION THROUGH PARENT PARTICIPATION

This policy brief summarizes the key findings and recommendations from the [International Review of Parent Advocacy in Child Welfare](#) in low, middle and high-income countries, and identifies elements of a strategy to strengthen children's care and protection through parent participation. It identifies lessons learned from the different sections of the report and suggests how the benefits of parent advocacy can be promoted internationally.

The international review commissioned by Better Care Network and written by David Tobis, Andy Bilson and Isuree Katugampala brings together the evidence on the role of parent participation and advocacy in achieving better outcomes for children and their families. It was written to encourage parents and their allies to work together to improve child welfare systems. The review highlights the role parent advocacy can play in preventing unnecessary separation of children from their families. Change will come about by increasing the influence and role of parents with lived child welfare experience in the development of better child welfare systems. Parent participation is both a right and a fundamental element to protecting the rights and meeting the needs of children. Participation is key to the achievement of all human rights. The [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) stresses the fundamental role of a family environment, focusing on preventing unnecessary separation and supporting parents and other caregivers to care appropriately. Parent participation is required to achieve these rights.

Parent participation is used in a broad way to refer to parents' involvement in the child welfare decisions

that affect their lives and their children's lives. This includes everything from decision-making in cases that affect them to their involvement in local and national policy making.

Parent advocacy is a form of peer advocacy where parents who themselves have had experience of the child welfare system help other parents involved to navigate it. In addition, they also help to develop strategies to change the system. The aim of this form of advocacy is to empower parents and help them assert their rights and their children's rights.

Parent advocacy covers three areas:

- **Case advocacy:** This promotes parent participation in decisions regarding their own involvement with child welfare systems.
- **Program advocacy:** This includes parents working as trained parent advocates in child welfare agencies (such as prevention, family support, out-of-home placement and legal assistance) to design, plan, evaluate and strengthen the program and to assist parents who are struggling to raise their children safely or to be reunited with them.
- **Policy advocacy:** This involves parents: a) acting politically to change policy, legislation and resources for family support; b) participating in governmental and NGO advisory boards, speaking on panels at conferences, teaching in classes of social work and law, writing about their experience and recommendations; and c) working at the grassroots and community levels to organize and advocate for change.

## MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT PARENT ADVOCACY EFFORTS

#### High-Income Countries:

#### PREVALENCE

##### LESSON LEARNED:

Parent advocacy in child welfare—increasing the influence and the leading role of parents in child welfare decisions—has been growing since its origins 30 years ago. As of 2020, based on the preliminary research for this report, there are at least 100 parent advocacy programs in eight high-income countries with programs that involve trained parents as advocates at the case, program or policy level. These countries are the United States, England, Scotland, Finland, Norway, Canada, Ireland and Australia. It is likely that there are programs in other countries that have not been identified by this preliminary research.

Parent advocacy is growing in several high-income countries. Nevertheless, parents have influence in child welfare in a very small proportion of high-income countries, and within many of those countries, parent advocates are involved in child welfare decision-making in a very limited number of localities, their work and recommendations reaching only a small fraction of the families that are affected by child welfare systems, even in the jurisdictions in which parents play a role in decision-making.

##### RECOMMENDATION:

Significant additional work is needed to prepare parents and their allies to embrace parent advocacy. These activities include changing social workers' and the larger society's attitudes toward child welfare involved parents. Parents are now often seen as pariahs when in fact they are most often people struggling to care for their children without adequate resources or options to do so. Training and supports should be available for parents to become spokespersons and leaders and for parent advocacy organizations to be created. Forums should be opened up or created for parents to speak and be heard. Trained parent advocates should be employed in child welfare and social service agencies to help other parents who are struggling with child welfare involvement. These programs should be evaluated.

## EFFICACY

### LESSON LEARNED:

Parent participation in child welfare decision-making in high-income countries, as documented in the literature review, has improved program performance, reduced the number of children in out-of-home placements, and decreased the length of time children remain in care, improved how parents experience the child welfare system, and has helped ensure that parents' and families' needs are met and their rights are respected. Generally, however, parent advocacy and interdisciplinary legal representation come late in the child protection process, limiting the impact on child removals.

