



Standing Up For Kids:

A Guide to Child Advocacy



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Introduction

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families created this guide to introduce you to the world of child advocacy and to outline the skills needed to be a successful child advocate. It is a practical guide suitable to a variety of children’s issue areas such as education, health, economic self-sufficiency, child welfare and juvenile justice. There are references to more comprehensive advocacy guides and publications that provide the details of the particular skills and issues of concern to the reader.

We hope you’ll find these tips helpful in your efforts. And remember, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families will always be available to answer any questions and help you along your way. Child advocacy is a labor of love that you’ll never regret. Now...let’s get started!

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About the book

In the last decade Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) and the Arkansas Kids Count Coalition have conducted a series of child advocacy trainings to help citizens translate their concern for the well being of children into concrete policy changes.

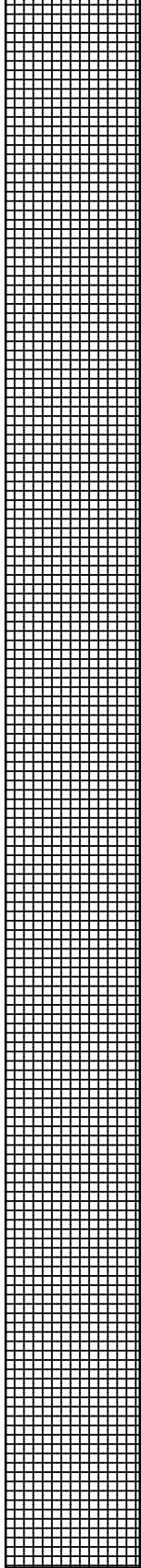
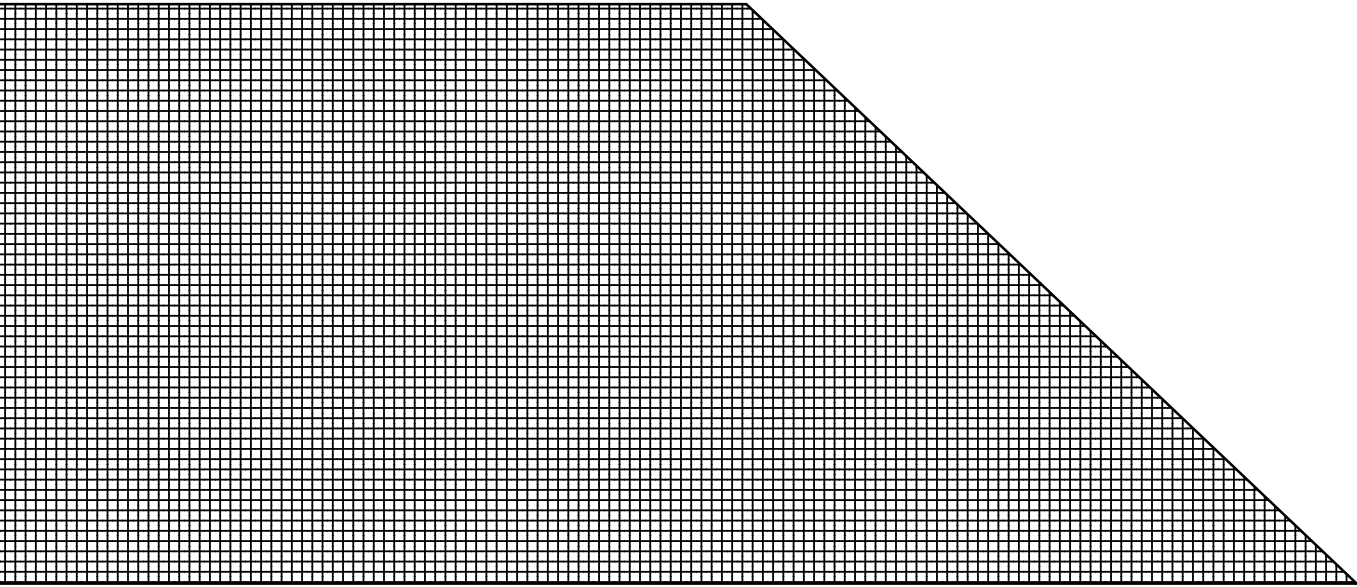
The trainings varied from a two-hour introduction on the basics of child advocacy to a two- or three-day Advocacy Training Academy with national experts, special guest speakers and working groups focused on a specific community concern.

