

Career Paths in Child Advocacy

In this section you will find:

Career Paths
Job Descriptions
Areas of Law
Profiles of Child Advocates

Career Paths: How Do I Get a Job in Children's Law?

Most career paths in the children's law field have bends, bumps and blow outs – there are many ways to get a job in children's law but no one right way, path or route. Sorry, grasshopper. Check Finding Your Career in Children's Law and scan the career paths, challenges, knowledge and advice of lawyers who've made the grade.

This section also contains short general job descriptions of traditional, new and exciting, and far-out areas of law that still affect children.

Finding Your Career in Children's Law/Job Descriptions

There are a lot of positions that an attorney can hold while working in the child advocacy field. Some are listed here.

Areas of Law Affecting Children

Many types of law affect children's issues. Some you might expect and others you might not. Here is a list of some of the areas of law that affect children's rights.

- ❑ Traditional Areas of Law Affecting Children
- ❑ New and Exciting Areas of Law Affecting Children
- ❑ Far Out Areas of Law that Still Affect Children

Attorney Profiles in Child Advocacy

We have included profiles of attorneys in the child advocacy field so that you can see how some lawyers have found their way to their job.

Career Paths: Road Map to Child Advocacy

A question the Center is often asked is: what is the best way to get a job in Child Advocacy? The short answer is, there is no one best way. The long answer is, the best way is the way that works for you. Here are the paths taken by three of the staff members of the ABA Center on Children and the Law—direct routes, circular routes and detours—bumps included for free.

(Note to Center Staff: if you would like to write your own path and submit it, we would be happy to have it. Like the profiles, we could rotate the stories in on the site. We just ask that you write your story, trying to keep to the format and identify your path—direct, circular, or detour)

The Direct Route

Mimi Laver, Esq. is the Associate Director of Child Welfare with the ABA Center on Children and the Law. She focuses on helping states implement the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) and on legal representation of parties in dependency cases, the theme of her book: *Foundations for Success: Strengthening Your Agency Attorney Office*.

Mimi always knew she wanted to help kids when she grew up. In high school she interned with the Child Advocacy Unit in Philadelphia. At Vassar College she majored in psychology in college with an emphasis on child development. While in college she taught nursery school and took a course in child abuse education. When she finished college she had to decide whether to pursue a Ph.D. in Psychology or a JD in Law—law won.

She went to Temple University School of Law with a career goal of child advocacy and public interest. It was the interest in child advocacy that got Mimi through law school. She worked in the Food Stamp Clinic and for the Philadelphia Child Advocacy Unit in her third year.

When Mimi looked for a child advocacy job, she really wanted to work for the Child Advocacy Unit but they were not hiring. She instead got a job as a agency attorney for the City Solicitor's unit in Philadelphia. When the Child Advocacy Unit was hiring, Mimi again applied for a job but didn't get it. Six months later she was offered a job at the unit but she declined and stayed with the Solicitor's office for seven years until she came here to the ABA Center on Children and the Law.

The Circular Route

Anne Marie Lancour, Esq. is the Legal Training Director with the ABA Center on Children and the Law. She is a national expert on child abuse and neglect, termination of parental rights, adoption, and foster care. She works to reduce adoption delays, produces teletrainings, drafts legal manuals, and trains on a variety of child welfare topics.

Anne Marie has always worked with children or on children's issues—she just wasn't sure that's what she wanted to do with her career. In high school she tutored children at a nearby elementary school in reading. At LeMoyne College, Anne Marie majored in English Communications and volunteered with low-income children, teaching them how to read and write. She kept law school

in the back of her mind but wasn't convinced she wanted to go through three more years of college. When she graduated from LeMoyne, after a short stint in retail (ok, she sold cheese for a year) she went on to get a Masters degree in Teaching English from Binghamton University and worked at her former high school teaching English. She loved the kids but still felt the pull to do something more.

After teaching for three years, Anne Marie attended law school at Western New England College School of Law. She took every course they offered on family law (all three of them). She volunteered for the Housing Law Clinic her first year. She worked in the Law Library for two years and then clerked for the litigation section of a law firm her third year.

After graduating from law school, Anne Marie worked in contract law for a year and realized that the pull of children's law was still there. She spoke with a long-time family friend who was an attorney and said she wanted to be a litigator. He gave her advice that would change her career. He advised if she really wanted to be a litigator, the best place to do this is in public interest law. She interviewed with the District Attorney's and County Attorney's offices and ending working for Broome County Department of Social Services. Finally, Anne Marie found what she wanted to do for kids. She litigated child abuse and neglect matters, termination of parental rights cases and child support issues. She stayed with the County for three and one half years before coming to work for the ABA Center on Children and the Law.

