


# Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going? A Conceptual Framework for Child Advocacy

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## Abstract

The primary goal of this article is to chart the development of child advocacy as an interdisciplinary field of study and conclude with a conceptual framework for research and higher education in child advocacy. Historically, child advocacy has justifiably focused on protection needs. Values and assumptions about children's best interest have also governed child advocacy, in part because evidence to inform decisions was lacking and in part because of its history as an activist movement. Against this historical backdrop, we describe contemporary trends in child advocacy that reconcile children's protection with their inherent rights to personhood. We rely on the principles and articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, most notably children's rights to participation and self-expression. At the same time, we demonstrate how values and ideology are being integrated with empiricism and objective analysis to inform policy and practice in child advocacy. The future of child advocacy depends on continued synthesis of rights and protection as well as values and rigorous analysis. From this perspective, we offer a conceptual framework for research and education in child advocacy.

## Keywords

children's rights, child protection, ideology, empirical analysis, child advocates

In the past few decades, child advocacy has emerged as a unique field of study. Although child advocacy aims to promote children's well-being in various life domains, in practice, it is often more narrowly conceived as protecting children from harm (e.g., Melton, 2011; Myers, 2008; Winter, 2011). To illustrate this point, ask a textbook publisher for a child advocacy text and the typical recommendation will be for books on child maltreatment. Academic library searches on child advocacy similarly will yield papers on various forms of maltreatment emphasizing one or more disciplinary perspectives (e.g., social work, psychology, law, public policy). Protecting children from harm is an important moral and ethical duty; however, protection should also be considered in the context of children's inherent rights to personhood. Although others have written about the importance of children's rights and participation (e.g., Knitzer, 2005; Stroul, Blau, & Friedman, 2010; Walker, Brooks, & Wrightsman, 1999), rights are often viewed as conflicting with children's need for protection, and an integrated view of rights and protection continues to evolve (Melton, 2005). Values, ideology, and assumptions about children's best interest have also significantly influenced child advocacy; however, values alone do not optimally inform effective child advocacy. This article has three

primary objectives: (a) to chart the development of child advocacy as a field of study to understand its focus on protection needs; (b) to identify tensions in child advocacy regarding children's protection, rights, and values, and describe strategies for reconciliation; and (c) to offer a conceptual framework of child advocacy to inform research and education in child advocacy. This framework has the potential to advance research in child advocacy and inform training of child advocates. The goal of the framework is to further children's protection and their rights to self-expression and inclusion in decision making, while balancing passion against empirical evidence to effect change at the individual, systems, and societal levels.

In the first part of this article, we provide a brief historical overview of child saving laws in the United States to illustrate how these laws created demand for training programs to educate child welfare professionals and spurred scholarship to understand child maltreatment. In the second part of this

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article, we show that integrating children's protection and rights expands the range of topics relevant to child advocacy (e.g., juvenile justice) beyond maltreatment while blurring the optimal balance of children's protection and rights. Our review of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) presents a set of principles that help balance rights and protection by recognizing children as individuals with inherent rights to self-expression, participation, and dignity (Melton, 2005, 2010; Winter, 2011). We also describe how values and assumptions about children's best interest have governed child advocacy, in part because evidence to inform decisions was lacking and in part because of its history as an activist movement where passion drives action. We demonstrate how consideration of values in conjunction with reliable and valid information has been gradually emerging and is important for the continued development of child advocacy. In the final part of the article, we offer a conceptual framework for the future of child advocacy.

## History of Child Advocacy

### *Child Saving Laws*

Child advocacy is generally considered to have originated with the emergence of childhood as a distinct, socially constructed phase of life during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods (Alaimo, 2002). During these same periods, philosophical influences of paternalism and autonomy exerted significant influence on views about government's role in society (Tomison, 2001; Yarrow, 2009). Paternalism generally refers to the state having a duty to protect and decide what is best for individuals in society, with little regard for that individual's own preferences or autonomy (Feinberg, 1971). This concept is readily applied to children, who have typically been viewed as vulnerable, defenseless, and lacking capacity for autonomy. In policy, paternalism is translated to social (e.g., family) and public (e.g., child welfare) institutions protecting children from harm (Myers, 2008). Across the 20th century, public policy discourse and allocation of public resources largely focused on child protection, as reflected in a paternalistic ideology (Alaimo, 2002; Takanishi, 1978). Perhaps the most sweeping influences of the child saving era in the United States were intervening in cases of abuse and neglect and the founding of the Juvenile Justice System to protect and rehabilitate delinquent children (Myers, 2008).