These trainings gave us the opportunity to spend time with those who share a common concern for children and a strong commitment to civic engagement.

We learned a great deal from each other and shared in the hope and promise that comes from being with parents, teachers, counselors, school nutritionists, students, health professionals, public office holders and others seeking ways to improve the lives of children and their families on a local or statewide level.

This handbook is dedicated to all of those AACF staff and partners who helped conduct these trainings and the hundreds of participants who brought meaning to child advocacy in community life.

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What is Child Advocacy?

Before we jump into the “how to” of child advocacy, it’s best that we start with the “what is” of the subject. You’ve probably seen child advocates on many occasions, although they may not have gone by that title. For example, you may have seen a few committed parents circulate a petition to build a safe playground or a coalition of teachers, social workers and health professionals seek comprehensive school health services. You may have even witnessed a statewide coalition of parents, providers and business leaders try to expand access to after school and summer programs. All of these groups have something in common. They are all working to make life better for the children around them, and that, in essence, is child advocacy.

Child advocacy is basically “speaking up” for children who cannot speak for themselves. It means making bold proposals to address the challenges facing our children. And it is working to improve the life of the whole child, focusing on such issues as healthcare, education, poverty, child welfare, juvenile justice, child care, after school and summer programs, nutrition and other issues that affect the ability of families to care for their children. All of these issues impact the well being of a child and his/her ability to realize their full potential.

Child advocacy is about change - changes in personal behavior and attitude, changes in institutions and changes in laws and regulations. Advocates understand that creating change, even in a positive way, is difficult, and involves conflicting interests.

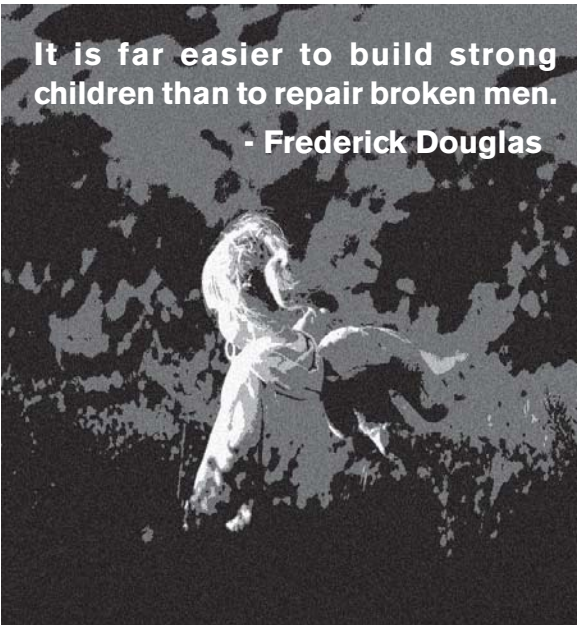
And finally, child advocates understand that they are bound by two simple principles. First, that every

child deserves vigorous representation using a variety of strategies, and second, that their work is based on a simple faith in the American political system.

Who Can be a Child Advocate?

The answer to this is simple. Anyone can be a child advocate! They come from a wide variety of backgrounds. They can be parents who want to make life better for their children and then realize that the needs of a larger group are not being met. Perhaps they are grandparents who have more time to reflect on community issues that are not being addressed. They can be teachers, social workers or medical professionals who understand how a change in policy can have a positive impact on a large number of children. But ultimately, child advocates are simply people that maintain a fierce belief that society can do better for our children.

It is far easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.
- Frederick Douglas



Advocacy Areas

There are four main areas in which child advocates work: administrative, legislative, electoral and legal. What type you pursue depends on your issue and what goals you are trying to accomplish.

Electoral Advocacy is a very visible form of advocacy work. Advocates can use political campaigns to raise issues and concerns to potential policy makers and the public. Children's issues consistently rank as a high priority with the electorate and candidates for public office.

Legislative Advocacy is perhaps the most common form of advocacy. It involves working with those who actually create the laws. A child advocate who "prowls the halls" of a state capitol, courthouse or city hall provides a powerful image to those creating the policy.

Administrative Advocacy focuses on the administrative branch of government. These are the people that put the laws into action. The target audience can be a commission, an agency or even an elected official's office. Advocates may serve as "watchdogs," provide testimony or urge the adoption of rules, regulations and procedures that assist in reaching a goal.