The Detour Route ↩

Mark Hardin, Esq. is the Director of Child Welfare for the ABA Center on Children and the Law. He works on child welfare and child maltreatment issues, recently focusing on court improvement and implementation of federal child welfare legislation. His books, monographs, and articles address a wide range of child welfare issues.

Before he entered law school, Mark knew he wanted a career in public interest law. He just didn't know it would be in child advocacy. From his college days at the University of California at Berkeley to law school at the University of Oregon, he kept focused on public interest issues. For example, he wrote his law review comment on environmental law.

Mark started his legal career at Multnomah County Legal Aid in Portland, Oregon. After three years working at different units of legal aid he was "forcibly rotated into Legal Aid's Family Law Center." That rotation changed Mark's career forever. Once he worked in family law, Mark said that he "thought it was the most meaningful work in legal aid."

After he had been at Legal Aid for four years, Mark saw an ad for a job at a Research Institute at Portland State University, involving two projects: Permanency Planning for Children in Foster Care and Employment Discrimination Against Persons With Epilepsy. He successfully applied for the position and took the job, thinking it would be a short-term sabbatical from his career as a litigator. After working at the Research Institute for 2 ½ years, he came to the ABA Center on Children and the Law.

Finding Your Career in Children's Law/Job Descriptions

There are a lot of positions that an attorney can hold while working directly in the child advocacy field. Some are listed here.

Judge/Judicial Officers: ensures due process is afforded to all parties who appear in court. Makes decisions on questions of fact and law. Has other administrative duties. Has broad discretion. Ensures safety, well being, and permanency of children. Best if familiar and comfortable with family court issues.

Agency Attorney: represents local (and state) child welfare agencies in and out of court during all legal steps of a case. Works on various issues including: abuse and neglect, termination of parental rights, child support, foster care, administrative hearings, contract review and other tasks. Works with agency administrators and caseworkers. Litigates cases in court. Familiar with child welfare statutes, regulations and policies. Excellent writing and people skills are important with an ability to clearly communicate ideas and concepts.

Children's Attorney/Guardian ad Litem: There are two different models of representing children: representing the child's wishes v. representing the child's best interests. The American Bar Association strongly feels that a child should have an attorney who is the child's legal representative who will advocate for what the child wants. A Guardian ad Litem model of representation allows the guardian to substitute their judgment for the child's and present what the Guardian feels is in the child's best interests even though this may differ from what the child wishes. An attorney in either of these roles must be knowledgeable about child abuse and neglect issues, family or juvenile court procedures. The attorney must be comfortable with children and understand developmental and psychological issues for children.

Parent's Attorney: represents the parent's best interests in family or juvenile court. Ensures that the parent's due process rights are upheld and that the parent gets fair and accurate representation. Should be familiar with court procedures and have excellent litigation skills. Helpful if knowledgeable about substance abuse and mental issues as 80% of parents involved in family court cases have some involvement with substance abuse.

Prosecutor: in criminal cases where a child is the perpetrator or where child is a victim. Represents the local jurisdiction in court. May be part of the District Attorney's office. Where a child is the perpetrator, litigates the cases in court to ensure that justice is carried out and that the child receives an appropriate sentence. Where the child is the victim, works with the local child welfare agency to ensure that the child is protected from future harm and is not traumatized in court.

Mediator: helps parties to an action reach agreement on contentious issues. Works in certain types of child welfare cases and attempts to reach solutions that are acceptable to all parties involved. Mediation can be beneficial to children and can assist parents to "buy into" the process.

Court Improvement Officer: each state's highest court administers a federally funded court improvement project. The court improvement officer administers this project statewide and works on improving family and juvenile courts in the state.

Public Defender: represents the child in an juvenile delinquency case or a parent in a case where criminal charges are pending that involve the same facts that brought the child into the child welfare system.

Law Firms: can work on these cases on a pro-bono or for-hire basis as children's or parent's attorneys .

Areas of Law Affecting Children

Many types of law affect children's issues. Some you might expect and others you might not. Here is a list of some of the areas of law that affect children's rights.

