Aida Vindell has worked in child welfare for about five years, and she is driven by a deep appreciation for the power of family and a desire to ensure children experience that connection. Aida strives to maintain that connection for families of all backgrounds. She brings a respect for her clients' families to her work and learns from her experiences every step of the way.

“Aida’s varied experiences as a lawyer have allowed her to approach legal and social issues that bear upon child welfare from a diversity of perspectives. Her deep appreciation for family comes through in her approach to case work.”

*By Isabel MacGuire, University of North Carolina School of Law, J.D. Candidate 2020*
Tell me something interesting about yourself.
One thing I enjoy doing outside of work is travelling to new places. Each year, I visit different countries with two of my best friends. Thus far, Peru is my favorite country that I have visited. I enjoyed the food, culture, people, and history. While I was there, I hiked to the top of Machu Picchu.

How long have you worked in child welfare? In what capacities?
I have worked in child welfare for about five years. For two years, I was a guardian ad litem advocate in Miami. As an advocate in the Transitioning Youth Project, I spent a lot of time working with youth that were aging out of foster care while also helping them make life long connections with adults or distant family members. During law school I interned at Kids In Need of Defense where we assisted unaccompanied minors in the United States with social and immigration issues. After law school I was an associate in a law firm where I handled immigration, criminal and family law litigation. I also spent two years at Ayuda, where I represented low-income immigrant survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault in obtaining civil protection orders, divorce, custody and child support in the Superior Court of the District of Columbia. Now, I’m a senior attorney at Children’s Law Center where I represent children in DC’s abuse and neglect system. Our number one goal is to reunify the child with their parents whenever it aligns with the child’s best interests. In making that determination, it is important to consider and understand the culture and family the child comes from.

How did you come to practice in this area?
After college, I was looking for a volunteer opportunity where I could give back to the community. I found the Florida Guardian ad litem program, an organization that made a direct impact on children’s lives. In this position, I met so many children who had been separated from their families and saw what that meant for them to grow up without parents, siblings, aunts and uncles. I also have firsthand experience with family separation myself.
I am originally from Nicaragua. When I was about 2 years old, my country was at war and the government tried to recruit my brothers to be child soldiers. In order to prevent my brothers joining the army at the age of 9 and 11, my family fled to Costa Rica, leaving my brothers with family members. After I returned to Nicaragua with my parents, my brothers ended up in an orphanage in Costa Rica because the family members that they were living with could no longer care for them. Shortly thereafter, my parents and I had the opportunity to find refuge in the United States. However, we were not able to bring my brothers with us. Our family could finally reunify only after we saved enough money to bring my brothers to the United States. My brothers spoke of how difficult it was being raised in an orphanage and the impact of being separated from us. It was incredibly challenging for my brothers, my parents and myself.

Many children and families face the heartbreak of separation for many reasons, from domestic violence to systemic poverty. In many cases, the family just needs the right support and resources to successfully reunify.

**What was an experience that had a big impact on the way you think about reunification?**

I had a case where, for about seven months, a young child was removed from his parents. As with all my cases, I am only able to share limited details to maintain the confidentiality of my client. However, what I can share is that the family was from another country—a country the child welfare team didn’t know much about. Since the team wasn’t familiar with the family’s culture, they didn’t understand the country’s childcare practices. For this particular case, those traditions were critically important in both understanding the reason the child was removed from his family, in addition to the steps that needed to be taken to successfully reunify the child with his loving parents. Each time I supervised a visit between the family, I saw nothing but appropriate behavior from the parents. It was clear that there was more to the story than what we could see at the surface level. I partnered with our social work department at the Children’s Law Center in order to ensure that I continued to pursue the most clinically appropriate path for my client. The Children’s Law Center social worker and my investigator were extremely instrumental in helping me break through the existing barriers for reunification.

While considering the best interest of my client, we interviewed the family to develop an understanding of their culture. Additionally, we worked with universities that researched how families in the client’s country raised children, and we recorded the parents practicing their culture. I was then able to present the research and findings to both the child welfare agency and the child’s medical team. This evidence made it clear that we could partner with the parents to address the original concerns to then successfully reunify my client with his family. They are doing well now and raising a sweet, healthy child.
It is important for agencies and attorneys to be open to educating themselves on cultural practices. Simply because parents do things differently in other countries does not mean they cannot or should not be reunified with their children. That’s why I believe in always making the effort to learn about my clients’ cultures.

**What are some of the strengths of the child welfare system in your area?**
There are some great social workers who care about the children and reuniting families. I personally work with many social workers who want to see families succeed. When social workers, attorneys and the entire child welfare team can partner with the child’s best interest in mind, we often succeed in building stronger families.

**What are some of the weaknesses of the child welfare system in your area?**
That is a question with a complex answer. I think that one weakness of the child welfare system is the overwhelming stress that social workers are faced with every day. This is not unique to just my area. I saw this in Miami and am familiar with the same concerns in other regions.

The social workers that I work with have high caseloads, which understandably leads to a lot of stress. Being overburdened can then impact the amount of time they can give to each individual families’ needs. Many families in turn may not trust the government. If we gave our social workers fewer cases and more resources, it could empower them to spend more individual time with the families and hopefully in turn this can help the families work better with the child welfare team in order to reach the goal of reunification.