The well-known case of Mary Ellen Wilson (Shelman & Lazoritz, 1999) is credited with starting the U.S. child protection movement in the late 1800s, and inspired the founding of the first child protection agency to combat all forms of cruelty and demoralization against minors (Shelman & Lazoritz, 2005). One hundred years later, the U.S. federal government established Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (CAPTA), setting minimum standards

to prevent and treat child maltreatment and enabling states to intervene in cases of abuse and neglect. Agencies soon became overwhelmed by the tremendous demand for child abuse investigations and services (e.g., Besharov, 1986; Newberger, 1983; Rosenfeld & Newberger, 1977), and case-worker preparation was insufficient to manage the complex needs of children and families in need of intervention (Faller, 1985; Lieberman, Hornby, & Russell, 1988; Mushlin, 1988; Olsen & Holmes, 1982). Several highly publicized failures to protect children in state custody resulted in child advocacy groups initiating class-action lawsuits against child welfare agencies. Between 1995 and 2005, 32 states brought class-action lawsuits against such agencies (Kosanovich, Joseph, & Hasbargen, 2005), which resulted in settlement agreements with provisions to improve professional development (e.g., Ahluwalia, 2012; *J.K. v. Eden*, 1991; *Angela R. v. Huckabee*, 1993; Kosanovich et al., 2005; National Center for Youth Law [NCYL], 2007; *Eric L. v. Bird*, 2003; *Charlie and Nadine H. v. Christie*, 2003; *Marisol v. Giuliani*, 2001; *Braam v. State of Washington*, 2003). Additional federal statutes also included directives to improve training for child welfare professionals (e.g., Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006; Deficit Reduction Act of 2005; Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003, a CAPTA amendment).

### *University-Based Education on Child Maltreatment*

Legal mandates through federal law, class-action lawsuits, and settlement agreements spurred the creation of academic programs in higher education to train child welfare professionals. For instance, starting in 1999, Montclair State University in New Jersey trained child welfare workers in the new or revised case practice model before they assumed supervisory or fieldwork duties (Kosanovich et al., 2005). A similar program started at Winona State University in Minnesota, which emphasized multidisciplinary collaboration within and across delivery systems responsible for protecting and serving maltreated children. Since the late 1990s, the number of U.S. university-based programs in child advocacy exploded nationwide, with more than 40 programs spanning 27 states. These programs justifiably focused on child maltreatment and reflected the public policy focus on protection. Simultaneously, scholarship on child maltreatment increased substantially and focused on identifying cases of abuse and neglect, as well as improving the understanding of its prevalence, etiology, and prevention (e.g., Mitchell, 1975). These efforts led to the recognition of child advocacy as a distinct field of study within the academy, focusing predominantly on child maltreatment. Examination of Google Scholar citations shows an 11-fold increase in citations on child welfare, child maltreatment, and child abuse/neglect from 12,900 in 1970 to 145,570 in 2010.

## Balancing Children's Rights and Protection

### Children's Rights

Since the 1960s, there have been extensive writings on promoting children's rights to support their development, well-being, and ability to reach their full potential (e.g., Adams, 2008; Bruyere, 2010; Knitzer, 2005; Walker et al., 1999). It is a universal value of human dignity that individuals possess inalienable rights. However, a fundamental challenge in child advocacy is determining the best extension of rights to children in the context of their need for protection, in part because children do not have basic rights and in part because they lack competence to make decisions about their best interests. Thus, there is substantial controversy regarding the appropriate level of protection for children, how far the state can or should go in granting rights to children, and who is in the optimal position to make decisions regarding children's best interests when parents or guardians are unable or incapable of such decision making (e.g., Adams, 2008; Helwig & Turiel, 2002; Walker et al., 1999).