Traditional Areas of Law Affecting Children

- Child Abuse and Neglect
- Termination of Parental Rights
- Education Law
- Special Education
- Health Law
- Child Support
- Delinquency
- Substance Abuse
- Court Improvement

New and Exciting Areas of Law Affecting Children

- Immigration
- Housing
- Criminal Law
- Domestic Relations Law
- Domestic Violence
- Emancipation
- Medicaid
- Victims Rights
- Guardianship

Far Out Areas of Law that Still Affect Children

- Contracts
- Confidentiality Laws

Reproductive Laws
Labor Law
Property
Landlord/Tenant
Torts
Tax Liability

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #1: K. Paige Berntson

Summary

I am a Youth Policy Advocate for Family and Children's Services in Minneapolis. It's a nonprofit agency whose mission is to strengthen families and communities in all their various forms. I graduated from law school in May 2000.

CAREER PATH

I worked as a child caretaker for numerous families while in college. After college, I worked as a houseparent, living with 12 young girls at a children's home. Then, I attended law school with a focus on children and the law. I currently volunteer as a Guardian ad Litem at Children's Law Center of Minnesota representing youth in child protection matters. In my current job as a Youth Policy Advocate, I advocate on children and youth issues in the Minnesota legislature.

CHALLENGES

Some of the challenges include the low pay and the inability to make everything just right for every child. However, on the plus side, just getting to know one special child can make it all worth it.

KNOWLEDGE

To work in children's law, you need to understand what it's like to be the youth you are advocating for. Also, knowing the legal, social service, and educational systems is helpful. Most important, however, is the ability to listen to a child and make them feel that they are being heard.

ADVICE

Right now, with the huge amount of loans law students must take on, it may be financially hard to make child advocacy your lifelong career. However, it can be done, and if you have the passion to do it, you should not give up. There are so many children out there who need your help.

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #2: Richard Cozzola

Summary

I'm an attorney with the Legal Assistance Foundation in Chicago handling Juvenile Court child protection cases. I have been a child advocate for 23 years and an attorney for 21 years.

CAREER PATH

I started as a grade school teacher. While I was in law school, I did my first year summer internship with the State's Attorney Child Protection Unit. I also had a part-time law school job with the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse writing legal articles and one with Juvenile Law Project of the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago. After law school, I became a staff attorney with Legal Services of Eastern Michigan learning other poverty law issues. Then, I got a job as a supervising attorney at Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic representing parents in child protection and adolescents in delinquency. I also was a Trial Skills Teacher for NITA. Later, I was Supervisor of Training for the Juvenile Unit of the Cook County Public Guardian's Office. Before my present job, I was Program Director at Loyola's ChildLaw Program.

CHALLENGES

The big challenge is understanding that children need caring families, that when we all go home at night feeling good about doing good, a child needs a caring adult to watch over, mentor, hold, etc. him/her. We too often view children in isolation. We remove them from placements or parents or blame foster parents or biological parents, because it makes us feel like we are doing something, not necessarily because it will really help the child. Supporting the caring adults in a child's life is not easy and has some risks. But if we are serious about a child's best interests, we have to be serious about supporting parents and foster parents as well as holding them accountable.

KNOWLEDGE

To work in this field, you must have multi-disciplinary skills to know when you have to ask questions and access other professions. You also need the ability to self reflect on how your own issues affect your decision-making.

ADVICE

Learn through internships. Get experience in representing all sides (parent, child, state) if you can so that you understand all the sides in a case. To find a job in this area, make connections both in the law (co-counsel, judges, teachers) and out (psychologists, social workers). Get good in something—for me it was being a trial lawyer and teaching trial skills.

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #3: Judith Larsen

Summary

I am a solo practitioner in the child abuse and neglect field in Washington, D.C. I have been doing this work for 14 years. I graduated from law school 24 years ago.

CAREER PATH

During law school, I worked at the Child Advocacy Clinic. I got sidetracked into government service on graduation, working for the Environmental Protection Agency. I grew dissatisfied with government work and my inability to make a difference in people's lives. That's when I reoriented my legal career toward children's issues. I litigate in D.C. courts on behalf of families. After several years of practice, I expanded into policy development, writing, and training.

CHALLENGES

The best thing about being a child advocate is the great satisfaction of being with children, seeing the world from their eyes, and helping human beings in practical, tangible ways. The biggest challenge is the inevitable and exhausting intensity of involvement. The lack of responsiveness to children's needs by government agencies and service providers is also a challenge.