Another area where I see a tremendous opportunity for improvement is how we support our foster parents. If we guaranteed the right training, supports and services for all foster parents, then it could lead to more successful placements and fewer moves for children. Right now in DC I do not think we have enough of these supports in place, and as a result, children are often placed in homes that are not suited to their needs. For example, a child might need a Spanish speaking home, but if one is not available, they will be placed with foster parents who may not speak the same language. You can imagine how difficult that is for both the parents and the child. This leads to my next point as well, which is that we need more foster parents overall so children can be placed in not just a foster home, but the right foster home for them.
What are some efforts you have made to improve child welfare practice in your area?

My job includes a lot of individual advocacy for my clients. Through this work I see some of the systemic challenges that children in DC face every day. For example, it is difficult and often dangerous to leave a toxic relationship, which is when the risk of homicide is the highest. It is also one of the reasons children are removed from their homes. If domestic violence survivors had safe housing options and mental health support as they leave their violent partner, it could have a trickle-down effect that makes the whole family safer and keeps the family together. I share these types of trends with Children’s Law Center’s policy team, which in turn uses this work and information to advocate for city-wide solutions that will positively impact DC children and families. I always strive to find creative solutions to the walls we come up against while working in child welfare.

I have also participated in a working group and developed a series of trainings at Children’s Law Center related to intimate partner violence. Since I have a background with domestic violence work, I often collaborate with my colleagues when it comes to this topic.

What is one thing you recommend in working with parents to increase the likelihood of reunification?

I encourage parents to be their own advocate. Parents are the ones who know their children the best. I believe in incorporating them into their children’s lives as much as possible when it is safe to do so, even after a child has been removed. Parents should attend meetings, medical appointments and be there for their child as much as possible. It is important for parents to continue participating in their child’s everyday life and follow the court order. We know that children do best if we can address the root cause of abuse or neglect and reunite them with their birth parents. Parents need support during this process too.

I talk with a lot of parents who feel hopeless after their child is taken away. Many parents feel that they are bad parents and will never be reunited with their children. The right support and encouragement can be pivotal for parents in reuniting with their children. I have met many parents who are stronger than they think and are good, loving parents. Like all parents out there, they need the emotional and social supports to increase their confidence and care for their children in an appropriate way. I try to remind parents, as often as possible, that they are the child’s family and there is no love that compares to a parent’s love.
What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare?
It is very easy to bring your own assumptions to the table when meeting new families. However, it is critically important to be willing to learn about the family, and then make a reunification or safety plan that fits that specific family.

Every family and culture is different, and it is important to let their culture shine. When you respect the family’s culture, the family will be more trusting. Find creative ways to help families reunify because the same things will not work with every family.

What programs are most effective in helping parents reunify?
Empowerment practices and empowerment-driven work can be effective in helping parents reunify with their children. When a parent’s children are taken away, so is a lot of power. That’s why it is critical to empower parents to believe in themselves, and to let them know that they can still make decisions for their children. They still know their child the best. In many cases when parents still feel involved and like they can parent their child, they are more likely to successfully reunite. Additionally, parent mentors can be extremely beneficial.

What practices are not effective and need to be changed?
Imagine being a child and spending so much time with your parents, doing everything together, and then being removed from that home and only seeing each other for an hour a week. Right now, one short visit a week is the reality for these families—sometimes only in an office or “clinical” setting, not in their homes. This kind of separation is shocking for both children and parents. Children often end up extremely stressed out due to this trauma, and may deal with that stress by acting out or through other harmful coping mechanisms. This is just one of the reasons why I think parents need to have more opportunities to visit with their children. It is one way we could help alleviate the stress of removal for children, while keeping the parents engaged and involved.

Visits are usually only scheduled during the week when parents may be at work or children are in school. Weekend visits could be beneficial for families when they aren’t facing these hurdles. If weekend visits were an option, parents and children could likely see each other more than once a week—without the added stress of work and school schedules.
What practices need to be added to make reunifications more successful?

It would be helpful to have services available right away. For example, a child might need therapy to cope with both the underlying reason they were removed and from the trauma of being placed in foster care. However, when there are no services available, they might not receive therapy until they can find an agency without a waitlist or whenever the agency is able to find transportation to and from the child’s therapist appointment.

What preventative actions do you think would be most effective in avoiding the conditions that may lead to foster care?

Try to make a safety plan with the family before removing the child, and think outside the box when making a safety plan. Additionally, incorporate as many of the families’ supports in the plan as possible.

What are the public misconceptions about the child welfare system?

One misconception from my clients is that they think the removal is their fault. Children blame themselves for being taken from their parents, and it is important to assure them that it is not their fault.

Any final reflections?

Reunification does not always happen as quickly as everyone thinks it will or should. Sometimes it takes parents longer than the allotted time to work their way up to reunification. For example, it may take a victim of domestic violence a long time to realize that they are in an abusive relationship. Then, after coming to the realization, they might start taking action and separating themselves from the relationship. That often means finding safe housing, a job and the right support. It takes an incredibly brave and determined person to do so. When a victim only has one year to leave the relationship and conquer all the steps needed to reunify with her child, that may not allow enough time for every step the parent has to take. What is important to remember is that the focus should be on the child’s best interest. If reuniting with this parent is in that interest, then the timeline shouldn’t be so rushed. Every family is different and works at a different pace.

It is important to take each case and grow to understand the family members individually and as a unit. When it is in the best interest of the child, the team should try to tailor the reunification plan to each unique family.