Legal Advocacy is usually a last resort; however, it can be a valuable tool for child advocates. A lawsuit can allow advocates to win victories in unpopular causes that will not succeed in the political arena. It's important to remember that litigation can be expensive, time-consuming and risky. It can create an atmosphere that can damage relationships with policy makers.

How to be an Advocate

And it's one, two, three ...what are we fighting for?

Obviously, before you begin an issue campaign, you'll need to have an issue! The needs of children are vast, and many issues are worthy of our attention. Most advocates enter the process interested in a particular issue resulting from a personal experience, a compelling story, or a long-held interest. However, advocates must also be open to looking at their issue area with a broader perspective.

A variety of other issues that relate to their area of concern may have a better chance of gaining public support. For example, an advocate may want to expand afterschool programs to reduce juvenile crime in their neighborhood, but the public or policy makers may be more focused on reducing teen



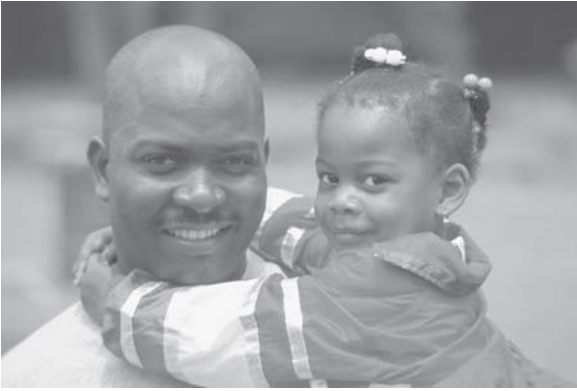
pregnancy, reducing teen smoking and drinking, or improving education outcomes. At this point the advocate can work with these interested parties to expand after school and summer programs to reach their goals. The question becomes “How do our goals benefit each other?”

Here are some additional questions that can be asked to determine if the issue you are considering has the potential for success.

- How many children are affected by the problem?
- Is the problem getting worse, is it about the same, or getting better?
- Can it be solved in the short term or long term?
- Who can be mobilized around this problem?
- Is the issue important to the public?

All of these questions help determine the potential impact that the issue will have on children, the potential for gaining public support, the strategy of the campaign and the odds of success.





Do Your Homework!

Now that you know what your issue is, it's time to do your homework. For many people, "doing the research" brings up images of cramped libraries or laboratories; but in this case, it simply means learning everything you can about your issue. You're going to be speaking about it so you'd better know what you're talking about! Research can help determine the extent of the problem, the specific things that need to be changed, and what changes have been successful in other communities. Research can be anything that provides information, from filings at the local clerk's office to interviews with people experienced with your issue. The next page shows a few research tips to keep in mind.

Hot Tip

When you start your research, keep in mind that most agencies and offices are beginning to post data on the internet. Call their administrative office and ask whether or not you can find your data online. This will save you valuable time.

- 👉 **Be Patient and Polite.** Most of the time, you are seeking data from people who have multiple requests, whether this is a county clerk, an elections office or a state agency. You'll get better service if you're not screaming at them to get your information. Be sure to thank them for their time and assistance.
- 👉 **Use Up-to-date Information.** Always check to make sure you're using the most current information possible. It will help you get a better picture of the situation. Old and dated information may not take into consideration recent policy changes.
- 👉 **Be Organized.** Once you collect all your data, compile it into an easy to read document. This will help you gain a better overall picture of your issue, rather than scattered documents, cds and recordings that seem to lack rhyme or reason.
- 👉 **Get Personal.** Research isn't all data. Get out there and talk to the people who are being affected. Listen to their concerns. Their stories can be very valuable in your efforts.

“Child advocates do not have to conduct original, scientifically based research. However, they do have to know how to count.”

- Fairness Is a Kid's Game: Children, Public Policy and Child Advocacy in the States, 1989

Get the Message

If you've ever paid attention to a political campaign, you'll probably remember a particular slogan or phrase repeated nearly every time you saw a commercial, heard a radio ad, read a pamphlet or heard someone speak. This phrase was their message. And more thought goes into it than you may think.

A message should encompass the true spirit of your campaign. It should be an appeal to your target audience and should take into consideration their values. What does your target audience feel about the issue? What do they value in their lives? Knowing these things can help you form a message that will hit them hard and get them thinking about your issue. For example, if you are trying to influence a group of parents, when you sit down to develop your message, you may think of their instinct to nurture or their desire to protect their children. Knowing this can help you form a message that will be tailored to them specifically.

