

A Model for Developing the Next Generation of Future Child Advocates

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Introduction

Mel Schneiderman - APSAC Board Member

The National APSAC Board recently endorsed Future Child Advocates (FCA) as an important initiative in the field of child maltreatment and anti-bullying and has agreed to form an advisory committee to help further the goals of the project. APSAC will become Future Child Advocates' national multidisciplinary partner, lending its credibility, providing a network of national and local experts to speak at club events, and helping to identify community sites for student volunteers. It is our hope that students across the nation will become APSAC affiliate or student members and serve on local, state, and national committees to further APSAC's aspirations. We are a leading voice in the field, intending to increase awareness of issues of child abuse and neglect as well as bullying among college students and the general public.

What Is the Problem?

All forms of violence, child abuse, harassment, and bullying continue to be an unfortunate reality of today's society. This is especially true for more vulnerable populations of children and young people.

Work has been done to provide greater support and attention to this concern, along with better training of professionals who are more directly involved with such children at risk. Since 2012, policy developers at the state and federal levels have introduced expanded guidelines in this area, such as licensure requirements that mandate additional training workshops to enhance understanding and promote interventions related to abuse, bullying, and harassment, especially for school-based professionals seeking certification or renewals across many disciplines (Sacco, D. T., Silbaugh, K., et al., 2012). New York State, for example, added 6 hours to the already required 4 hours of mandated training for school-based professionals seeking certification. But it is not enough! More work is needed not only to sensitize professionals but also to expose the next generation of citizens and future parents to these realities regardless of chosen profession. Each person can do something to help support and protect children in his or her life and community and thus become that needed child advocate.

Finding Solutions

The Future Child Advocates (FCA) initiative was launched in 2012 as a vehicle to bring the issues and concerns of

bullying and child abuse prevention and intervention to the next generation of citizens and diverse professionals in each community. The idea was to establish model undergraduate and graduate clubs focused on advocacy in the areas of bullying and child abuse. Student organizations and clubs can play a strategic role in intellectual and civic responsibility, thereby bridging academic discourse in the classroom and the need to support a human community striving for equity and justice. The FCA club concept offers undergraduate and graduate students opportunities to enhance or clarify their future professional roles while providing a greater understanding of what is needed to ensure a safe, enriching, and positive world for their own children along with understanding what role they can play in advocacy on multiple levels. Identified goals for Future Child Advocates clubs include the following:

- » Public Awareness events developed within the campus community around issues and advocacy related to anti-bullying and child abuse interventions.
- » Professional Development activities (such as speakers, workshops, and readings) which can expand student knowledge and identify community needs across targeted child abuse and anti-bullying areas. Libraries and community-national partners can help by identifying local experts as speakers or developing fact sheets or reading lists on critical topics. Other activities may include site visits to medical centers, child advocacy centers, or court locations to learn more about processes and procedures involved in child maltreatment cases. Libraries can also provide space or support for facilitated conversations on issues or demonstrations of unique programs in this area of work.
- » Community Service in the area of child abuse and bullying prevention and intervention can be done in a variety of ways. Multiple opportunities exist to volunteer at a local child advocacy center, for example, working with children and families in waiting room areas or raising funds for needed books and materials for these locations and families. School-based community service might involve leading various types of anti-bullying sessions during or after school.
- » Opportunities for all clubs to develop skills in Advocacy and Fundraising are important for to achieve projected outcomes.

Two formal FCA clubs have been developed as models: an

undergraduate program at Fordham University, Bronx, New York, and a graduate program at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York. For more information, visit the Web site at www.futurechildadvocates.org.

Moving Forward

To sustain the work at these two pilot institutions and to promote the FCA concept among other higher education communities, it was decided to secure a formal partnership with an appropriate multidisciplinary national professional organization. Students becoming involved in this type of campus club are seeking exposure to multiple disciplines and aspects of child maltreatment, prevention, and intervention. Research also documents graduate students developing stronger professional identity as a result of out-of-class experiences (Lidden, D. L., Wilson, M. E., et al., 2014). Furthermore, students often transfer their focus of interest beyond their immediate community as enhanced knowledge broadens their horizons. Tapping into that widening circle of possibilities beyond university boundaries seems to hold promise for sustaining this particular child advocacy model. In addition, faculty can have greater confidence in supporting the activities of students participating in an FCA club given added oversight from national experts who could also provide materials useful to professional research and course development.

Given the vision and overall mission of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children and its interdisciplinary membership from around the world, FCA leadership sought to establish a formal connection with APSAC and its statewide chapters to help develop this next generation of child advocates. Partnership possibilities with APSAC include the following:

- » Creation of a Committee or Sub-Committee within the APSAC structure to ensure that APSAC is meeting the needs of undergraduate and graduate students interested in child advocacy in these areas.
- » Preparation of a listing of recommended articles across disciplines that could be available to FCA faculty advisors and student leadership and incorporated into club meetings or advocacy efforts.
- » Identification of an APSAC member to serve as a liaison with the national leadership of FCA, to help identify current topics that should be included in the FCA work at the college or university level in addition to assisting in questions and issues that might arise.
- » Provision of a listing of recommended local speakers for approved FCA club meetings, workshops, or events that would be appropriate for student groups and where possible encourage their involvement. Site visit recommendations also could be included.

- » In collaboration with the FCA national administrative staff, the APSAC liaison or committee could participate in reviewing the approval of new clubs, helping to ensure oversight and monitoring where necessary.
- » Provide to club faculty advisors free access to at least the APSAC Advisor and its online library for as long as they serve in this capacity for their university student organization.
- » Provide opportunities for FCA student leadership and graduates to serve on APSAC state or national committees where appropriate.
- » Help sponsor in collaboration with national FCA a biennial event that would provide opportunities for clubs to share their activities, outcomes, and challenges.
- » Assist in the design of an assessment tool to document the sustainability and support the replication of this initiative.

There are no simple and totally evidence-based models for securing a safe, quality world for children for today or the future. However, the time is right to build upon ideas that seem to hold promise for continuing to encourage a child advocacy agenda for the next generation of citizens and professionals. The work is not done, but positive changes can continue to occur if each of us does his or her part.

References

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About the Author

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