The UN Convention on the Right of the Child and most child welfare systems recognize that the family is the best environment for the child, that children need to grow up in families that should be supported to care for children. Instead, the punitive approach of many child welfare systems and their lack of focus on prevention make it extremely difficult for families who have been in contact with the system to be strengthened by the process rather than weakened by it. These parents, like the children and young people who have gone through the system, are in the best position as a result of their lived experience to identify what helps and what doesn't. It is precisely the expertise of parents and young people from which the system needs to learn and change to deliver better outcomes.

### RECOMMENDATION:

An influential role for parents and other primary caregivers in child welfare decision-making should be promoted and expanded. Additional government, NGO and foundation resources—financial, organizational and individual—should be devoted to expanding the participation of parents in child welfare decision-making to increase the likelihood that families' needs are met, their rights are respected and that state parties fulfil their obligations to assist families. Parent advocacy and interdisciplinary legal representation should be available earlier in the child protection process to reduce unnecessary child removals.

## PREVENTION

### LESSON LEARNED:

Poverty is an endemic and structural problem throughout the world. Primary prevention is a universally needed approach to reduce child removal and to promote child and family well-being. Prevention of violence against children and of placement in alternative care—strengthening community resources and networks, promoting community development, building an infrastructure to protect children and families, and providing additional resources and supports to families—is needed to promote child and family well-being. Promoting prevention activities was a significant focus of the parent advocacy programs reviewed in high, middle and low-income countries.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Programs and infrastructure that support families and prevent the need for alternative care should be expanded. These prevention programs should be based on parental and child understandings of the difficulties they face and should address structural problems such as poverty and access to health and education. These programs could be an effective entry point in which parents could be trained and supported to participate.

## PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

### LESSON LEARNED:

Parent advocacy includes many different activities. The most widespread of these is parent advocates working one-on-one, and in support groups, to engage parents and to support them as they struggle through the child welfare system. This assistance often includes work beyond child welfare, including housing issues, public benefits, and drug rehabilitation. At a policy level, parents in most organizations speak on panels (child welfare, legislative, social work), provide training to child welfare workers and carers and write about their experience and present their recommendations through newsletters and magazines. Less frequently parents meet formally with child welfare policy makers. Although several organizations surveyed cite community level work as important for their effectiveness, bottom up grassroots organizing for direct action is an underutilized strategy.

### RECOMMENDATION:

These parent advocacy activities should be supported and expanded. Bottom up grassroots organizing among parents involved in child welfare and their allies is an important way to create a countervailing force to press child welfare systems to reduce unnecessary child removals, improve programs of alternative care and to better meet the needs of children and families. Grassroots community organizing should be supported and expanded.

## RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF PARENTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF STATE PARTIES

### LESSON LEARNED:

The CRC and other international human rights instruments place a duty on states to support family life and to develop a child welfare system that can ensure the rights of children are upheld. Most saliently, international instruments place an obligation on states to give families economic, social and legal protection and assistance to ensure they are able to play their fundamental role in providing safe, loving, and nurturing care for their children and to prevent unnecessary child-family separation and placement in alternative care. In many countries, the child welfare system does not achieve this aim and separation from parents and families is increasingly used as the first response, particularly for children of excluded minorities and families in poverty. Developing effective parent advocacy alongside other strategies to promote the rights of the child form key elements in ensuring states meet their obligations.

### RECOMMENDATION:

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child should consider and assess the extent to which parent participation and advocacy is a key element of the child welfare system in its reviews of the implementation of the CRC by member states.

## REFORM STRATEGIES

### LESSON LEARNED:

The countries in which parents have achieved deep and long-lasting improvements in child welfare systems have been based on an alliance between parents and their allies, using a multi-pronged, long-term approach, with both a top-down and bottom-up strategy, working within child welfare and pushing from outside of the system. Entire systems need to be restructured to meet the needs of children and families, to reduce unnecessary child removals, and to ensure that their rights are respected. Parent advocates and their allies not only work to reform child welfare systems per se but work within other systems such as bringing a child welfare justice lens to economic and racial justice movements.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Collaboration between parents and their allies should be encouraged to create an effective, broad-based countervailing force for change. Although parents and their allies working independently are also effective change agents, working together or in an alliance, building on and mobilizing their respective strengths, can increase their impact to strengthen families and reduce unnecessary removal of children.