KNOWLEDGE

To be a child advocate, you need a big heart and a willingness to right wrongs.

ADVICE

If an instinct tells you that work with children and families will be satisfying, try it for at least a year. Be sure you have support from people experienced in the field. It is a complex area and you will need legal guidance and emotional support.

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #4: Craig Goodmark

Summary I work on special education law as an attorney with Kramer & Thomas, LLC, in Atlanta, Georgia. I graduated from law school three years ago.

CAREER PATH I clerked at ACLU during summer in law school. I became interested in juvenile issues while in school and participated in the University of Florida Juvenile Law Clinic.

CHALLENGES What I like about being a child advocate is providing a crucial service to a community of people that otherwise would not receive any representation. I also like being able to ensure that every child's education is at least considered. The challenges of the job include being a child psychologist as well as attorney, working with a family unit instead of only one client, and dealing with overabundance of need and scarcity of services.

KNOWLEDGE The only skill you need to do this is the desire to work for children. As an advocate, you must be compassionate to your client without losing sight of your role in the client's life. Also, you must be able to entertain conflicts and see them through to resolution. If you are not ready for the fight, you shouldn't get into the ring.

ADVICE If you want to work in special education law, study family law, administrative law, the rights of juveniles under the federal constitution, and the statutory rights of children. Learn to recognize a disabled child both from an intake interview as well as from evaluative testing. To find a job in this area, network within the legal community. Work well at your job during law school and introduce yourself to everyone you see. Then come back and remind these people later that you are a legitimate candidate that they have already encountered in the legal community.

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #5: Keely Anne Magyar

Summary

I am an attorney with Lawyers for Children America in Washington, D.C. I train and support private and government attorneys to do *pro bono* work on behalf of abused and neglected children. I graduated from law school in 1998.

CAREER PATH

Although I have always wanted to work with and for young people, I didn't decide to pursue a legal career until my third year of college. I went to law school to become a children's advocate. During law school, I had internships in different kinds of advocacy (direct services, impact litigation, policy work, lobbying, community organizing), and different issues (kinship care, abuse/neglect, guardianship). I also participated in my school's general legal services clinic for two years. Through this work, I met many prominent child advocates in both California and Connecticut. Plus, I got to know a number of other organizations by interviewing for summer employment. During my third year, I was unsuccessful in finding my dream job. I put the job search on hold until after the bar exam. After five months of unemployment, I found a job at the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford, Connecticut, which was a perfect first job for me. After two years at the Center, I decided to move to D.C. where I found my current job.

CHALLENGES

The pluses of being a child advocate are being able to educate and empower children and families about their legal rights, the opportunity for creative lawyering in a number of arenas, and the sense of community among classes of children's advocates nationally and locally. The work is never boring. The downside is being unable to change the underlying culture giving rise to abuse, the fear of making a decision that will harm a child, and a nagging feeling that you wish you could be more than just a lawyer to clients.

KNOWLEDGE

To be a good child advocate, you need to respect children and their families, be able to discuss matters differently with different audiences, and have good listening skills. It also helps to have a

gentle and genuine personality as well as a basic knowledge of child development.

ADVICE

Do not settle for a job outside of child advocacy if there is any way to avoid it. These jobs are relatively rare, so be as patient as you can. If you are going to relocate, try to find a job before you move so you won't feel pressured to take the first job that comes your way after you leave your old job. Be willing, at least at first, to sacrifice your dream city for your dream job. If your goal is to represent neglected kids in San Francisco, then it is probably a better professional move to get a job working with abused kids in rural area of Kentucky than to take a job at doing tax law in San Francisco.

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #6: Alan A. Pfeffer

Summary

I work for the New York State Office of Children and Family Services in Rensselaer, New York. I have been in child advocacy for 21 years and an attorney for 28 years.

CAREER PATH

I started in private practice but also took a part-time position in the New York State Senate as legislative counsel to a senator. Then I became a senior attorney for the New York State Department of Social Services. In 1979, I became Executive Director of the Community Facilities Project Guarantee Fund, a public benefits corporation established to provide loan guarantees to build community facilities, principally day care centers. I have continued this duty in addition to my other responsibilities.

CHALLENGES

My function is resolve through either administrative appeal or negotiation federal funding disputes. My job requires a detailed knowledge of the federal rules related to the various federal programs as well as cost principles.

KNOWLEDGE

To work in children's law, you need good advocacy skills and the ability to communicate well.

