



CHILD WELFARE LAW
Career Guide

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNSEL FOR CHILDREN

NACCchildlaw.org

Promoting Excellence

Building Community

Advancing Justice

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Section 1: Introduction

From the moment a child is removed from their parents and placed in foster care, everything is at stake — their home, school, community, and relationships with family and friends. Although the child welfare system was designed to protect the safety and wellbeing of children, children and youth in foster care often experience a damaging trajectory of disruption, inadequate services, and further maltreatment. These negative experiences are exacerbated by racial bias and economic inequality which have deep historical roots.

Courts play an integral role in the child welfare system, where the decisions made are serious and consequential: Is the child in danger of immediate harm? Should the child be removed from the home? Has the child protection agency made reasonable efforts to prevent removal? How will the parent, child, and siblings be reunified? Should parental rights be terminated? Is there a relative who can care for or even adopt the child? Does the older youth have the supports needed to transition from foster care to adulthood? For judges to make the best possible decisions, they need accurate, relevant, and complete information. Lawyers provide this information.

The practice of child welfare law is complex and dramatically impacts the lives of millions of children, parents, siblings, and kin each year. Children face the trauma of abuse, neglect, family separation, school changes, and uncertain futures. Parents experience the removal of their children and face the possibility of permanently losing custody of, and contact with, their children. Agencies face community pressure to keep children safe. To effectively represent clients, child welfare attorneys must possess expertise in state and federal law, ethics, local court rules, trial skills and dispute resolution, child development and trauma, community resources and treatment services, as well as skills in client interviewing and relationships.

Child welfare law is a relatively new field compared to contracts or real estate law. Due to the highly specialized nature of this work, most attorneys did not acquire knowledge in child welfare law while in school, but this is changing with the growth of child welfare law classes and clinical programs. Many of the traditional law school classes such as evidence, constitutional law, and trial skills, among others, will be helpful in becoming an effective child welfare lawyer alongside the exploration of child welfare careers. Building a pipeline of committed attorneys to join this challenging and rewarding practice is necessary to ensure access to justice for children, parents, and communities and to develop child welfare law and policy.

The goal of this *Child Welfare Law Career Guide* is to encourage students to explore and prepare for a career in child welfare law. This Guide advises how to build your knowledge, explore child welfare attorney roles, and prepare for an early career attorney position. Whether your school has dedicated child welfare law classes, a child welfare practice clinic, or none of the above, this Guide suggests a pathway for learning and experiential development that will inform your career search and enhance the success of your job applications.

We look forward to providing support through your educational journey.

National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC)

Founded in 1977, the National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC) led the evolution of child welfare law from a cause to a profession by establishing child welfare law as a specialty practice requiring distinctive training, skill, and support.

NACC's mission is to advance children's and parents' rights by supporting a diverse, inclusive community of child welfare lawyers to provide zealous legal representation and by advocating for equitable, anti-racist solutions co-designed by people with lived experience. Fundamental to NACC's mission is the core belief that all parties deserve effective and zealous legal advocates. NACC's programs Promote Excellence, Build Community, and Advance Justice:

NACC **Promotes Excellence** in legal representation through attorney training, publication of the seminal *Child Welfare Law and Practice* book, and certification. NACC is the only national organization accredited by the American Bar Association to certify attorneys as Child Welfare Law Specialists (CWLS).

NACC **Builds Community** through a national membership program, annual National Child Welfare Law Conference, and affinity groups, such as the Children's Law Office Project.

NACC **Advances Justice** for children and families by engaging in public policy and legislative advocacy aimed at improving the child welfare system. NACC's signature policy initiative is the Counsel for Kids campaign: Children in court need lawyers of their own, we're working to make sure they have them.

NACC thanks Casey Family Programs for its partnership in producing the *Child Welfare Law Career Guide*. Founded in 1966, Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families.

Section 2: Child Welfare Law And Practice

NACC uses the term “child welfare” as a general reference, to include child protection legal proceedings as well as collateral matters like education, immigration, and public benefits that impact families and the outcomes of child protection cases. This Guide focuses on child protection court proceedings, in which a parent or guardian has been formally accused of neglect or abuse of a child (or the child is alleged to be dependent and in need of supervision), and the child has been removed from the home and placed with relatives or in foster care.

Child protection legal proceedings may be heard in a “dependency court,” “juvenile court,” or “family court,” depending on the structure of a jurisdiction’s judicial system. Juvenile court is also where juvenile delinquency proceedings are heard, when a child is accused of an act that would be a crime if committed by an adult, which is governed by juvenile law. Family court is also where divorce and child custody matters are heard, which is governed by family law. Each of these systems has their own set of laws, rules, policies, and procedures. Terminology varies by jurisdiction. Some professionals refer to the child welfare system as the “family regulation” or “family policing” system with critiques of the laws and actions of child protective services.