## INDIGENOUS ADVOCACY

### LESSON LEARNED:

The use of child welfare systems to destroy Native American cultures in North America, Aboriginal cultures in Australia, and indigenous cultures throughout the world have had a devastating effect on those communities. These systems of genocide persist in the functioning and impact of child welfare systems in those countries today. There is a heightened need for community control and increased influence and power of parents, family and community members in those systems.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Parents and grandparents from indigenous cultures—including Native American, First Nation, Aboriginal, Maori, Inuit, Ainu, Sami—as well as from other ethnic groups, immigrants and refugees, are organizing for community control within child welfare and other systems. Those communities should be the leadership of their struggles for community control and for parents to have influence and power within child welfare systems. These indigenous leaders should be supported by parents and allies outside their communities in ways that they determine are beneficial and are culturally sensitive.

## GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT

### LESSON LEARNED:

Existing parent advocacy programs are primarily operated by NGOs. With a few important exceptions, governments at the local, state and national levels have been slow to incorporate parents as advocates in child welfare decision-making or to provide funding to NGOs to employ parents in their child welfare programs.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Governments that are supporting parent advocacy or are considering doing so should be encouraged and supported. Governments also need to be pushed, pressured and forced by parents and their allies to listen to, incorporate and fund parent participation and parent advocates in child welfare decision-making. There should be proper investment in well evaluated pilot programs to demonstrate impact as part of ongoing child welfare improvement.

## PARENT LEADERSHIP

### LESSON LEARNED:

The extent to which parents lead parent advocacy organizations in child welfare varies considerably. Among organizations interviewed for the survey in high-income countries, almost half are parent-led. Other organisations, however, have only one or two parents on the board, and some of the larger organizations with a parent advocacy program do not have any parents on their governing board.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Parent-led organizations are optimal for parents to have meaningful influence and power within child welfare systems. It is essential for there to be a critical mass of parents working in organizations and on the governing boards of those organizations. If not, parent participation will be tokenistic. There should be discussion and reconceptualization of what is parent leadership and vigorous efforts to ensure that parents lead.

## TRAINING

### LESSON LEARNED:

Among the parent advocacy organizations interviewed, most provide some training or shadowing for parents to become advocates. In a few programs, this training includes several months of in-class didactic training on relevant topics with internships and experiential learning and support groups. More common however, are brief training sessions on a few issues of advocacy or shadowing people who currently work as advocates.

Most parent advocacy organizations expressed a need and desire for more training and materials to support their parent advocacy work. Other organizations that do not yet have parent advocacy programs expressed a desire to have materials and training that would enable them to set up a parent advocacy program. Organizations expressed a desire for robust training on self-care, coping with emotional toll of care-work, legal procedures, legislative writing and advocacy, designing policy proposals, leadership training, fundraising and training to participate in committees.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Training materials and training programs should be made widely available to help individuals start parent advocacy programs, to train parents to be advocates, to support parent advocates in their work, and to train parent allies to support the work of parents with child welfare experience.

## FUNDING

### LESSON LEARNED:

The survey found that about half of the groups interviewed had very small budgets. As a result, the staff, both parents and allies, in these programs work as volunteers. In some of these programs, parents receive a small stipend or reimbursement for expenses. Allies who work as volunteers in parent advocacy programs often are employed in the social welfare agency that supports the parent advocacy work.

Seeking and using external funding is a complex decision that may require adjustments (e.g. an administrative infrastructure, a reporting system, possibly modifying the focus of an organization's activities). An organisation needs to weigh the benefits of independence from the constraints that external funding may require versus the expanded impact that funding may provide.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Small, independent, catalytic funding is necessary to expand an organization's impact and to pay a living wage to parent advocates and other staff. Donors should be encouraged to provide grants of unrestricted funding to support the growth of parent advocacy programs and organisations, and enable testing and learning about innovative interventions and organisational models. Governments should provide contracts to parent advocacy organizations to deploy parent advocates to assist families at various points of the child protection process.

Materials and guidance on fundraising should be developed to empower parent advocacy groups to effectively seek funding where they deem it necessary.