### Protection and Rights: A False Dichotomy

Melton (2005, 2011) characterizes child advocacy by two polarized ideological views: "child savers" and "kiddie libbers," the former rooted in protection and the latter in children's rights. This dichotomous view, where children are viewed as either vulnerable dependents needing protection or self-determined individuals capable of adult decision making, does not advance our understanding of children or their advocacy (Melton, 2011; Walker et al., 1999). While not explicitly tied to this apparent conflict, child advocates have already begun to expose the limits of this dichotomy, by pushing policy and practice to consider more fully the wishes, concerns, and needs expressed by children and as appropriate to their developmental capacity (Hart, 2002; Melton, 2005; Smith, 2002; Walker et al., 1999). However, as children are increasingly viewed as endowed with certain rights, there has been lack of clarity about how to simultaneously value children's rights, protect them from harm, and encourage fulfillment of their maximum potential. This confusion becomes more obvious and problematic as child advocacy extends beyond the scope of child maltreatment.

An example related to children and their legal rights to due process illustrates some challenges associated with balancing children's rights and protection. The juvenile justice system was originally conceived to protect children from an adult criminal justice system and to balance "rehabilitation and treatment with appropriate sanctions" (Bilchik, 1999). However, the landmark U.S. case of *In re Gault* (1967) demonstrated that the juvenile justice system did not provide adequate protection. Specifically, the absence of due process rights contributed to abuses by the justice system that resulted

in Gerald Gault's inappropriate loss of liberty. Thus, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *In re Gault* granted children some due process rights, such as the right to timely notification of the charges, the right to confront witnesses, the right against self-incrimination, and the right to counsel to make judicial proceedings more fair and transparent and to protect children from unconstitutional loss of liberty. However, while these changes simultaneously increased children's legal rights and their protection from abuse in the juvenile justice system, they also paved the way for children to be waived into adult courts, thereby inadvertently reducing children's protection from the adult criminal justice system. Moreover, children were granted some due process rights, before knowing whether juvenile offenders were capable of competent participation, which these rights presume and require (Grisso et al., 2003). In this example, granting children rights not only increased protection against abuses in the juvenile justice system but also decreased protection from the adult criminal justice system. Thus, neither rights nor protection were adequately balanced to promote children's welfare and best interest.

### Reconciliation of This Dichotomy: UNCRC

The UNCRC attempts to reconcile the dichotomy between children's protection and rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). The UNCRC treaty is the culmination of a series of children's rights declarations, which began with the Geneva Declaration of the Rights in 1924, and marked a dramatic step forward for child advocacy. The UNCRC is the first legally binding international treaty to offer a comprehensive view on children's rights that includes protection concerns, and also emphasizes universal principles for inherent rights, well-being, and self-determination (Todres, Wojcik, & Revaz, 2006). The power of the UNCRC is reflected in the participation and agreement of the global community, irrespective of economic, political, geographical, social, or cultural differences (Todres et al., 2006). The UNCRC also offers an unparalleled path through the complexity and challenge of finding an appropriate balance of children's rights and need for protection, bridging this disparity by emphasizing children's inherent worth and dignity (Melton, 2005, 2011).

The balancing of rights and protection is inherent in the structure of the UNCRC. The convention consists of a preamble and 54 articles. The preamble and first 5 articles articulate the underlying philosophy on children's rights. These include emphasizing the right of all children to be free from discrimination (Article 2), the importance of using the "best interests of the child" standard in all decision making (Article 3), and the critical necessity of the State's recognition that parents have the right and responsibility to provide guidance to their children (Article 5). The next 36 articles and three optional protocols lay out more specific rights, and the final 13 articles and third optional protocol describe the enforcement and ratification mechanisms.

The UNCRC treaty recognizes that children's healthy development cannot proceed when they are subjected to extreme poverty and frequent violence; therefore, an emphasis on protection is a moral and ethical duty. However, the UNCRC also provides language for 35 individual rights to which children should be entitled, as appropriate to parental values and children's developmental capacity. These individual rights underscore the inherent value of children and can be effectuated irrespective of protection needs, such as rights to freedoms of expression (Article 13), thought, conscience, and religion (Article 14), to assembly (Article 15), privacy (Article 16), and rights and information (Article 17). One article, in particular, makes explicit a child's right to express his or her own views (Article 12):

The child who is capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

In April 2014, a third optional protocol was added, allowing children to bring complaints directly to the Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, n.d.), further encouraging their direct participation in matters that affect them. Article 12 and the third optional protocol sit at the core of child advocacy, where children are endowed with certain intrinsic rights, perhaps most importantly, the right to self-expression, that do not stand in opposition to children's need for protection or parents' obligation to provide guidance.

