

## Preface

The fact that you are reading this book suggests that you are particularly invested in helping improve the lives of children who have vulnerabilities that they themselves in no way chose to have. Children in foster care (care by adults who are nonrelatives) and kinship care (care by adults who are relatives) need the assistance of professionals and guardians who have competent knowledge and skills, a strong sense of ethics, and a big heart. Because of your current or future primary role in the lives of these children, we would like to point out that advocacy will be a central part of your work in helping these youth who rely on you for their care.

In this book we refer to “children in care” because we are including children who reside in both foster care and kinship care. Additionally, when we discuss those in foster care particularly, we refer to them as youth “in care”—rather than as “foster children”—because from a strengths perspective, it is vital for readers to remember that these youth are children first; while they may inhabit a child welfare system at a particular time in their life, this is merely an *aspect* of their identity and development as children rather than the *central focus*. To this end, when we crafted these words (contrary to those in the literature), we strove for this orientation. We will also refer to foster parents and kinship care providers collectively, at times, as “care providers.” Finally, “practitioners” are those current or

future professionals who typically have degrees or a background in social work, human services, or related fields.

“Advocacy,” as defined in a social work context, can be broadened to apply to everyone’s work in advancing the cause of youth in care; it “is the exclusive and mutual representation of a client(s) or a cause in a forum, attempting to systematically influence decision-making in an unjust or unresponsive system(s)” (Schneider and Lester 2001:64–68). It is essential for foster parents and kinship care parents as well as for practitioners to focus on influencing decision-making, if they are to become an effective voice for the youth entrusted to their care.

This book is structured on and adapted from a specific model of advocacy—Rae and Nicholas-Wolosuk’s “action-strategy model.” This model is based on six factors: (1) “solution-based incrementalism,” (2) a “bottoms-up approach,” (3) “macro social work practice for direct service workers,” (4) “savvy workers—strong clients/consumers,” (5) “social work values and the Code of Ethics,” and (6) “a systematic process” (2003:42). In adapting these principles to our book, we place emphasis throughout the text on how the process of advocating for youth in care: (1) can address needs, often one small step at a time; (2) is most often initiated by foster parents and practitioners, who are on the front line of service delivery; (3) considers the larger context in which needs emerge; (4) expects knowledgeable foster parents, kinship care providers, and practitioners on the front line to emphasize the strengths of the youth in their care and collaborate among themselves and with others (including the youth themselves as possible) to address youths’ needs; (5) resides in an ethical context and includes a respect for diversity, and (6) achieves its ends by following a series of steps (Rae and Nicholas-Wolosuk 2003).

Regarding this last point, Rae and Nicholas-Wolosuk describe the four steps of the action-strategy model: (1) dream about agency policy change; (2) analyze the policy situation related to the change idea; (3) develop a plan of action related to the change goal/idea, and (4) implement change strategy to accomplish approval of agency policy change (2003:49). Using these four steps as a foundation, we have structured each chapter below to include the following steps/subsections: identify the need; analyze the context; develop the plan; implement the plan. Additionally, each chapter includes a vignette at its beginning that is referred to throughout the chapter. While the vignettes vary in discussing the foster care or the kinship care context, we believe that the general points of advocacy remain

the same for both foster parents and kinship caregivers; we note points of difference when they do exist. Finally, every chapter contains an advocacy checklist (which reflects the structural sections of that chapter), discussion questions, and relevant Web sites giving further information.

The substantive areas of advocacy into which this book is organized reflect the hierarchy of the overall system that foster parents, kinship care providers, and practitioners inhabit and have the opportunity to advocate within. These correspond to the micro systems-interventions of the caregivers, the mezzo systems-interventions of organizations, and the macro systems-interventions of agencies, government, and community. The first two chapters (part I) address preparation for advocacy as foster parents and kinship caregivers, with practitioners' assistance, work both to verify for themselves that they are ready to become foster parents and kinship caregivers and to assess the range of youth issues they feel comfortable dealing with in parenting. Chapters 3 through 7 (part II) address advocating with organizations, that is, those service providers who are "part of the system" and yet so central to the lives of youth in care. These organizations, examples of where direct advocacy occurs, include the court system, the social services system, the educational system, the health and mental health systems, and interdisciplinary teams comprised of representatives of multiple systems. Finally, the last three chapters (part III) focus first on advocacy through policy change at the agency and legislative levels and then on the role of the community in supplementing, or often leading, advocacy efforts.

This book is written for four audiences: foster parents, kinship caregivers, service practitioners, and undergraduate and graduate students intending to pursue careers in child and family services. While social work is the principal profession that focuses on advocating for youth in care, it is not the only one that works with these youth, and therefore the scope of this book has been expanded to include *all* practitioners who work with children, including essential professional volunteers known as "court-appointed special advocates" (CASA). And while we focus on issues for practitioners to consider when working with foster parents and kinship caregivers, this book can also aid practitioners working with youth in care who reside in "higher levels of care"—group homes and residential treatment facilities (RTFs).

Regardless of your role—as practitioner, as kinship caregiver, as foster parent, as student in a child welfare course and/or field placement—knowing

how, when, and among whom to advocate on behalf of the children and adolescents who are disenfranchised and residing in the foster care system—or with relative caregivers—will be crucial to your effective work. The presence and quality of advocacy by care providers and practitioners can make or break a placement. You are both empowered and obligated to pursue the best advocacy that you can.

We hope that this book guides you in “getting the best out of the system” for the children you have decided to work with and are charged with helping. We wish you every success in your efforts.