## EVALUATION

### LESSON LEARNED:

There is a growing research base on the impact of parent advocacy in a number of areas as identified in the literature review. Although some parent advocacy programs have been assessed and/or evaluated, many have not. Among the groups interviewed in this sample, only three have been evaluated.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Additional research is needed to expand the understanding of and increase the efficacy of parent advocacy. Areas that would benefit from additional research are: parent advocacy with different populations and in different settings; the utility of various types of training; the extent and areas of parent leadership; parent advocacy by informal groups and in grassroots activism; and the impact of parent advocacy on family well-being and child removal.

## CHILD WELFARE IN LOW AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES

### LESSON LEARNED:

Wide variations in child welfare systems in low and middle-income countries and limited documentation make it difficult to generalize about the strategies and approaches that would be most effective or about the form that parent advocacy should take. Strategies will have to be carefully crafted at a local level. In some states, child welfare systems have some similarities to systems in high-income countries, particularly where states have developed systems that use the Anglo-American model. Many of the lessons from high-income countries are more easily applicable despite differences including: a limited number of child protection investigations; reliance on residential institutions rather than foster care. a recent development in these countries; significant proportion of out-of-home placements of children into other systems such as health and education.

### RECOMMENDATION:

The child welfare systems and the role of parents in low and middle-income countries need further review to understand the context in which parent participation would occur. Issues to be reviewed include: the various systems involved in family support and out-of-home care for children; the legal frameworks; social work and community attitudes toward parents who are involved in child welfare systems; socioeconomic characteristics of parents whose children enter out-of-home care; reasons for placement; resources available to support families; entry points for parent participation; and other social movements that might support or promote increased parent participation in child welfare. Parent participation and advocacy should be specifically developed in each country. Where countries are receiving support to reform their child welfare systems, parent participation and advocacy should be introduced as early as possible to inform the reform agenda with parent participation built into all aspects of the reform process. An assessment process would be created to identify countries in which to pilot test or expand child welfare parent advocacy. Criteria for selection include local conditions, parent and allied leadership, resource availability and entry points conducive to parent participation and advocacy. These initiatives should be evaluated to assess their impact on children and families.



## International Review of Parent Advocacy in Child Welfare

### Low and Middle-Income Countries:

Although the paper focuses on parent advocacy in child welfare in high-income countries, it provides a preliminary scoping of areas in low and middle-income countries in which parents participate as advocates, not only in the child welfare and protection systems per se, but in

some of the other systems that overlap or intersect with child welfare. The recommendations above will need to be adapted for the particular circumstances of low and middle-income countries. The following lessons learned and recommendations address this issue.

## PARENT ADVOCACY IN CHILD WELFARE AND CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS

### LESSON LEARNED:

Parent participation in child welfare decisions at the case level is very limited for parents who are at risk of having or have had a child removed from their care. Parent advocates working in child welfare/child protection programs or participating in child welfare policy decisions is almost non-existent.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Parent advocacy has been a useful approach to reduce child removal and to decrease the length of time children remain in out-of-home care in high-income countries. It may be similarly beneficial in low and middle-income countries. Additional research, including pilot projects, are needed to determine if, and under what circumstances, parent advocacy can contribute to improved child well-being, reduced child removal and to protect the rights of parents, children and families in low and middle-income countries.

It is also important to determine which aspects of parent advocacy are most resonant in a particular low and middle-income country. These aspects may include parents helping other parents, writing about their lives and presenting policy recommendations, participating in public forums, creating community-based and community-controlled service programs and working on a grassroots advocacy campaign. Finally, for parent advocacy to be introduced in a particular country, training materials and resources would be needed to prepare parents to be effective advocates and leaders. These materials will need to be customized for the specific country context.

## PARENT PARTICIPATION IN AREAS RELATED TO CHILD PROTECTION

### LESSON LEARNED:

Although parent participation and advocacy in low and middle-income countries rarely occurs in relation to the child welfare/child protection ministry per se, parent advocacy is taking place in areas related to or intersecting with child welfare including disabilities, education, health, and gender-based violence.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

In strategies to introduce parent advocacy in child welfare, NGOs in which parents participate as trained advocates in areas outside of the child welfare system, are possible entry points to increase parent participation in child welfare. NGOs working in areas mentioned above might be encouraged to expand their focus to support a broader range of parent advocacy. High income countries should also learn from the experiences of the community committee approaches in low and middle-income countries.