### *Values in Child Advocacy*

While the UNCRC offers a useful guiding framework for integrating and balancing children's rights and protection, it does not address the challenges associated with child advocacy's roots in activism and passion. Historically, action in child advocacy has been fueled by passion and derived from strong values, beliefs, and ideologies about children's best interests (e.g., Grisso & Steinberg, 2005; Melton, 2005). Child advocates have used passion to elevate the status of children and to promote laws against various forms of mistreatment. However, ideology alone is insufficient to guide effective policy and practice; ideology must be informed by reliable and accurate information.

*Values and empirical evidence contradict each other.* Values and ideologies may influence policy that contradicts empirical evidence. For instance, U.S. values of public safety and individual responsibility are exemplified in policy shifts to classify severe acts of juvenile delinquency as adult crime and try qualified minors as adults in the criminal justice system (Addie, Adams, & Firestone, 2011). Each State stipulates a set of criteria, based on age, severity of the crime, or other relevant factors, to determine whether a minor is appropriate for trial in adult court (Addie et al., 2011). However, this

values-based approach overlooks an extensive body of literature, demonstrating that sending youth to the adult criminal justice system increases the likelihood that they will reoffend (Ryan, 2014), and neither benefits the child nor the society (Lambie & Randell, 2013). Policies that are based on values alone, without due regard for empirical data, may not only be ineffective, but they may also be harmful to children.

*Empirical evidence can inform values-based decisions.* Incorporating empirical evidence into child advocacy can also help reconcile opposing ideologies and promote the creation of effective policies. For instance, ardent supporters of corporal punishment claim religious values ("spare the rod, spoil the child"), cultural mores, and rights to privacy to justify disciplinary practices, whereas opponents argue that any form of corporal punishment is abusive and wrong. Each of these views is rooted in fundamental beliefs about the ethics and morality of corporal punishment, making it difficult to determine which framework should guide public policy efforts. However, empirical data help inform debate between opposing ideologies. Specifically, in a review of 88 studies, Gershoff (2002) found that children subjected to corporal punishment were more likely to comply with parental demands but also showed increased aggression, more mental health problems, and decreased quality of parent-child relationships. Extensive research in the United States and abroad also supports these trends, demonstrating the far-ranging negative effects of corporal punishment, including impaired cognitive development, delinquency, and aggression (Straus, Douglas, & Medeiros, 2014).

### *Integrating Values With Objective Analysis*

Values are inherent in child advocacy. Some might argue that advocacy, by definition, is not impartial or unbiased, particularly when contrasted against a dispassionate scientific attitude (Grisso & Steinberg, 2005). However, for child advocacy to be maximally effective, it must rely on rigorous analysis and empirical research, so that policy and practice decisions are not based on myths, misunderstandings, political posturing, or idiosyncratic values. On the whole, the field of child advocacy must move away from a notion shared by many human service professionals that "good intentions lead to better outcomes" (Axford & Morpeth, 2013). Indeed, "we need to be more skeptical about our ability to make things better, to have . . . more realistic expectations of impact, and, crucially, to stop harmful interventions" (p. 275). Across a number of child-serving fields, there have been calls for evidence-based practices, specifying service outcome and increasing accountability (e.g., Bickman & Hoagwood, 2010; McKay et al., 2004; Stroul et al., 2010). Advocates' decisions, while guided by fundamental values about children's protection and rights, would benefit from including careful analysis of research evidence from a variety of sources generated by relevant disciplines. Certainly, rigorous



**Table 1.** Conceptual Framework for Child Advocacy.

## Definition:

*Child advocacy:*

Any action intended to empower or elevate the status of children by promoting their self-expression and participation, while recognizing that the improved status of children depends on the welfare of the families and communities in which they are embedded.

