

Resource Section

With more than 30 listings for advocacy, support and more.



YOUNG VOICES

4 Brave youth share their experiences.



PAR CONFERENCE

Catch up on the conference



PROFESSIONAL ADVICE

How to make a SAR

PAR MAGAZINE



Welcome to PAR Magazine

PAR is a group of parents and independent social workers who are motivated to influence change for the wellbeing of children and families. PAR stands for Parents Advocacy and Rights. PAR also means equal. Parents have a right to be treated as equals by professionals and others in the children's care and protection systems. PAR Magazine aims to provide a voice for families and those who work with them to promote the necessary changes to ensure we get it right for every family.

More and more children are being drawn into children's hearings, child protection investigations and a rising number are being taken into care. Scotland has the highest rate of children in care in the UK. Mostly the reasons that social workers give are "neglect" or "emotional abuse". Parents often report finding that they are not heard. It seems as though professionals often start from a position of automatic belief in parents' guilt. Some parents are completely cleared of causing any harm to their children – but only after going through the most harrowing and stigmatising experience that any parent can suffer. Some parents have asked for help with domestic violence, illness, stress, and poverty but

*Family is not an
important thing. It is
everything.*

Michael J. Fox

then find that they get no help, instead their requests are used against them as evidence of guilt.

PAR was set up in 2016 by a group of parents and two independent social workers. The Scottish Association of Social Workers had invited David to speak at a conference in Edinburgh which was attended by both parents and social workers. Parents spoke about how they suffered from being shut out of decisions, their human rights breached, and isolated from being able to advocate for their children.

We heard David speak about the NYC experience of building parent advocacy in child welfare. This has helped prevent NYC children being taken into care and has increased the reunification of children in care back to their parents.

About the conference

The conference on 3 November was an opportunity for the collective voice of mothers and other family members who have experienced local authority and children's hearings involvement in their family life - investigations, case conferences, children's hearings, loss of children to care and adoption, restricted contact between children in care and their parents and siblings.

Parents often feel powerless and feel unfairly and disrespectfully treated. This conference was an opportunity to have a voice on how things can be improved - for children and for families. We want to see more support and help, and respect, for families. We had a great line up of speakers including David Tobis, author of *From Pariahs to Partners*, from PAR parents and other parent led campaigns from across Scotland.

The conference was commenced by a moving AV presentation which you can view by following the link.

<https://youtu.be/YqPiKqE98DM>

You can read three of the speeches from the conference starting on pg 19.

(We hope that you will join us. If you want to contribute to future issues, have a comment or resource to contribute please email: parentsadvocacyandrightsmag@gmail.com)

The Scottish Child Law Centre



The Scottish Child Law Centre provides free legal advice and guidance on all law matters pertaining to children and young people.

They have debated solicitors that can answer questions and offer further training to organisations and individuals.

<http://www.sclc.org.uk>

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Young Voices



At first it was difficult to know where to place our bright, articulate young voices. After some serious thought, the answer seemed obvious. We should hear our young voices first! In everything we do, in everything we hope to achieve, our children are our priority. This is their future that we are building, their lives we wish to build up. We are overjoyed that they have bravely shared their views and experiences with us.

Our four young voices this issue range include three teen girls and a younger boy. These fantastic youth demonstrate that children are far more articulate and have a far better understanding than that which they are often given credit.

Well done Young Voice authors, each and everyone of you should be so proud of yourselves.

Dear Child Away from Home

Dear Child Away From Your Family,

I can't even possibly imagine how you must be feeling right now because although our situations are similar every situation is unique to that individual and their family, but I can take a pretty good guess at what it might be like for you.

I do know you must feel absolutely terrible, as though part of you has been stolen and as if your heart has been ripped out your chest. I can at least say I know what it's like to feel like that because I felt that way every day and night for the 18 miserable months I was in the "care" of my local authority.

I won't go into detail but yes as you probably guessed I was stolen from my mum. The social workers lied to the sheriff about my family and my mum and as a result an order for the social workers to take me was granted. I consider this method to be nothing more than legal kidnapping.

It's the most horrible thing in the world, being in care and being without your family - I know, I've been there. But please believe me, THIS WILL END. You will survive this, Keep breathing and get through the days, remembering each day brings you closer to the day you will get back home.

Two years ago I was in the same position as you: alone, miserable, scared and desperate, desperately longing for my family, and I never truly thought I would ever be happy again, but I am....

There is no quick fix for this and I'm sure you already know that but slowly but surely and over time your scars will begin to heal, your broken heart will mend and your soul will grow braver, wiser and more full of love than it ever had been before this experience. Your trauma will always be part of you but trust me, the memories WILL fade and even though it doesn't seem like they will ever leave you now, they will.

Nothing will ever be worse than what you have already survived. Remember one day this will all be over and it will just be a bad, bad, bad memory but it won't be your life.

Hold on. This will end. And one day, somehow, no matter what, I promise you, this will only be a memory.

Best wishes,
A Child Who Was Kidnapped Too

Dear Mummy

Dear Mummy,

I know these last few months have been hard, but you have been so supportive and strong.

I know you have been fighting for us and I know you will win.

Thank you for all you have done for us, we will make it in the end, but we couldn't have done it without you.

You are always here for me and I will always be there for you.

One day things will get better and social work will go away. It feels as if it will last forever, but as you fight you start making it go away and I know you won't stop until it does.

I am so lucky to be your daughter and wouldn't change that for the world.

Love,

Your daughter

Advocates help Me

Advocates are helpful for many reasons

One of the reasons is that sometimes when you want to say something even when it might upset an Adult, with an advocate you can say the important things.

Even scary things, an advocate can say them for you.

When you feel anxious or scared, when you feel like you are too little and nobody cares, an advocate will say your voice for you. So you don't get forgotten and bullied.

Not just kids bully kids. Adults bully kids too. Advocates can stop bullies.



Advocates make it feel like the world is more fair and more safe.

Without my advocate, I would feel alone, because sometimes Mummy can't do everything to stand up for me.

Boy, Primary 4



Dear Social Worker

Dear Social worker,

I don't want to see you on Tuesday
I'm sick of covering up
I'm tired of feeling invaded
I'm tired of your lies
Sometimes I'm angry and I'm livid
Sometimes I'm ready to explode
Sometimes I am ready to stop being my best self
So I don't want to see you on Tuesday
'Cause I don't need your help

Help shouldn't hurt this much.