ADVICE

Study family and administrative law.

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #7: Jessica Singal Shapiro

Summary

I work for the City of Philadelphia Law Department representing the Department of Human Services in child welfare cases. I graduated from law school in 1996.

CAREER PATH

When I was in law school, I was one of the first students to be involved in the Boston College Law School Juvenile Rights Advocacy Project. In this program, I examined conditions of confinement for youth in Massachusetts. It was this program that peaked my interest in child welfare.

CHALLENGES

As an attorney for the City of Philadelphia Department of Human Services, I find my job to be both rewarding and demanding. I am rewarded when the children in my cases receive permanency. However, it is difficult to manage the volume of cases.

KNOWLEDGE

To be a good child advocate, you need good litigation skills, a broad base of knowledge in the law, and compassion.

ADVICE

Try not to take the stress of your job home with you! To find a position, try networking and law school career services.

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #8: Kelly Smith

Summary I am a Cochise County Public Defender who represents children in juvenile delinquency cases in Bisbee, Arizona. I graduated from law school in 1999.

CAREER PATH This is my first job out of law school. I always wanted to be a Public Defender, but I wasn't sure about juvenile work. Now I love it!

CHALLENGES Here in Arizona, there is minimal juvenile law so it is a great place to make new law. I've done many special actions and appeals, which are very interesting. The biggest challenge for me is dealing with the parents and with Child Protective Services. Another plus in working with children is you have contact with them early and can really make a difference in their lives.

KNOWLEDGE To be a good children's attorney, you need patience, passion, and dedication.

ADVICE When something is hard or challenges you, that's what you probably should do!

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #9: Claudia Wright

Summary

I work at the University of Florida Levin College of Law in Gainesville, Florida. I have been a child advocate for my entire legal career—23 years.

CAREER PATH

I started as a juvenile public defender. Then, I went to the ACLU National Prison Project to work on a class action to improve conditions in juvenile institutions. I worked for the Youth Law Center for a year. I moved to the Florida State University Child Advocacy Center, then to my current position heading the law school's Juvenile Law Clinic.

CHALLENGES

The positives are the great clients, challenging legal work, and job satisfactions. The negatives are the long hours, low pay (what else is new?), and the failure of our systems to take care of our clients' needs. It is sometimes frustrating to work with political systems. It is also difficult because of the lack of appreciation and status of our work by the Bar in general.

KNOWLEDGE

To work in this area, you need a good understanding of federal constitutional law as well as litigation skills. You also must be able to work well with difficult clients in difficult situations.

ADVICE

Find a mentor. Don't be afraid to start with the hardest kids. Finally, be prepared to commit to social change over the long haul. I am inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's quote: "Injustice must be made visible." Sometimes that is all we can do, but if so that is enough.

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #10: Peter W.D. Wright

Summary I am a solo practitioner in Deltaville, Virginia who handles special education cases. I have been an attorney for 23 years and a child advocate for 35 years.

CAREER PATH I was considered borderline mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed in second grade. It all started there. Now, in addition to my legal practice, I am on the advisory boards of several organizations and schools. I also maintain websites on special education issues (smartieps.com and specialedadvocacy.com).

CHALLENGES The biggest challenge of being a child advocate is maintaining a practice on low income.

KNOWLEDGE It helps to have a background in psychology and human behavior. You also must have negotiating skills and know how to conduct cross-examination.

ADVICE To work in special education, become a skilled trial lawyer. You will also need to learn to read and interpret educational and psychological tests. Gain experience by working in a cottage setting with disturbed children.

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #11: Candice Maze

Summary

I am an attorney with Lawyers for Children America in Miami, Florida. I also serve on several advisory boards and work with other advocacy organizations. I graduated from law school in 1997.

CAREER PATH

I volunteered with children in high school and college. I went to law school to advocate for the rights and interests of children. During law school, I took every opportunity to gain experience and knowledge in the field. I volunteered as a CASA, I earned a Kellogg Child Welfare Law Fellowship to work for an experienced children's lawyer, and I participated in my law school's Child Advocacy Law Clinic. I took as many courses as possible that were relevant to my interest in child advocacy and issues affecting children.

CHALLENGES

The best part of being a child advocate is having the opportunity to do something I love every day. Even in the most frustrating moments, I know that my efforts are having an impact on the life of a child. The downside is that child advocacy is not a highly valued legal job, so often you have to be extremely creative in order to make a living as a child advocate.