## Assumptions:

1. Disciplinary perspective: Attending to the needs of children requires an interdisciplinary perspective.
2. Protection and autonomy: Children's need for protection from maltreatment, neglect, abuse, and exploitation should be balanced against their intrinsic rights to personhood so they can participate in decisions affecting them.
3. Values and objective analysis: Values influence child advocacy, as passion and ideology often drive action. However, values alone cannot guide policy and practice decisions. Values should be balanced with rigorous analysis of empirical evidence and other sources of reliable information.

## Action steps:

1. Synthesize knowledge: Knowledge from relevant disciplines on children's capacity for decision making should be integrated to guide policy and practice for when and how to include children in decision making (Assumption 1).
2. Encourage children's right to participation and self-expression: Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recommends endowing children with certain intrinsic rights, perhaps most importantly, the right to self-expression and their direct participation in matters that affect them (Assumption 2).
3. Identify and define core constructs: Important concepts, such as empowerment, dignity, inclusion, and participation, must be methodically articulated in measurable terms (Assumptions 2 and 3).
4. Evaluate participation and inclusion: Develop best practices for involving and encouraging children's participation and evaluate the circumstances under which children feel included (Assumptions 2 and 3).
5. Connect advocacy goals to participation and inclusion: Conduct research to evaluate the link between subjective and objective indicators of children's inclusion and participation to measurable achievement of specific advocacy goals (Assumption 3).
6. Educate child advocates: Concepts, methodologies, and scholarship from numerous disciplines, including child development, social work, psychology, public policy, and law, are applied to achieve an interdisciplinary understanding of children in the context of multiple child-serving systems and environmental settings (e.g., society, community, family; Assumptions 1-3).

and objective analysis will not entirely prevent well-intentioned decisions based on dogma, but it will minimize them. Thus, we suggest that child advocates strive to ensure that value-driven policies are grounded in the best available information.

Child advocacy has been slowly shifting toward the integration of children's rights and protection along with a balance of values and empiricism. The evolution of forensic interviewing offers an instructive illustration on this point. Until the mid-1990s, the reliability of children's self-disclosures was predicated on untested adult beliefs about their capacity. For much of the 20th century, the prevailing view was that children could not be trusted to tell the truth or did not possess sufficient capacity to recount personal experiences (Davis, 1998). As a result, children's reports of sexual abuse, in particular, were discounted or ignored (Motzkau, 2007). In the 1980s, child advocates in the United States, who were dedicated to the protection of children, shifted public opinion about children's capacity to describe personal experiences. Consistent with an emphasis on children's rights, alleged abuse victims were given the right to self-expression and were listened to by concerned adults. However, values and untested beliefs about children's innocence led to problematic forensic interviewing practices. Child advocates, with the best intentions, commonly relied on highly suggestive and leading interview methods to elicit

a disclosure, even if the child repeatedly denied abuse (Horner, Guyer, & Kalter, 1993). These methods resulted in numerous false accounts of abuse leading to the convictions of innocent adults (Bruck & Ceci, 1995; *New Jersey v. Michaels*, 1994). Over time, the actions of well-intentioned child advocates were tempered by increasing evidence about children's capacity and susceptibility to suggestive influences. Research on forensic interviewing continues to advance and provide a balanced integration of children's need for protection with their rights to self-expression using empirically supported principles of child development and age-appropriate investigative interview strategies (e.g., Anderson, 2013; Anderson et al., 2010). However, child advocacy has not uniformly embraced this increased emphasis on empiricism. In our view, integration of values with objective information exemplifies the optimal strategy for effective practice and policy in child advocacy.