And there are many things you could change
But you don't care about listening to me
I was always taught that I am valuable
But with you, I feel anything but

I want love, I don't want to cry
Don't want to feel this fear inside
Don't want to wake up and hurt like this
I want to sing, I want to dance
I want to feel safe and secure
I just want you to go away.

I don't want to see you on Tuesday
I want my home to be mine again
Together, our family has a good life
We don't need inference and judgement
We could do with more money
But we can make do and get by with out you
We don't get a choice
So, I will see you on Tuesday
And try to be nice.

Kat, 14



Advice and Experiences from Parents

Parents and Grandparents who have involvement by local authorities frequently express how deeply frustrated they are and how much it hurts to feel so powerless in their own families.

An important aspect of advocacy is listening. It makes an enormous difference to feel heard, to be acknowledged, and it is vital that we listen to those who have experience or 'being done' to by the child protection system. We need better understand and work together to make much needed change to 'working with'.

Corporate parents need to work with and listen to biological families as equals. There is no substitute for a child to their family. Children need their families.

Sometimes parents need support to do their best by their children. The first step in supporting a family is helping them to be heard. The first step in building a working relationship and the only way to develop trust and respect is through communication.



Should

You should write a book about it all.
Go for a walk in nature
Go to the gym. You should be working out.
You should use this time
For you.

I wake in a shock
Having cared for no one
Having comforted no one
Knowing my children are lost and alone.

The phone rings and my heart recoils.
It takes all my courage to read the minutes, the letters, the lies.
I endure the meetings, the allegations, the blame
And the utter sickened helplessness of being disbelieved.

You should volunteer! No need to be lonely!
Lots of people need your help!
But I'm in limbo
My brain is creaky, my thoughts disconnected.
I cry at the checkout.
No one must look at me
I am not fit to be seen.

By Louise

What it's like to lose a child

From the first time I looked into your bright blue eyes,
the love I felt for you, endless, without limitation, was overwhelming,
I promised, I believed, that nothing could take me from your side.

Strangers who had never seen you, never heard your little voice sing
Can take you away and never let me see you again,
It makes it feel like you were never really mine.

In the streets, in the parks, at bus stops and shops,
children everywhere,
I pray you don't hurt as bad as me.

Walking through the airport far from home,
I see your pigtails, your teddy, your jumper on someone I don't know
And I can't breath as I run for quiet place to cry.

There is this link, this bond, this relationship deeper than blood
It's fragile, it needs nurturing and thoughtful care
For them it is so inconvenient!

The sun shines, the cake is iced, and the balloons are up,
If I had my way the sky would thunder and lightening to sooth my soul,
I can't celebrate without you.

I don't know who I am anymore, and you are no longer you
I don't know where we went but I feel so insecure,
Even if we can fix this, we will never feel the same.

Each day is lonely, my heart broken, my life stopped the moment you were gone,
I am a fraud, I am a cheat, I am not entitled to grieve.
My child is well, they say.

By Ashley



My Story

by Pauline

I had the perfect life with the best family, my dad left when I was two and I saw him occasionally we lived above a pub with my mum, uncle, and grandparents, they were wonderful, and I got to dance to the Beatles on the jukebox with my mum, in the pub, best times!

Suddenly, my world end. My mum died. Dad came and took me away from my broken-hearted family, we moved about and I lived with various relatives. Eventually, he brought me to Scotland to marry his girlfriend. She hated me on sight. She was jealous of my dead mother!!! She made my life hell on earth. My dad was so besotted with her that he joined in with the physical and mental abuse.

I left home at 16 and began work in a hotel. I drank to cope with the trauma of my childhood. I did not even know I was pregnant for nearly 6 months. I kept in touch with my dad and his wife because of my half sister and brothers. I did not feel like a person of my own right. I had no self-esteem. I was broken. I left the hotel. I went back to my family and told them and got battered.

They told me to get an abortion, I went to the doctor who confirmed that was not an option and I was sent to a mother and baby home in Leith. I was told the baby would be put up for adoption. **I felt I had no choice. My opinion didn't count. I was a nothing.**

Now, I had a Social worker, a very nice man. He told me what would happen, my

baby would go to wonderful middle-class parents who would give her everything she wanted and she would have the best life. What could I offer - nothing! I was told I would not get benefits. I have since heard that was a lie!

I spent the rest of my pregnancy in the mother and baby home, with other girls between the ages of 13 and 27. Can you believe that! Not one of them wanted to give up their babies, but we all did. The Catholic shame was a big part of it for a lot of them. We supported each other and went to the pub in secret.

The matron was a cow the rules were strict, but it could have been worse. We all bought clothes to take to the hospital for our babies. The day came for me to go into labour a girl Fiona chummed me to the hospital on the bus. She was a good friend. The bus went over the hobbles, not good while you are in labour as we travelled to the Elsie Inglis.

They asked my friend to go and I was taken to a most humiliating preparation experience! I was taken to the labour ward and I screamed blue murder. The worst part was that I was alone! It was awful.

My baby girl was born. I saw her for a second and then she was whisked away. I was taken down to a wee separate room away from the other mothers. I was in total shock. I went to sleep and when I woke in the morning - a great surprise - in the other bed, my pal, Fiona had just had a baby girl too.

We went upstairs to see the babies. No words can describe how I felt - love I had never known before and indescribable pain too.



Our routine became visiting the babies twice a day. Staff were discouraging - In case of getting too close they said!

In that wee room, we laughed, we cried. It was just insane. Doctors were okay towards us, nurses were not too judgemental, but we were the bad girls.

The cleaners, two of them in particular, were lifesavers. We received no visitors. They brought us magazines and cakes, and came for a wee chat every day. Fiona got out of hospital two days before me. I had a temperature and I was kept in for ten days past my daughter's birth. On my last day, I went upstairs to see my beautiful wee girl for last time.

She opened her eyes and looked at me blue eyes and jet black hair. There are no words for this pain. I left her and I went to the tv room. I watched *Happy Days* on television and I wished and wished that the show was my life, not this hellish nightmare.