KNOWLEDGE

You must be creative and able to withstand a great deal of frustration and a number of obstacles. You should definitely understand the broad picture and political landscapes of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, locally, statewide and nationally. You must care about your work and be able to appreciate and relish the small victories. Most of all, you must have a passion, a fire in your belly, about the legal needs and interests of children.

ADVICE

Take as many classes as you can while in law school related to litigation skills and juvenile law. Also, participate in any legal clinic or program that offers services to children. Volunteer as a CASA or Guardian Ad Litem. Obtain public interest fellowships or

volunteer for an attorney who works in child law. Get as much courtroom experience as you can while in law school or in your practice. If you are a practicing attorney, the best way to pick up skills and experience is to represent children *pro bono*.

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #12: Angela Adams

Summary

I am the Chief Children's Court Attorney for the Department of Children, Youth and Families in Sante Fe, New Mexico. I have been handling child abuse and neglect, termination of parental rights, and appeals for 18 years.

CAREER PATH

I received a Bachelor of Social Work degree in 1975 and worked as a child protective services worker in West Texas for two years before attending law school. After receiving a law degree, I worked as an assistant city attorney in Lubbock, Texas for two years before moving to New Mexico to work in the Children, Youth and Families Department in Santa Fe. In 1984, I was the first attorney assigned to this Department after class action litigation placed legal responsibility for achieving permanency in the Department's hands. I served as the Director of Social Services for two years in the early 1990s, and now serve as the Chief Children's Court Attorney.

CHALLENGES

Once you do this kind of law, it's hard to do something else. I've never explored another profession that seemed as meaningful as when you are able to impact a child's life. My source of grief at work is obstacles to providing protective services to kids to protect them from maltreatment. One example is the negative public attitudes towards social workers. Society villianizes the people who are probably the most committed to what they do.

KNOWLEDGE

To do this job well, you need commitment to doing this work. The emotional toll can be great. Financial and status incentives do not exist in this line of work, so you really have to desire to better the lives of children. You also need the ability to relate to social workers and be part of a team of professionals. Attorneys are more effective when they are willing to participate in a collegial environment. Finally, you need strong trial skills. More and more cases require attorneys who can be effective in court.

ADVICE

Because of the nature of our work, a support system is essential. The nice thing about coming to work for an agency, where others do what you do, is that you naturally get a support system. If you are a solo practitioner, you may have to work harder to find a support system. It's important to look for mentoring, networking and professional development opportunities through such organizations as the National Association of Council for Children, the ABA Center on Children on Center on the Law, and children's law sections of state and local bar associations.

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LAW

Attorney Profiles

PROFILE #13: Daniel Hatcher

Summary

I work for the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) in Washington, DC where I advocate for low-income children. I have worked in the child advocacy field for five years.

CAREER PATH

I volunteered in legal services offices while in law school and loved it. However, at graduation I briefly sold out to go to work for a large midwestern firm doing labor and employment law. I hated the big firm practice and within a year changed gears to work in legal services full time. I started in the Child Advocacy Unit at the Maryland Legal Aid Bureau, handling a large caseload of abuse and neglect cases. After a year, I started general practice at Legal Aid, still doing abuse and neglect cases and adding a general poverty law caseload. I was on leave from Legal Aid the summer of 2000 to teach a civil clinical law class at the University of Maryland School of Law. I then started up a new project at Legal Aid focusing on child support and barriers to employment for noncustodial parents, with the goal of serving the best interests of children. I recently left Legal Aid to become Senior Staff Attorney in CDF's Family Income Division, where I advocate for low-income children in legislative and national policy issues.

CHALLENGES

I absolutely love child advocacy – the drop in income from private practice is well worth enjoying what you do and working for children. There is an emptiness in making money off something you don't feel strongly about. There is a challenge for me in moving from direct representation to policy work – I very much miss working with clients, children and adults, and having a direct impact on their lives. However, I now have the opportunity to try to influence national policy to hopefully help millions of children, rather than one at a time.

KNOWLEDGE

A balance of excellent legal skills, compassion, patience and determination.

ADVICE

The systems you work in are not easy or well managed – chaos and frustration are the norm – but if the systems were great then the children wouldn't need as much help from child advocates. The notion of “burning out” is real, especially among child advocates in urban areas with huge caseloads - but I think you can work past the burn-out if you keep your life in balance and remember why you are doing the work.