

**COLLABORATING
AND ADVOCATING**
for children and
youth in care



Never underestimate the power of people
who wish to change the future.

– Margaret Mead



Ministry of
Children and Family
Development



As a foster parent, you have the skills to educate others about caregiving issues and advocate on behalf of the child or youth in your care, their families and yourself.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development's social workers are committed to enhancing the participation of children, youth and their families in decision making.

Advocacy is recognized, encouraged and supported as a way of helping children, youth and their families have their views heard and considered. Here are some guidelines to assist those working with children and youth.

Building Relationships and Awareness

Developing good working relationships with those involved in the lives of children and youth is an effective approach to advocacy. Collaborative relationships:

- promote shared understanding and mutual goals
- enhance positive planning for children and youth
- encourage a team approach that has the best interests, needs, and rights of children and youth at the centre

You bring experience and particular knowledge about children and youth to your relationships with others. Developing these relationships provides an opportunity for you to:

- champion children's and youth's strengths and abilities
- educate others about children's and youth's needs
- champion child and youth participation by ensuring that their views are heard and considered in decisions affecting them.
- educate others about parenting issues especially as they relate to children requiring care and support services
- advocate for what you believe is required to care for children or youth and to encourage their reconnection with family, extended family, or someone with whom they could have a stable, life-long relationship
- increase awareness, respect, and understanding of caregiving issues



Communication skills

Any kind of effective advocacy involves good communication skills. Whether advocating for yourself or for someone else, you will be most successful when you have the ability to say what is important to you and to listen to what other people are saying. Here are three principles to work toward when communicating:

1. communicate clearly by:
 - using a reasonable tone of voice
 - listening to what other people have to say
 - asking for explanations if you do not understand what is being said
 - ensuring others understand what you are saying
2. participate in creating an environment where everyone is treated with consideration, trust, honesty and respect
3. take responsibility for your own feelings – it is important that all participants feel safe from verbal abuse and intimidation
 - if feelings get in the way of communication, take a short break to gain perspective



Communication methods

There are several methods of communication — telephone, letter, email or in person — each serves different purposes at different times. Consider who is the best person to hear your message – someone who will listen to you and someone who has the power to make changes. Perhaps in a particular situation, it would be most helpful to communicate with a group of people such as the team that supports the child or youth. Depending on your audience, choose a method of communication that will get your message across effectively.

- be clear about the purpose of your communication
- create an outline of the points you want to make
- propose suggestions on how the issue could be resolved from your perspective
- if you have the support of others, request that they join your advocacy efforts
- ask for feedback, a response, and follow-up

Advocacy skills

By learning advocacy skills, you can improve your ability to influence people and organizations that affect your life and increase awareness of caregiving issues. To be effective:

- understand your needs and interests
- communicate as clearly and effectively as possible
- ask for help when you need it
- maintain your caring, commitment, conviction, curiosity, and creativity

Advocating for a child or youth receiving care or support services

When advocating for a child or youth, it is essential to:

- keep a child-centred approach – the child's or youth's best interests take precedence
- be clear about your role and the role of other members of the team. An advocate ensures that the child's views are heard and considered
- include the child or youth in the decision making process in keeping with their rights under Section 70, *Child, Family and Community Service Act*



Supporting others to advocate for themselves

There are several ways you can support children, youth and their families to advocate for themselves:

- support and assist children and youth and their families to use their voice, to clarify their concerns, needs, and wants, and to brainstorm ideas
- coach them to learn communication skills and to develop good working relationships, how to obtain information and keep records, and how to negotiate
- help them create an advocacy plan including who might best support them
- support them as they learn to advocate for themselves
- by being a good advocate for yourself, you are being a role model for the children and youth in your care and their families.



Focus on the issue

Here are three techniques to help get the results you want:

1. Separate people from problems; don't take things personally.
2. Try to see the situation from the other person's perspective.
3. Focus on interests rather than positions – discussing interests increases the likelihood of a satisfactory result.

Obtaining information/documentation

Gather all the information that will help support your interests and point of view.

- Find out about the rights, regulations, and policies relating to your concern.
- Keep records of the history of your situation:
 - who you have contacted
 - what you were told
 - communication to and from you
 - anything else that will help explain your situation as you go through the process
- Take notes, have someone take notes for you, or tape your conversations if you receive permission.
- You have the right to review your file – you can informally request information from your file from your social worker or make a formal request through the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* for the file itself.

Getting Support

It is OK to ask for help. Help can come from a number of sources, including:

- another foster parent
- other people who play a role in the life of a child or youth
- your local foster parent association
- local foster parent support agencies
- the British Columbia Federation of Foster Parent Associations
- the Federation of Aboriginal Foster Parents



Advocacy Plan

- What concern or issue would you like addressed?
- Who can best help you resolve your concern?
- What is needed to resolve the problem? The options?
- What information do you need about each option?
- How do the options compare? Choose the one that best suits the needs of the child or youth in your care.
- Do any further actions need to be taken? If so, find out if you need to know any more information, how to collect it, who to contact, and how best to communicate (in person, by phone, letter, fax, or email).
- Is there an appeal process?
- Remain committed!

You are an advocate!

An advocate is a person who is a backer, promoter, believer, activist, campaigner, or sponsor who suggests or supports an idea or way of doing something.

References

Ombudsman's Office

Office for Children and Youth

B. C. Federation of Foster Parent Associations

Federation of Aboriginal Foster Parents Association

Useful Contacts

Federation of Aboriginal Foster Parents

Tel. 604-291-7091

Toll Free Number: 1-866-291-7091

Fax: 604-291-7098

Website: <http://fafp.ca>

B.C. Federation of Foster Parent Associations

Toll Free Number: 1-800-663-9999

Website: <http://www.bcfosterparents.ca>

Federation of B.C. Youth in Care Networks

Toll Free Number: 1—800-565-8055

Website: <http://www.fbcyicn.ca>

Local and regional foster parent support agencies:

Check local and regional telephone directories

Child and Youth Officer for British Columbia

Victoria telephone number: 250-356-0831

Toll Free Number: 1-800-476-3933

Email address: cyo@gov.bc.ca

Ombudsman's Office

Toll Free Number: 1-800-567-3247

Website: <http://www.ombud.gov.bc.ca>



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