After, I got changed, Fiona bless her came for me. I left the hospital by taxi. I was hysterical. Once back at the home, I was picked up by my dad. My step mum had had a wee boy three months earlier (my half-brother). I got in the house and she said to me just take him for a walk!

Can you imagine? Here I was, having just left my beautiful baby hours earlier for the last time, and now I was pushing a baby that I had only met. It totally screwed me up. I left my father's house and went to work in hotels and never looked back.

I don't see Dad or his hideous wife anymore. I have put it behind me. I was grief-stricken for the first few weeks. I bought my daughter a silver bracelet. I did not feel that I could not put the name I chose for her on it. The adoptive parents would change her name.

I went on to have my own family. A family that I could keep! I grieved for 10 years for my first daughter. Every time the news came on I would wonder is that her? I looked for her wherever I went. When she turned 10 years old, I wrote to social work and asked if there anyway that they could give me any information about how my daughter was doing. I was going mad with worry!

Social work contacted her family and I was sent brief details about her. I was told she was happy. This gave me some peace. Once she turned 17 years old, I contacted social work again and asked that they find my daughter and check if she would like to be in touch with me. I did some counselling. Finally, after a time, they traced her, by a phone book. Her family had never moved house.

When we met in the Leith adoption agency, I thought a baby would walk in - not a beautiful 17-year-old girl!

We went to the pub in which I married my first husband. She brought her boyfriend with her and we had a great time. It was amazing! In time she met with my family and it was pretty good. Not easy, I'm not going to lie. Now, she has her own children and I see her every few months.

We get on okay, but we have different values. Her mum gets jealous of me and as such my daughter does not tell her she sees me. When she got married last year, I was not at the engagement party or the two wedding ceremonies she had.

I don't get invited to any of the children's parties or any events. I see the photos on *Facebook*, and I feel like a dirty secret.

That is bad I know, I am blessed to have found her again. Most don't.

Two things, I want taken away from my story are the following:

1. Social work, although kind to me at the time, never ever spoke to me. They never said, "Look these are your rights, we can help you." Or "You don't have to give up your baby." This information was held from me. I was made to feel like a criminal. and treated like I had no worth and I believed that.
2. Second, I feel deeply for all those lovely, young girls in that home. None of us wanted to give our babies away. We just needed someone to tell us that you can do this and we will help you, but they never did.....

10 Tips for building a Support Network

For the most part, family is the centre of all of our lives. Right up until something happens that creates a rift, or a crack.

When safeguarding measures enter your family's life, more than just cracks form, mountains you never imagined rise up and they seem impenetrable.

There is such deep shame, such painful isolation that comes part and parcel with having child protection proceedings. Starting with the measure of confidentiality. Your life is falling apart, your child may have been removed, and you aren't allowed to say anything to anyone.

Perhaps, you are still caring for your child, but even a dentist appointment, the whispers of the staff behind the desk, about your child being a 'social case', feels degrading.



Judgement, isolation, and anxiety weigh heavily on your shoulders and you feel like curling up and hiding.

Don't hide.

Don't curl up and grieve, alone.

I think the hardest situation in the world is having to survive when your child is gone.

This is a long process and this is where you need your team, your support network.

Here are my ten ideas on how to build that support network that will be so crucial in getting from here to there.

1. Accept that this is going to be uncomfortable. This is going to take pushing yourself hard. The hardest things in life are often the most worthwhile. There are going to be days, when you would rather have a tooth pulled, where you are physically shaking with the struggle of it, days that maybe you don't quite make it. You sit in the car park and cry, not quite able to make it that last few feet to go into the cafe to meet a friend for coffee. Write a text, reschedule and get up and try again.

You have survived worse than social discomfort. I know you can do this.

2. Accept that this is going to take time. A lot more time than anticipated. It takes time to build new habits. Just like going to the gym you are going to be especially sore after the first few outings. It takes time to rebuild your trust, to build relationships with other people, and to start to feel like this is a part of your normal.

3. Accept that this is going to take a lot of effort. It is tempting to hold back and reserve your energy when you feel anxious and ashamed. This is going to initially feel like a massive waste of time. It will pay off in the long term.

4. Explore a hobby in a new way, or start a new one. Anything from a local knitting group to taking up a martial art. I suspect most of us could benefit from kick boxing.

Find something to spend your time on that renews you, soothes you, allows you to blow off steam.

5. Be open, share something about yourself. It is so hard not to close up. There is no real risk to admitting to someone that you really like watching a particular TV series. Sharing opens the door to connect with people.

6. Make at least three friends. You can't ask one person to help all the time. Parents from your child's school, family, work colleagues, medical professionals, support groups, social clubs, study groups, sports, even the cashier at your local shop. There are lots of people out there. Don't let age be a barrier. The elderly neighbour has likely seen a lot in life, but maybe be just as lonely. It might be a relationship that would benefit both parties.

7. Make the effort to contact people regularly. Reach out and send them a text, give them a phone call. Don't let a single day pass where you do not reach out to contact someone. Set yourself a reminder if necessary.

8. When you find someone that you connect with, ask them around for coffee. Invitations don't have to only be extended for events and meals. A good friend and I used to regularly meet up and grocery shop together. It made for easy conversation as we discussed meal ideas, and laughed over product labels. It was low stress and a chore that needed doing anyways. I would leave the store feeling renewed, at least until I had to put the shopping away! It is terrifying to extend an invitation. The risk of rejection feels enormous. Do it! You might just make someone else's day.

9. Volunteer. There are lots of places that you can volunteer and this takes away any fear of needing an excuse to talk to

people. It takes away the stigma, and allows you to seize back that part of your identity that was stolen. You can do good. You are doing good... just maybe you might start to remember that you are good.

10. Social media. This is a heavily debated arena, but I would take the view in favour of social media. You need support first and foremost, and the major advantage of social media is that it crosses the vast distance between people in an unprecedented way. It isn't relevant whether you connect with a next door neighbour or with another parent 100 miles away. The point is that you need to throw away the isolation, and find like minded people.