## A Conceptual Framework for Child Advocacy

In this section, we offer future directions for the continued development of child advocacy. A conceptual framework for child advocacy is shown in Table 1. According to this framework, child advocacy is defined as any action intended to empower or elevate the status of a child to promote his or her

well-being and best interest. In the conceptual framework, three important assumptions are postulated that guide child advocacy. First, effective child advocacy maintains an interdisciplinary approach. Second, children's needs for protection are balanced against their rights to personhood. And third, values, ideologies, and passion are judged against empirical evidence and rigorous analysis to effect change at the individual, systems, and societal levels. Action steps for research and education follow from this definition and set of assumptions. The first action step is to synthesize and integrate knowledge from relevant academic disciplines to guide child advocacy policy and practice as well as for when and how to include children in decision making. The second action step encourages children's right to participation and self-expression. Accordingly, child advocacy advances a focus on children unto themselves and, guided by the principles and articles of the UNCRC, emphasizes children's rights to acknowledgment, self-expression, and inclusion in decision making in a variety of life domains. Children are viewed as "active agents in their own lives, entitled to be listened to, respected, and granted increasing autonomy . . . while also being entitled to protection in accordance with their relative immaturity and youth" (Lansdown, 2005, p. ix). Maximally effective child advocacy maintains an unwavering focus on the child, while also recognizing that the welfare of the child depends on the overall well-being of his or her family and community. Action Steps 3 to 6 specifically outline strategies for research and education.

### *An Interdisciplinary Research Agenda*

Child advocacy is a complex and multifaceted endeavor, cutting across multiple systems, which are embedded in complicated social and family structures (see Stroul & Friedman, 1986, for seminal work on children's systems of care). One of the great challenges of child advocacy is to clearly define its scope without duplicating efforts in other fields, such as social work, psychology, family and child studies, and child development. As outlined in Action Steps 3 to 6 in Table 1, we believe that this clarity can emerge from an interdisciplinary research agenda in child advocacy that (a) identifies and defines core concepts in child advocacy (Action Step 3); (b) emphasizes the key role of children in the design, execution, and interpretation of research (Action Step 4); (c) contributes to the understanding of when and how to involve children in decisions that affect them (Action Steps 1 and 4); and (d) evaluates the child advocate's efforts in explaining concepts using language children can understand, helping children express their views, and identifying whether these actions influence improved practice, policy and, ultimately, children's well-being (Action Steps 4 and 5).

Advancing knowledge in child advocacy will also require that prominent constructs continue to be carefully defined, operationalized, and measured as recommended in Action Step 3. Some key concepts, such as promoting children's

rights to self-expression and participation, enhancing their quality of life, and advocating for inclusion and opportunity with fairness, respect, and dignity, may not be easily quantifiable. Indeed, rigorously operationalizing these terms may prove to be very difficult, and quantitative methodological frameworks may obscure important subtleties associated with these concepts. However, the challenging work of measurement must begin to capture the meaning of children's inclusion, participation, empowerment, voice, dignity, respect, and well-being. Some of these concepts have been defined in social psychology (e.g., procedural justice theory; Lind & Tyler, 1988) and may offer a useful starting point for research in child advocacy. By carefully defining core concepts in child advocacy, strategies for engaging children can then be systematically developed, implemented, and evaluated.

A key feature of research in child advocacy is for children to occupy a role in the design and execution of investigations as appropriate to their evolving capacity, as indicated by Action Step 4 (Bruyere, 2010; Melton, 2005). Child advocates are in an optimal position to represent the views and voices of children in research by ensuring that children are involved in the creation of new knowledge and that the methods of inclusion are developmentally sensitive. To achieve this goal, we need to improve the understanding of children's skills and capacity for participation in the development, planning, implementation, and interpretation of research. Participatory action research and community-based participatory action research are not new concepts (e.g., McIntyre, 2008), and their application to children is gradually emerging, with increased calls for new approaches and strategies that promote collaboration with children (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). There is also a need for a deeper understanding of children's capacity for assent when they serve as participants in research.

Consistent with Action Steps 1 and 4, research must also synthesize knowledge developed in other fields to identify children's capacity for meaningful involvement in decision making in various life domains. Extensive research exists on children's competence in certain areas, such as informed consent for medical decisions (Alderson, Sutcliffe, & Curtis, 2006; Weithorn & Campbell, 1982) and competence to participate in legal proceedings (e.g., Grisso et al., 2003). However, less is known about children's capacity for decision making in other important domains, such as education, out-of-home placements, foster care, adoption, and custody arrangements. Greater understanding is needed of the strategies for involving children in decision making and for which types of decisions their involvement is most appropriate.