Also keep in mind that you don't have to use the same exact message with everyone. If you're targeting multiple audiences, do the following. Take the central premise of your campaign (*e.g.* Increase the number of insured children), combine it with what you know about that group (*e.g.* Parents would do anything to keep their kids healthy.), and then use it to help form a message: "You'd do anything to keep your child healthy, now you can help other mothers do the same thing." The same message can often be "tweaked" based on what you know about a particular group.

Grab your partner, do-si-do!

As you're thinking about what tactics you'll use to reach your audience, you may begin to notice that while you may not be able to reach a certain person, there's another group that has a great relationship with them. That group, coincidentally, will also benefit from your issue's success. This is called developing strategic partners, also known as "coalition building."

The phrase "two heads are better than one" is true indeed. Joining forces with other groups not only provides access that may have not been possible before, but it also increases your resources. If you have 20 people in your group to make phone calls or send e-mails and you join with another group that has 100 members....well, you can see how much more effective that can be.

To find some strategic partners, think back to when you were initially pondering your issue. We asked you to think in broader terms. What other areas does my issue touch? For example, if we're looking at children's health, things like education, juvenile justice and tax policy are all affected, so what groups are interested in those areas? That's how you identify potential partners. By working together, you can greatly increase your chances of success.

**"If you have God, the law, the press
and the facts on your side, you have
a 50-50 chance of winning."**

Glazer and Glazer, 1986

It's all Tactical

So you've got your issue, you've done your research, you know what you want to say and who to say it to. You're ready to go, right? Wrong. You still need to decide *how* you're going to deliver that message. That's where your tactics come into play.

Tactics are the activities used to deliver your message. There are probably hundreds of different ones used throughout the country. However, there are a few major ones that can be divided up into three groups:



Lobbying. Lobbying is simply the act of explaining your position to someone in a position of power in an effort to sway their opinion. This can be anyone from a member of Congress to your neighbor down the street. If that person is your target audience and you're trying to change their mind about something, then lobbying is a definite way of reaching them. Lobbying can take several forms such as personal visits, phone calls, letters and e-mails. The important thing is that enough people contact the individual in order to make your point clear.



Earned (Free) Media. Many people believe that the media is a target audience. This is not true. In fact, the media is simply a way to *reach* your target audience. One way of doing this is to provide relevant information to the media, such as your message and supporting information, through a number of methods. You can hold press conferences to high-

light a certain problem, you can write letters-to-the-editor, you can write opinion editorials (also known as “op-eds”) or you can go on the radio or television as a special guest. These methods are called earned media because there’s no guarantee that the media will cover your issue the way you want, or at all for that matter.



Paid Media. If you want to make sure your message gets out the exact way you want, there’s one sure fire way to do it. Paid media is exactly what it sounds like. It’s media space for which you pay. This could be an ad in your local paper or magazine, a radio or television spot or even a billboard. The point is that you’ll get to say exactly what you want without it being influenced by the journalists writing the story. The downside is obviously the cost. And unfortunately, the better the coverage or ad placement, the higher the cost.

Other tactics might include holding community meetings or rallies to inform people and motivate them about your issue, sending out postcards or newsletters, or even using new technology such as blogs or text messages. The point is that through your research, you should now know a good deal about your target audience and that will help you determine the best way to reach them. If you know that they attend PTA meetings, see if you can get on the agenda, get a list of members and call or e-mail them. If you’re trying to reach a legislator, go visit them and have other members of your group do the same.

Conclusion

We hope that this handbook will be helpful in getting you on your way toward a successful child advocacy campaign. It is, of course, by no means a comprehensive guide to advocacy work, but really more of a quick glimpse. We encourage you to surf the web, hit the library, call Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families or visit us on the web at www.aradvocates.org where you can find a wealth of information through our CLIKS database. Another helpful tool is the “Child Advocacy Primer” created by Voices for America’s Children. It can be downloaded at www.voices.org.

And remember, no matter how hard the issue is or what obstacle we face, the payoff is always worth it. We’re the ones who speak for those that can’t speak for themselves. And that is better than any reward anyone could ever receive. Now is the time to get started, so what are you waiting for?