**ALONE, WE CAN
DO SO LITTLE.
TOGETHER,
WE CAN
DO SO MUCH.**

When you feel good about yourself it is easy to socialise and go out. When you feel bad, it feels insurmountable. It is vital to avoid drowning in this process, and that requires a support network. They are your team. You wouldn't expect a footballer to single handedly play the World Cup. Alone we can do so little. Together, we can do so much. Don't be that single footballer against the whole world. There is a community out here waiting for you.



Professional Advice

In the child protection and social work world, professionals rarely receive a great deal of praise. Which is truly unfortunate given the tremendously difficult jobs they do day in and day out. PAR is dedicated to parent advocacy and rights. It simply could not exist without the brave, dedicated and caring professionals that give endlessly of themselves.

In this issue, we have the advice and support of a Social Worker, a Senior Lecturer and Programme Director of Social Work, and Birthlink.

It is incredibly important that parents and professionals work together in the best interests of children, but it is immensely difficult in many situations. Often information and understanding is key, and this can only happen with good communication.

The professionals in the following articles will share their experience and knowledge in an easy to understand way about topics which are important to parents.

We welcome advice and contributions from all professionals involved with families and child protection please email: parentsadvocacyandrightsmag@gmail.com.

Making a Subject Access Request

Written by Maggie Mellon

"You have the right to find out if an organisation is using or storing your personal data. This is called the right of access. You exercise this right by asking for a copy of the data, which is commonly known as making a 'subject access request'".



The information commissioner's office has clear information about your rights and how to go about making a "subject access request" (SAR)

<https://ico.org.uk/your-data-matters/your-right-of-access/>

Every organisation has to have a policy about recording and sharing information, and they must make this available to you.

Why parents might need to make a Subject Access Request (SAR):

With very few exceptions, you have a right to see everything that schools, GPs, hospitals and social workers - and any other organisation - have recorded about you and your children. This should be

information that is necessary for them to do their job. Any exceptions are about protecting other people's confidential information. (This includes older children. See below for more information about that.)

You can ask to see everything held or you can ask for very specific information about particular events e.g. from police about what they recorded and shared about any incident involving you or your children.

You should know about what is recorded

People who are recording information about you should make sure that you know what they are recording, and why. They also should make sure that what they are recording is accurate, and also that it is necessary for them to hold the information. If you believe or suspect that information about you is not correct or that they should not be holding it then a making a SAR will provide you with confirmation or otherwise.

You should know and give permission about what is shared

Organisations should ask for your permission to share any information about you with other people or organisations. If information about you or your children is shared without your permission then the person/organisation who shared it needs to have a lawful reason for doing so. If you suspect that information has been shared unlawfully, then a SAR should reveal this.

Older children and SARS

Children over the age of 12 years are usually understood to have capacity to make some decisions for themselves. So you will usually be told that your older children will need to give permission for information about them to be shared

with you. Professionals often forget that this applies to them too, and that they need to have your child's permission to record and share information about them with other people. It may be difficult for you to get your child's consent if you are being denied a relationship with them and/or are always supervised when you meet them and are forbidden to talk about "the case". You could write a letter to your child explaining why you want to see information about them (e.g. for your legal case to get them out of care, or to make sure that they are safe and well) and copy this letter to the social worker. You can formally write to ask to be told in writing what advice to your child about your request, and to see any signed refusal of permission for you to see information held about them.

Getting the information

When you make a SAR request the organisation has twenty working days to provide it. This gives them time to make any redactions (taking out) of information that is about someone else. For instance, information about a family member or a neighbour that is mixed with your information and that you don't have a right to know.

In my experience so far, councils drag this process out, giving constant excuses for not being able to meet deadline. If they don't meet the deadline or if they refuse to give you specific information that you have asked for then you can take your request to the Scottish Information Commissioners Office.

ICO Scotland contact details

The Information Commissioner's Office -
Scotland
45 Melville Street
Edinburgh
EH3 7HL

Telephone: 0303 123 1115

Email: Scotland@ico.org.uk

Once you have the information

You might want to have enlisted the help and support of a friend you trust or of an advocate to help you read and make notes about the material. A lawyer or social worker would be a good person - and if you have a lawyer for your case then they should be interested in reading the file and seeing what is recorded.

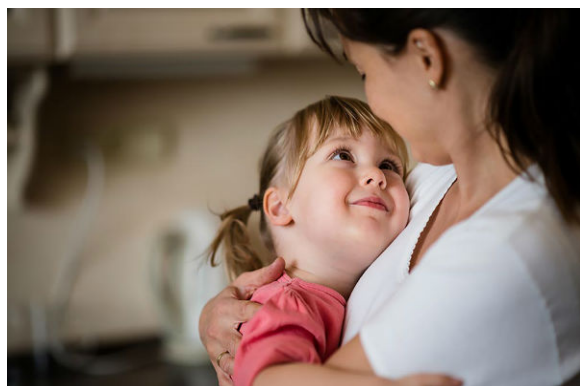
Contact

By Maggie Mellon

We plan to have a regular column on parents' experiences of contact with their children. We want to hear about parents experiences of contact with their children - and from children too if they are able to tell us.

I am often disappointed and upset by the decisions and arrangements that are made for contact between children and their parents and other family members. Much of what I have found out needs to be challenged and changed. So this article is hopefully the beginning of parents being involved in working together to push for change.

As a social worker, I am clear that there are important issues that social workers should be thinking about asking themselves before making recommendations and plans for contact.



The first question is "what is contact for?". The main answer is that it is about human rights. Simply that. Parents and children have the right to a full and proper relationship with each other, and they have a right to support from governments to have support for their family life. Even when children are taken into care, and particularly when any neglect or abuse has not been

proven, these rights are not taken away. Here is what the official Scottish Government Guidance has to say.

Guidance on Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007

"When a child is looked after, the local authority have a duty under [section 17\(1\)\(c\)](#) to take steps "to promote on a regular basis, personal relations and direct contact between the child and any person with parental responsibilities".

So, contact between children and their parents is a duty that local authorities must fulfil.

Most children who are looked after by local authorities (in care) are under an order made by a court or a children's hearing. A few children are in care with the agreement of their parents. In both cases, contact has to be assumed to be a necessary and good thing in principle.

