Adam Ballout is a partner at ABC Law Group, LLP in Everett, Washington. Adam was born in Lebanon and immigrated to Seattle at 6-months old. Adam is an alumnus of the University of Washington and the Seattle University School of Law. Adam has been a dedicated and successful litigator in dependency, termination, adoption, and administrative law which have included several high-profile cases garnering national media attention.

Adam has worked in child welfare for 12 years. He currently focuses on parents, children, and preventative advocacy work. Adam’s commitment to advocating for system reform and the reunification of families has led to a focus on transformative changes upstream to the child welfare system. Adam always wanted to help families stay together but thought that was only possible through traditional family law. Luckily, his first job after law school was representing parents and children in dependency court as well as at-risk-youth. The impact of seeing how effective advocacy in the beginning of a case can change the trajectory of a family for generations was life-changing. Adam says, "if you’re able to fix some of the cyclical issues that impact families, then you’re able to spare future children from ever being exposed to the system.”

Cases where there were active efforts to sabotage reunification for low-income parents and parents of color have had a large impact on how Adam views reunification. Adam’s firm is involved in a case that examines the politics of child welfare and the lack of accountability that exists in normal systems. Seeing and feeling a lack of accountability of actors in the child welfare system has really focused his work on the importance of advocacy inside the courtroom. Adam wrote about the case for the ABA litigation: https://www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/committees/childrens-rights/articles/2017/breaking-bias-scandal-lay-guardian-ad-litem-office/

Adam was nominated as a Reunification Hero by one of the partners at his law firm and a former client.

By Nicole Johnson, Staff Attorney, American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law
Tell me something interesting about yourself.

I am an only child, the first in my family to graduate from high school, and a first-generation college graduate. My parents divorced when I was 10 years old at a time and in a culture (Lebanese) when that didn’t happen at all. I was introduced to the legal field very early, accompanying my dad to appointments and often translating legal documents or ideas, it gave me a first-hand experience of the way that the legal system impacts children, which forever shaped my views.

What are some of the strengths of the child welfare system in your area?
There are a lot of community actors and partners who are ready to work with creative lawyers to think outside the box to change the child welfare system. With only a few minor exceptions, there is a spirit of collaboration and energy towards making positive changes outside of the court process.

What are some of the weaknesses?
A total lack of accountability for anyone other than parents in the child welfare system. Social workers and others in the child welfare system routinely mislead or misstate facts and when negligence occurs or a failure to follow policy occurs and children are endangered, there is no accountability. This has created a culture where rights, civil liberties, and norms/rules are attacked and violated with no worry or fear of accountability. Adam provided a link to recent media coverage regarding this same issue:
Describe some efforts you have made to improve child welfare practice in your area.
Currently in our county there are between 12-15 babies removed each month from their mothers. Instead of making reasonable efforts to prevent or eliminate removal, we’re seeing a trend of “pick up, figure it out later” in local CPS offices.

Starting in July of 2019, our office is launching the Family Intervention Response to Stop Trauma (“FIRST”), a medical-legal partnership in child welfare housed within our local Providence Hospital. FIRST is a legal clinic providing pro bono advocacy for parents (specifically pregnant women with substance use issues) to change the trajectory of the cases and stop the removal of newborns at the hospital. Our clinic provides legal advocacy and a multidisciplinary team with a veteran parent who has successfully reunified with their child, access to treatment quicker and a safe and stable home to discharge to following treatment where mothers can stay rent-free for 12-18 months while they organize their future and learn job skills and work skills. This preventative model seeks to be a new scalable model for legal-medical partnerships to prevent trauma in child welfare.

What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare? Or to individuals considering working in child welfare? What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, governors or the president about how to improve the system?

We all have to regularly examine and reexamine our empathy and own biases especially if and when we feel like we don’t need to. Understanding the trauma behind decisions and the trauma folks have faced prior to reaching you, as a judge, or social worker, etc., will be incredibly helpful in having a meaningful connection. Recognize that this a person, and not a set of facts that you’re reading about on paper. That recognition, often silent, is impossible not to feel as a parent or advocate.

What programs/practices are most effective in helping parents reunify? Are there programs/practices that are not effective and need to be changed? If so why?

The old child welfare model at least as it relates to parents in recovery is that parents first have to be punished prior to providing them help. That model doesn’t fit with the current stated model of evidence based preventative approaches that keeps a family together and provides services directly to the family in a therapeutic way. This punitive approach still has champions in the system and that culture has to shift. There are some incredible social workers who do amazing work but their work gets overshadowed by the ones who undermine reunification. The “fight or flight” response that parents routinely have with the department will continue until this culture changes.

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm
What preventative actions do you think would be most effective in avoiding the conditions that may lead to foster care?
Things everyone can do:

- Identify supports – i.e. family/friends;
- Being honest about the need for treatment, and figuring out whether it is possible to do with your child; and
- Ask whether any of the identified resources can live with the family, or the family with them, to be a stable and positive influence for the parent?

Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system?
That the top priority of the agency is the safety of children. The top priority of the agency is the agency. If people understand that, the motivation for decisions that the agency makes would be clear as well as the understanding of why children and parents need effective advocacy. If the safety of children was the top priority, we would see so much more accountability for the workers who cause harm, as mentioned above.

Is there anything else about you or your experiences that we should highlight?
For the last several years I’ve been on two boards for domestic violence, our local county DV shelter and our State’s domestic violence coalition overseeing our member programs. I think now more than ever its important that men speak out against domestic violence and take a stand and a vocal role. In doing so, we change the narrative about how masculinity is defined, and we create a space where others can speak up which we need more of. The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV), our state coalition is launching a project this summer using sports as a platform to end sexual assault and dating abuse, our initiative begins by expanding the reach of Coaching Boys Into Men and Athletes as Leaders, two violence prevention programs for high school athletes. [https://www.teamupwa.org/]