

Preface

Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does.

William James

This book is intended to help people become passionate about initiating or renewing their advocacy skills for children and families in the United States. We as a society have too many children who live in families that are chronically or temporarily living below poverty level; we have too many children who are abused and neglected; we have too many children who are not receiving the education they need to reach their potential; in general, we have too many children being ignored in our country (Children’s Defense Fund, 2012). As a student or professional in the human sciences and services, and a concerned citizen and fellow human, I believe you as a reader of this book feel a responsibility to do something, yet where do you start?

First and foremost, you must believe that you can improve the lives of children and families by creating a world where children are safe, that they can grow up healthy, and that they can be productive citizens as they age to adulthood. Yes, you want their parents to do the majority of the work of giving their children safe, healthy, and productive lives. Nonetheless, many parents confront obstacles that prevent them from providing resources necessary for their children’s healthy development (Lieberman & Van Horn, 2009).

When situations are not conducive for parents to give their children safe, healthy, and productive lives, neighborhoods, communities, state government, federal government, and others step in to make sure that the constitutional rights of every child are secure. However, the systems and programs, which we as a society put in place, may not be working out as well as we had hoped. Funding, lack of training, lack of research, lack of public understanding and education all play a role in our systems weakening. When this happens, we must expand the arena of “helpers” and we find ourselves reaching out to citizens, especially those citizens being trained as professionals working with children, to step up and advocate for the decency of lives—the unalienable right of children to have safe, healthy, and productive lives in the United

States (and elsewhere in the world). The authors of the chapters of this book discuss the need to raise the standards for the quality of life for children in the United States.

Advocacy as an Ethical Responsibility

Many of us belong to professional organizations that have a code of ethical conduct. It is the moral compass for our professions. Within the ethical code document, there is usually a section which articulates standards and core values that reflect the highest of ethics. In almost all professions that work with children and families, there is a respect for the dignity and worth of each child and family member. We would all agree that we should not harm children. We shall not discriminate against children for being homeless, poor, or the many indicators of risk in which they themselves did not put themselves. We recognize that children, especially the very young, are at critical junctures in their lives in which certain interventions would be highly effective, and we recognize that not all children have the chance to function at their best.

We perform practices and teachings that promote healthy children and families, both in physical health and in mental health. These values provide a conceptual framework by which professionals define their work as clinicians, educators, and practitioners.

In the past few years it has become common for graduate curriculums to require a content knowledge base in public policy and advocacy (Kaslow et al., 2009). In fact, for professional psychology, the public policy curriculum is found within the construct of ethical and legal standards. The expected competencies in public policy and advocacy skills span across topics of assessment, diagnosis, intervention, research, supervision, and management. It permeates all curriculum constructs within doctoral work of clinical psychologists (Roldolfa et al., 2005). Each profession should identify the knowledge, the skill set, and the values that develop advocacy and public policy. However, there have been few resources to guide these efforts toward professional child and family advocacy. This book provides a research-based approach to address this need in many disciplinary fields.

Description of the Book

The book provides a functional model for integrating research and advocacy for children, youth, families, and communities to a large number of professions and practices. The work is a product of the ongoing professional agenda of the Society for Child and Family Policy and Practice, Division 37, of the American Psychological Association. The primary mission of the Society's work is to carry out research with children and families, advance education and training based on the research findings, and advocate for positive change in social and public policy. Based on this

perspective, it is assumed that changes in social and public policy should be firmly grounded in scholarly research and that research development and funding should be influenced by social and public policy.

Many professionals lack training and experience in translating research into policy and utilizing research in advocacy efforts directed toward children, families, and communities. This volume provides a knowledge base for effective social and public policy as well as specific training for effective professional advocacy. One of the unique contributions of the book is that it serves as a model for psychological professional advocacy work in addition to specific guidelines applied to critical topics related to the well-being of children and families.

The book describes a range of advocacy skills: from grassroots efforts to testifying before legislative bodies, from efforts in neighborhoods and communities to efforts in state capitols and national efforts in Washington, DC. The authors translate research into action steps for changes in child and family policy. The authors describe how they use research to inform advocacy efforts at the community, state, and federal levels.

Definition of Child Advocacy

Advocacy involvement spans differing levels from service activities in school and communities, to grass root groups organizing for community social justice and change, to political lobbying, and to testifying before legislative bodies on behalf of quality of life issues for children's growth and development. This book spans each, but primarily focuses on how to make legislative policy changes on behalf of children and families. The advocacy work in the legislative arena is focused on public programs and social services, based on solid child development research, that assure safe and healthy (physical and mental) development for children and their families.

Organization of the Book

The organization of the book is based on a developmental ecological approach with four parts. The first part of the book provides two important chapters to provide the ground work for the remaining chapters: the state of the child in the United States; and an overview of the policy process which will provide an advocacy policy model for children and family issues.

The second part of the book presents substantive chapters providing a summary of research and advocacy related to key issues at the child and family levels of analysis. This part is reserved for chapters which concentrate on specific child issues. Each chapter defines the child issue, provides a research summary of the issue, and then specifies the advocacy goals. The authors underscore steps that have yielded success in policy change, whether it is local change in the community, or

state or federal changes. Topics in this part include children's mental health, health disparities, homelessness, child abuse prevention, juvenile justice, media violence, working with Native American families, reform in child welfare, education, and early childhood and child care.

The third part of the book has four chapters in which authors share personal experience in the public policy domain. This part stands out as unique from Part II because the authors focus on the advocacy process within a child or family issue, rather than the child issue as the focus, as it is in Part II. For example, you will read first-hand accounts of testifying on Capitol Hill for IDEA, winning and losing policies for adolescent reproductive health, and how to engage families in your advocacy efforts.

The fourth part is an interesting chapter on the history of Division 37, whose primary function at the American Psychological Association is to promote child and family advocacy utilizing research-based evidence.

Each of the chapters' authors is committed to believing that you, the reader, can stand up and do what they have accomplished. They write their chapters in enough detail that you should be able to say, "I can do this!"

I would like to end with another quote relevant for advocates:

Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time.

Thomas A. Edison

Orlando, FL, USA

Anne McDonald Culp

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