The guidance does go on to say that *"this is not an absolute duty. It is qualified, because a local authority should make arrangements so far as they are practicable and appropriate, and taking account of their duty to safeguard and protect the child's welfare as their paramount concern."*

It often seems that this is treated as a "get out clause". It isn't. But if parents don't know how to go about challenging contact arrangements then it might as well be. Here are some of the "whys?" that I think need to be asked by parents and by anyone helping them to have the best possible communication with social workers and children's panels.

I have found contact taking place in obviously unsuitable places: tiny cubicles in waiting areas of social work offices; bare rooms in official buildings; large commercial play barns, empty institutional kitchens with all the cupboards and fridges locked. I have also found contact taking place in specially designed domestic-type spaces.

- What I do not find is any explicit rationale for the rules that have been developed. Contact is invariably supervised regardless of whether a parent has been accused of any deliberate or even accidental harm. Why? Is this to avoid some unspecified risk? Of what?
- Parents are often forbidden from talking with their children about why they were taken into care. Why?
- Parents are often told not to ask their children if they are ok? Why?
- And if the child complains about something that has happened, to reassure them that the social worker and the foster carers and the residential workers are all good and know what they are doing. Why?
- Parents have been told not to tell their children they love them and

miss them every day and want to have them home. Why?

- Parents I know have been told that they must not be critical of the social workers or contact will be ended. Why?

I advise parents to ask their social workers for a clear written explanation of the rules of contact. What is allowed and what is not allowed and why? What have the supervisors been told about what to permit, or not permit? About what is significant to report and what is not? Often parents tell me that their social worker has refused or been unable to answer these questions.



This needs to change. We need to build up our own evidence base for change for the better. Help us build this up by telling us about your experiences. You don't need to give us your name, but please if you are not afraid, let us know what council area you are in?

Birthlink

by Dr. Gary Clapton

There are very, very few organisations dedicated to birth parents, adopted people and other adults who have been affected by adoption. Birthlink, based in Edinburgh, is one of these. For thirty-five years Birthlink has operated a contact register that allows parents and adopted people to add their names and record their wish to meet. The Adoption Contact Register for Scotland (ACR) has thousands of names and contact details on it, mostly those of adopted people looking to make contact with their birth parents. Birth parents are encouraged to walk away after adoption, often not informed of the register and been given the distinct impression that it is not their place to reach out to their children in adult life.

The ACR workers are all professionals advised by and including people with direct experience of adoption and have lots of experience in helping birth mothers and their (over 16 years) children to establish contact and meet each other. Birthlink will also search for people (when original names are available) and the workers rarely fail to find someone. Sensitive go-between work takes place, sometimes involving people just a few miles apart but also bringing together people living on different continents, literally a world away from each other. This kind of mediation is available to anyone whether or not they use the ACR, and often searches, mediation and contact are done on behalf of adoption agencies.

Most of Birthlink's experience is rooted in bringing together people who have been separated by adoption when the child was an infant. However, increasingly, with the rise of adoptions of children against the parents' wishes, birth mothers have been registering on the ACR in the hope that, when their son or daughter is of an age to do so, they too will register. Although Birthlink works with adults, and the ACR service is for over-sixteens, adoptive parents can register on behalf of a son or daughter who is looking to find out more about their mother (or father) and, perhaps be introduced to them – again, in an atmosphere less poisoned by any misinformation and misunderstandings that often surround forced adoptions and one that is of benefit to the child.

More recently Birthlink has expanded its work to include help for parents, adult children and other family members separated from loved one or their family by the social services. This includes people who have been in foster care, or in residential care. Case records are accessed, copies shared and case notes interpreted and, if requested, a reach-out is commenced.

There is a fee for services but this will be reduced or waived in cases of low or no income.

More information at: Birthlink.org.uk



**Adults Affected
by Adoption**

Parents' Advocacy and Rights Conference

On the 3rd of November, PAR held a conference in Edinburgh. The collective voices of mothers, fathers and grandparents who have had local authority involvement were shared. Professionals from Social Work, SCRA, Universities, the Care commissioner, and from abroad came together to discuss and work towards parent advocacy.

Parent Participation in New York City's Child Welfare System



Parent Participation in New York City's Child Welfare System

Presentation to Parent Advocacy and Rights:

Edinburgh

By David Tobis, Ph.D.

November 3, 2018

Introduction

Today I want to tell an inspiring story of the ways parents in New York City, whose

children were involved in the child welfare system, became active in child welfare reform and decision making. I'll describe dramatic changes in the city's child welfare system that parents helped bring about. It is a hopeful story though not without its problems and setbacks.

The presentation is divided into four sections.

- First, I'll describe what were some of the problems in the NYC child welfare system when parents had no voice and present some of the major changes in New York's child welfare system in the past 25 years.
- Second, I'll describes ways in which parents have become involved in child welfare decision making in three main areas:
 - on their own cases, as staff in various child welfare programs, and in helping to shape public policy.
- Third I'll describe how changes were brought about, describing the role of parent advocates and the role of their allies.

- And finally, I'll answer the question: Why has New York City's child welfare system changed as much as it has in the past 25 years, and why has the child welfare system recently deteriorated?

Major Changes in NYC Child Welfare System in the Past 25 years

First a little background in child welfare in the United States. In the U.S. each of the 50 states has different child welfare laws, policies and systems. New York City's child welfare system is administered by the public child welfare agency called the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), headed by the commissioner. In New York City children are placed by ACS in foster homes and group care that are operated exclusively by not-for-profit agencies. More than half of the foster care beds are in agencies that are affiliated with religious denominations—Catholics, Jewish and Protestant.

In the 1990s New York City had one of worst child welfare systems in the country. There were 20 federal and state class action lawsuits filed against the city's child welfare agency and the private foster care agencies with which the city contracted to provide foster care services. There were 11 court orders that judges had issued that required the city to improve one or another aspect of the child welfare system (ACS, 1996, p.14). Many children were removed from their home who didn't need to be removed and remained in care an average of 4 years; it took 7 years for a child to be adopted (Tobis, 1989). But one of the most disturbing conditions was that in almost 40% of the cases when a family was

found to have abused or neglected a child, the family received no social services help nor was the child removed and placed into foster care (Children's Rights Inc. [CRI, 2007], p. 31).

Since then, the reforms that have been implemented have been deeper and lasted longer than reforms that were implemented at any other time in at least the last half century. What follows are some of the major changes that occurred in the past 25 years.