Finally, as an interdisciplinary focus contributes to new strategies for child advocacy, defining and evaluating the efficacy of the child advocate deserve greater attention as well, as suggested in Action Step 5. This includes developing best practices for involving children in decision-making processes, encouraging their participation, understanding how and when children feel included in the advocacy process, and

how this inclusion relates to outcomes. Interdisciplinary research also includes evaluating the efficacy of the child advocate in effecting change on behalf of the child at the individual and societal levels. Finally, recent advances in research have increased our ability to advocate on behalf of children, including recognizing children who are at risk for harm, assessing their unique needs, and measuring the impact of various interventions on their well-being and functioning (Barth et al., 2012). Child advocates utilize such advances to improve the lives of children.

### *Interdisciplinary Education in Child Advocacy*

As scholarship in child advocacy advances, the resulting efforts must be incorporated into curriculum as proposed in Action Step 6. Existing programs in child advocacy have long recognized that no single discipline is equipped to offer a coherent understanding of the complex problems in our society (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014; Sa, 2008). Education in child advocacy requires a blending of multiple disciplines, as children's development is shaped by disparate factors, and relies on knowledge produced by numerous fields, including sociology, child development, social work, psychology, public policy, and law. A more holistic, integrated, and comprehensive perspective on the protection and rights of children emerges when concepts, methodologies, and scholarship from each of these disciplines are applied. As Knitzer (2005) points out, promoting children's well-being requires understanding of issues through multiple lenses and developing a shared formulation that crosses disciplinary, systems, and agencies' boundaries. Thus, the field of child advocacy demands an interdisciplinary synthesis.

Future child advocates must learn a wide variety of concepts to be effective. This includes the sociology of the family; the ecological, educational, and psychological aspects of children's development; the philosophical and historical meaning of childhood; the legal, political, and ethical considerations of children's rights; and the public service systems that intersect with children's lives. This type of foundation results in a richer understanding of how to advocate for children of different cultures, economic backgrounds, developmental stages, and learning, behavioral, and emotional capacities. Curriculum in child advocacy encourages rigorous empirical analysis and application of evidence-based practices, while recognizing how values and ideologies might interfere with such dispassionate endeavors. At times, action may be needed before evidence shows the best path. Child advocates are mindful of their call to protect and promote children with beneficence and continually weigh values against data, and of the balance of protection and individual rights as appropriate to the child's developmental abilities.

A review of child advocacy curricula in universities across the United States indicates that although most programs maintain an interdisciplinary focus, the emphasis is still largely on child protection. Specifically, an inspection

of course offerings at 40 U.S. child advocacy programs shows that only about 25% offer a diverse array of programming in child advocacy and policy. In these exceptions, students study a wide range of issues important to children. For instance, the child advocacy minor at Hobart Williams and Smith addresses physical and emotional health, material support, social relationships, and educational needs. It explores three components of child advocacy: (a) child development, (b) the family and other social contexts affecting children, and (c) social, educational, and legal strategies for advocacy on children's behalf. At Montclair State University, undergraduate and graduate degrees in child advocacy and policy emphasize not only children's protection but also children's legal rights in a variety of systems, policy analysis, and rigorous evaluation of current child welfare practices. Unfortunately, these examples are currently the exception. The majority of other programs focus more narrowly on child maltreatment, with little or no course offerings in other areas. In our view, expanding the scope of existing programs is important for the continued development of child advocacy.

### **Conclusion**

Child advocacy emerged as an organized social and political movement to help the State make decisions about children's welfare more than one century ago (e.g., Myers, 2008). In the past few decades, the character and complexity of child advocacy has transformed from a grass roots movement and garners increasing recognition as a unique field of study. We have argued that the goal of child advocacy is to support children's dignity in service delivery, public systems (e.g., education, mental health, juvenile justice), policy, and law. Child advocacy, in our view, incorporates both protection and rights, as complementary constructs essential to healthy child development. As noted by Lansdown (2005, 2010), children should not have responsibility beyond their capacity, but they are entitled to take responsibility and participate in decisions and activities over which they do have competence. In our view, translating this argument into practice is not be based solely on values, beliefs, and societal standards at a specific time and location—rather, it incorporates research evidence and universal acceptance of scientific inquiry as an underlying mechanism that drives decision making about policies and services for children.

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