First, in 1992, there were almost 50,000 children in out-of-home care (Child Welfare Watch 1997, p.7). As of January 2018 there were only 8,711 children in out-of-home care (Administration for Children's Services (ACS), 2017).

Second, in the late 1990s parents had terrible legal representation in the legal proceeding when their child was about to be taken from them. They were represented by low paid court appointed attorneys operated out of their briefcase with no back up support from social workers, investigators or clerks, had no time to conduct any type of investigation to strengthen their client's case, and perhaps worst of all, they met their client for the first time on the day they went into court for the proceeding to remove the child (Special Child Welfare Advisory Panel, 2000, pps.44-48). Today, most parents have excellent government-funded legal representation when their child is at risk of being removed and placed into foster care. They are represented by law firms in which each parent is represented by a team consisting of a specially trained child

protection attorney, a social worker and often a parent advocate who had previously had a child in foster care (Tobis, 2013, pps. 171-174).

Third, more social services called preventive services, are now available to help struggling families at risk of having a child removed. However, there are still far too few service slots of the type and quality that families need. More on this point later.

Finally, parents previously had almost no say in their own case decisions nor had much ongoing say in decisions such as health care or education for their children while they were in care. Nor did they have a voice in policy recommendations of what kinds of programs or services were most needed by struggling families. Today parents who have had child welfare experience are involved in three major areas of child welfare decisions:

- On their own cases,
- They work in child welfare agencies and programs as Parent Advocates, and
- They are involved in shaping government child welfare policy and the policies of individual child welfare agencies.

I want to describe parent involvement in each of these areas but first I want to describe the role of Parent Advocates.

Parent Participation in child welfare decision making: Parent Advocates

A main way that parents are involved in strengthening the child welfare system are as Parent Advocates. A Parent Advocate is a mother--though some fathers are also parent advocates--who has had a child placed into

foster care, changed her life, been reunited with her children, and has been trained to be an advocate for herself and to learn how to advocate for other parents (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017). The training of parents to be advocates and to know the rules of the child welfare system was key to the success of involving parents in decision-making.

Parents were trained to be Parent Advocates by the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), an NGO that is a collaboration of professionals and parents both at the staff level and the board level. CWOP developed a six-month training program for parents that included classroom training, internships in child welfare agencies and support groups that helped them channel their rage into productive anger. Parents were trained in the history of child welfare, the laws and principles of child welfare, how to speak in public, how to be advocates for themselves and then to be advocates for others. They were given opportunities to speak in schools of social work, at city council hearings and at conferences on panels about child welfare. Parents were paid a stipend for their time in the training program and a salary for their work as Parent advocates. Originally the training was delivered by professionals. Now it is delivered by parents and is completed in three months.

- Parent Advocates now work in foster care agencies, helping parents whose children are still in care, to reunite their family.
- They also sit on government and private agency advisory panels helping to shape

public policy so that the views of parents will be heard, their needs will be met and their rights will be respected (Tobis, 2013, pps.174-183).

- Of great importance, a Parent Advocate attends every Child Safety Conference as an ally of the parent. These conferences occur before the decision is made whether a child should be removed from his or her family or if the child can remain safely at home with supports and a safety plan (ACS, 2013).

Parent Advocates, who had experienced the loss of a child to foster care and been reunited, are in an excellent position to help other parents reunite with their children since the Parent Advocate had walked in the shoes of parents who are struggling to change their lives and to be reunited with their children. As John Mattingly who was commissioner of ACS from 2004 to 2011 said at a forum on child welfare with Parent Advocates:

“Everywhere you look in this city where we are doing our best work... where the best is happening, you find Parent Advocates around (Mattingly, 2011).”

Previously no parent who had had a child in foster care had ever been employed in the child welfare system. To have parents hired, we had to prove that it was legal for a parent with child welfare experience to work in child welfare with parents and with children. We asked Professor Martin Guggenheim at New York University Law School to prepare a legal brief documenting the law. He found that it is perfectly legal—for a parent who had abused or neglected a child and the child was placed into foster care—to work in a foster care agency with parents and children, so long as the executive director of the foster care agency affirms that the person is not likely to be a danger to anyone (Guggenheim, 2008). Once we had that legal determination, the floodgates opened. Parents who had had children in foster care and had changed their lives, began working to help other parents to be reunited with their children.

(This is only the first part of David’s presentation. Please go to the PAR website: <https://parparentsadvocacyrights.com> to read more.)

How it has felt to be a mother speech

by Louise

I want to tell you how it has felt for me to be a mother without her children, and how it has affected me, so that others in the same situation won't feel so alone. I also want to make a couple of recommendations for things we can do that might help others in the future.

When the children were removed I felt like I'd been run over by a bus. I was absolutely flattened. For a considerable time, probably weeks, I was basically in a waking coma. I could barely speak or eat and kept my eyes closed as much as possible. My head and my heart were completely with my children and I was using all my efforts just to stay alive. In this condition I was expected to go to incredibly painful meetings and I just was not able for it.

I never thought of myself as someone who'd need an advocacy worker. I was the person who helped others. Before I became a mother I had a senior professional job. I was used to meetings and bureaucracy. I was used to working in partnership with others in a spirit of transparency and with accountability for my words and actions. But I was silenced by the social workers, very effectively, by plain old fashioned bullying. Instead of being listened to, I was disrespected, disbelieved and disregarded and in my emotionally devastated state I just could not withstand it.

So my first recommendation from what I've been through is that we need something more than the usual advocacy workers as they are limited in their roles. We need people who understand the social work system, who are independent and paid, and who can offer emotional support as well as helping us to have our voices heard. Family and friends, if we're lucky enough to have them, have lives of their own that they need to go back to at some point and we need consistency for the long haul; to have the same person with us through it all, taking notes, witnessing, speaking up with us and seeing fair play.

My second recommendation is to have an information pack with lists of websites, Facebook groups and sources of support like PAR, that could be given to parents whose children have been removed. I knew no one in this situation and today is the first time I have met anyone who is. I could not unravel the system - what was meant to be happening? When? How? - and I did not understand the jargon - LAC? LAAC?

It would have really helped me to be in contact with others in my situation. As well as being desperately worried about my children and what they were going through, I felt a huge sense of shame at being a mother whose children had been removed. As time went on and the children were still in care I kept thinking that people must be saying there is no smoke without fire. I did my shopping late at night so I wouldn't bump into anyone I knew. I could not bear to see children of the same age as mine so avoided school start and

finish times when I had to be out of the house. I pretty much stopped going on Facebook because of all the happy family photos of days out, holidays, Christmases, back to school. I rationed the times I'd allow myself to go into their bedrooms. I'd see friends and family trying to put themselves into my shoes then flinching away from the pain because it is just too much. It's constant and it doesn't fade. Nothing helps. Only having your children in your arms helps.

A dear friend gave me a silver bangle engraved with some wise words that I'd like to leave you with, because they became my mantra: COURAGE. KEEP GOING.



Just keep breathing in and out. Stay alive. Some days that's all you can do and one day there will be a resolution.

Child Protection Case Conferences

by Ashley

Today, I am going to focus on speaking about child protection case conference meetings.

From my perspective, I could unaffectionately call my experiences with child protection meetings the Good, the Bad and the Ugly.

Three very different meetings, from my perspective, with the same family, same faces round the table, same circumstances for the most part, but the entire experiences were as different as oil, water and soda.

It has taken a great deal of reflection to try to see why these experiences were so different.

As such, I think it is important to reflect on how a meeting works.

Because one of the most traumatic parts of child protection is expectations.

I don't mean a meeting in a child protection capacity. I mean meeting in a wider, broader sense. Consider a business meeting. Any business meeting will have a very specific purpose that will have been set out ahead of the meeting.

It is important to understand that there is already a goal in mind before you even attend the meeting. The meeting is not the time to make changes. A meeting is to inform, not gather data.

The chair of the meeting has a vital role in having already spoken to all the parties involved in advance of the meeting. No chair would go into a meeting unsure about what all parties are going to say, because it is the chair's role to orchestrate and

guide the meeting through all the stages to its conclusion. The chair will want everyone at the meeting to work together to bring about the set conclusion.

In a business meeting, it is really important that information is gathered ahead of the meeting. This prevents unnecessary complications and, in order to plan for the sessions ahead, the meeting needs, to a degree, to have a goal in mind ahead of time.

This is good business. It allows for solid, constructive communication to be partaken to create a plan going forward.

In a child protection case conference, this is also true.

The chair of the meeting should meet with you ahead of the meeting. It is vital, seriously it is absolutely vital, that ahead of the meeting you participate as fully as you are able such that your voice and your contributions can be thrown into the melting pot of voices that will guide and develop not just the goal of the meeting but the plan going forward.

Get your voice in early.

The social work case worker is a key figure. This social worker will construct a risk assessment. From brutal experience, please do whatever you need to such that you work with the social worker to build that risk assessment. Call the social worker, meet with the social worker, invite the social worker around for a cup of tea.

In my experience the quickest way to make a social worker run away... is to invite them around a lot.

I know that sounds like simple, almost ridiculous advice. But engage. Engage even when it feels like you are drowning. Engage when it hurts to breath, engage

when you think you have never felt so mad in all your life.

Engage when you run into a personality clash - when you find a social worker who seems to push every button, daring you to fail.

Bite your tongue, remember who you are doing this for. Your child, your perfect, amazing, precious person. Keep them at the front of your thoughts. There is nothing you wouldn't do for this blessing in your life. So, while it may be understandable to be annoyed, to be frustrated, but set it to one side, one hour at a time, and make yourself determined to work with your social worker.

Ahead of our very first initial Child Protection conference, I had no idea what to expect. To say I was uninformed would be an understatement.

I truly believed that this meeting was a good thing. I believed this would be a meeting where everyone could sit down around the table, have a genuine discussion and we would all leave with the world set to right.

If you have been through this process, you may well think I was a proper idiot. I had this idea in my head that this was a discussion.

I thought my words would matter.

But everyone else in the room had the big, fancy important words and acronyms. They had important professional job titles. Most importantly, they had big, serious concerns, and I was left floundering. I studied to a university level and yet, I had never felt more stupid or broken.

Very broken.

It felt a lot more like being a naked gladiator shoved into an arena full of lions as the realisation dawned upon me - there

was a very specific outcome orchestrated long before I appeared in the meeting room.



I was very underprepared for that first meeting and the worst part, what made the experience so much harder than it needed to be, was **my own misguided expectations.**

Meetings are not places for discussion. Discussions happen before meetings, they happen after meetings, but not during meetings.

I had no idea what the structure or format of this meeting would be, or what my role would be. I didn't know where or when I should speak, or what everyone else's roles were.

I think to a point, you can only really learn by experience. It has taken a few of these meetings for me to feel in anyway able to articulate what was going on, and I am not that dense.

The huge difficulty faced by parents, by me!, is that this meeting will undoubtedly be called at the worst moment in your life. Something awful has happened, or is happening, and now, you are under the greatest scrutiny of your life - Everyone's favourite, right? Safe to say, your stress levels are off the chart, and you are now competing with professionals. People who have been doing this for years, who have more experience with this than you will hopefully ever have, and they all slept soundly last night.

So, don't compete.

That is right. I am really saying that. Fight or flight is overwhelming your brain, and I am telling you to override that impulse.

Don't compete.

Seriously, the deck is stacked. Work together, you can't take them single handedly!

You may feel that your efforts go unnoticed, unappreciated. There may be a lot of different reasons for this, at this stage.

What I can say is don't stop trying. Sometimes, time is the key, and everyone needs to see you are committed and serious about being onboard.

Sometimes, I think that while social work acknowledge that parents play a valuable role in their children's lives, the honest truth is the application certainly doesn't feel like it.

At some point you need to set aside being deeply sad, deeply ashamed, deeply mourning, and get ready to fight.

Corporate parents do need to pay more than lip service to biological parents.

But it is important that while this may feel the case, that you are being overlooked, take a good long look at the situation. I was told so many times - this is early days. This is early days.

I hated those words. I did not want any of these days. I did not like the idea that there was lots more to come. I did not like the idea that this was only the beginning. I wanted to fix this right now. I want to make everything better right now.

But I couldn't.

And I wanted these people to leave my family alone.

But they couldn't.

Time has helped build bridges.

Time. That will stretch out like taffy, too thin and too long.

Work at building bridges, time and again, I have found there is no other way.

This is where you have to learn a new way to work with people, who disagree with you on a level which you have never previously experienced. Just breath. Say less.

Most importantly: Surround yourself with support.

The most important advice I can give, the most effective experiences that I have had through this process, has been Support.

Get an advocacy worker.

Advocacy workers are angels who will be there for you in your time of greatest need. They can speak when you can't. Having someone who you can discuss what went on and re-orient you after the meeting with, is invaluable. Our advocate's post meeting debrief was unbelievably helpful. He would say to me that went well, they said this, and that was encouraging. Or he would explain to me you need to do this, that is what they were telling you. It is so difficult to take everything onboard.

Bring support to every meeting.

I wish I could say you just need support through those initial days. But the truth is, you need your support team for the long haul. This is where you really find out who your friends are, because for most parents this is not brief.

At some point you need to set aside being deeply sad, deeply ashamed, deeply mourning, and get ready to fight. This is

were you need to start pouring all your fight into winning your child back.

And that requires a major shift in emotion, if I am honest. You have to climb out of the crumbled, wreck of your soul, and find your fight.

Those initial days and weeks I spent in a state of shock, numb and overall feeling broken beyond words.



So many of my friends told me that they just wanted to see me get mad. They would have felt more comfortable seeing me angry. Seeing me defeated and traumatised was really hard on everyone.

Anger is volatile, but it is also useful. I was afraid to get angry. I was scared I wouldn't be able to stop. Letting myself have the right to feel mad was helpful. It helped motivate me to stand up and fight.

And fight we did... and fight we continue.

I really, really mean it when I say WE. Because I could not have survived without support. That has to be your priority. Get support. Talk to your friends, your partner, your parents, your church, your child's school even. TALK to people. There is this huge shame, this huge barricade to opening up. And when you do, you realise two very important things.

First, people are much more sympathetic and supportive than you assumed.

And second, you are not the first person to go through this. My world view was

rocked, by all the people that said, we are going through the same thing. Or my sister went through that, I remember what it was like. Or I was in care, I know how it feels.

The trouble is that nobody wants to talk about it.

The stigma of 'bad mum' is too great. Children enter care for lots of reasons, and only a few of them are due to 'bad mum' syndrome.

My child had never been shouted at, never been hit. She had not suffered poverty, or divorce. She had never been emotionally or sexually abused. There was no drug abuse or mental health problems in our home. She came from an affluent middle class home, with two professional parents. She had never wanted for anything. Social work's parenting assessments have always reflected that I have 'exceptional parenting skills'. It frequently mentioned that I was always calm, patient and positive. An affectionate and loving mother. My daughter's social worker affirmed that my daughter's needs were always met.

And, my child became 'looked after'.

For every parent, for what ever reason who is apart from their child - there will be blue days. Days when the feelings of loss are so great, you could drown in them.

For those days, let me say:

I am sorry for every day, every park visit, every movie night, every birthday party and Christmas that she is missing. For every time you buy shoes, and you aren't buying her a pair. When you order ice cream, and there is one less cone. When you serve dinner and her plate isn't there. When you read bedtime stories and her head isn't there to be kissed.

For every time the sun shines, and you would just pick up a blanket go to the beach for a 'Nic Nic' (picnic). For every time it rains, and she is not there to teach your favourite board game, to make that blanket fort, to bake those cakes.

For how the grocery store is suddenly filled with children just her age.

When did everyone else suddenly have a child just like the one you are missing.

From singing silly songs, to barely paying attention, lost in her own games, as she played in the back ground while you work in the garden.

To when strangers nod to your children and ask, 'All yours?' And you don't know how to answer when one is missing. I am so sorry for all that she/ he is not there.

Keep Holding On.

Believe in yourself.

Surround yourself in people who believe in you.

Get an advocate.

And talk, keep talking, tell your story, and know that you are not alone. I believe in you.

Resources

Websites

PAR - Parents Advocacy and Rights

<https://parparentsadvocacyrights.com>

CLAN Child Law Centre

<http://www.clanchildlaw.org/>

The Scottish Child Law Centre

<http://www.sclc.org.uk>

The Family Rights Group

<https://www.frg.org.uk>

Keeping Families together

<http://www.keepingfamilies-together.org.uk/>

MATCH - Mothers Apart from their Children

<http://www.matchmothers.org>

Fathers Network Scotland

<http://www.fathersnetwork.org.uk>

Scots Mums Guide to Safeguarding and Child Protection

<https://thescottishmumsguidetosafeguarding.blogspot.com>

Fiightback

<https://www.fiightback.co.uk>

Parents against injustice

<http://www.parentsagainstinjustice.org.uk/>

Justice for Families

<http://www.justice-for-families.org.uk/>

Unity Injustice

<http://www.unity-injustice.co.uk/>

Advocacy Highland (Inverness)

<http://www.advocacy-highland.org.uk>

Advocacy Orkney

<http://www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/advocacyorkney/>

Equal Say (Glasgow)

<http://www.equalsay.org>

Partners In Advocacy (Glasgow)

<https://www.partnersinadvocacy.org.uk>

The Advocacy Project

<http://www.theadvocacyproject.org.uk/advocacy-services/glasgow/>

Women's Aid

<https://womensaid.scot>

WomenZone

<https://womenzoneblog.wordpress.com/about/>

Phone numbers

Scottish Child Law Centre
0131 667 6333

Scottish Domestic Abuse Helpline
0800 027 1234

The Relationship helpline
0808 802 2088

Support for prisoners' families
0800 254 0088

Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and
Drugs
08080 10 10 11

Samaritans
116 123

Breathing Space
0800 83 85 87

Young Minds
0808 802 5544

Working Families
0300 012 0312

ParentLine Scotland
0800 028 2233

Lone Parent Helpline
0808 801 0323

Additional Support for Learning
0345 123 2303

Sleep Scotland
0800 138 6565

We would be delighted if readers would send us any information on resources which they have found useful or have heard about so that we can grow our resource list and assist more families.

If you want to contribute a story, article, poem, opinion, comment, resources, or have a query, please email:
parentsadvocacyandrightsmag@gmail.com