Child welfare law includes federal statutes, state statutes, federal and state case law, regulations, and court rules. While child welfare law is primarily based upon state statutes, federal statutes and funding streams have shaped their development. For more information on child welfare law, see NACC’s *Child Welfare Law and Practice: Representing Children, Parents, and Agencies in Neglect, Abuse, and Dependency Cases*, known in the field as the “Red Book.”

A case begins with an allegation of abuse or neglect of a child that is reported to child protective services (typically a county social service agency) or the police. Most referrals to child protective services do not result in court proceedings. In 2021, child welfare agencies received nearly 4 million referrals involving over 7 million children.¹ Nearly half of these reports were screened out, and agencies conducted investigations involving over 3 million children.²

Some investigations lead to informal arrangements between parents and agencies that are alternatives to court involvement. In a small but growing number of cases, parents receive preventative legal services prior to or at the point of investigation that can also prevent a case from being filed in court.³ The federal government recently recognized that in many cases children and families would benefit less from foster care and more from a temporary boost such as help paying for rent, child-care, transportation, or preventative civil legal services to work through a challenging situation.⁴

In 2021, over 600,000 children were served by the foster care system, and over 200,000 entered foster care as the subject of an abuse, neglect, or dependency petition in court.⁵ Over 50% of all children removed from their homes are placed in a foster home with strangers, a group home with multiple foster children, or in a residential institution or treatment facility.⁶ Contrary to media head-

1 U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau. (2023 Feb 9). *Child Maltreatment 2021*, p. x. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment>.

2 *Id.*, p. xiv.

3 See, Casey Family Programs. (2020 Feb 13). *How Can Pre-Petition Legal Representation Help Strengthen Families and Keep Them Together?* <https://www.casey.org/preventive-legal-support/>

4 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2018 Nov 16). *Informational Memorandum ACYF-CB-IM-18-05*, p3. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/im1805.pdf>.

5 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau. (2023 Feb 1). *AFCARS Report #29*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-report-29.pdf>.

6 *Id.*

lines, most cases filed are due to allegations of neglect (63%), compared to 12% of cases finding physical abuse and 4% of cases finding sexual abuse.⁷

Formal court involvement begins when a child protection agency seeks an order from a judge to take custody of a child due to an allegation of abuse or neglect. But children are typically removed without a court order when a child protection agency determines there are “exigent” (emergency) circumstances. An initial court hearing is then held to review the removal decision or to review the request for an order to remove the child. The case then moves toward adjudication of the allegations, with many other determinations along the way, including family visitation, safety plans and whether the child can return home, and whether the agency has made reasonable efforts to avoid removal and return the child.

At adjudication, if the allegations are proven or admitted, the agency assumes formal jurisdiction over the child and the case moves toward disposition. Disposition considers whether the child should be removed from or remain in the home as well as the development of a case plan. A case plan outlines the responsibilities of the parties in remediating the issues that led to the removal. A case plan always starts with the goal of reunifying the parent and child unless there are aggravating circumstances. When the case plan moves away from reunification, a plan for adoption or another permanent home for the child or children must be developed. An exception to the general court process is for cases involving Native American children and tribes, in which the Indian Child Welfare Act requires specialized procedures.

One of the most severe consequences of a child protection case is the legal termination of the parent-child relationship. This is called the termination of parental rights (TPR), even though it also terminates the child’s rights to their family. TPR has been described as the “civil death penalty,” one of the most consequential outcomes in civil practice. The child protection agency must first demonstrate efforts to reunify the family and then demonstrate facts to support the elements required under state law for termination. The court or jury must apply the facts to the law and determine if there are grounds for termination and that termination is in the child’s best interest. The parties also have the right to appeal court orders, such as the disposition order and an order terminating parental rights.

Despite its goal of child protection, children and youth in foster care can experience a damaging trajectory of disruption, inadequate services, and further maltreatment in placement or on the street. These harms are not experienced equally by all children. Black and Indigenous children are overrepresented in the child welfare system nationally, and Latino children are overrepresented in many states.⁸ LGBTQIA+ children are also overrepresented in the child welfare system.⁹ Once removed from their homes, Black and Indigenous children spend more time in out-of-home care, change placements more frequently, are less likely to receive necessary services, less likely to reunify with their families, and more likely to age out of foster care without a family or support services.¹⁰

The transition to adulthood for youth without a permanent home can be precarious. It’s estimated 31–46% of youth aging out of foster care become homeless by age 26,¹¹ and one study showed only

7 *Id.* But note, there is overlap between categories.

8 Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2018 Nov). *Entangled Roots: The Role of Race in Policies that Separate Families*, p.15-16. <https://cssp.org/resource/entangled-roots/>.

9 See, Human Rights Campaign. *LGBTQ+ Youth in the Foster Care System*. <https://www.thehrcfoundation.org/professional-resources/lgbtq-youth-in-the-foster-care-system>.

10 J.J. Cutuli, et al. (2016 Aug). *From Foster Care to Juvenile Justice: Exploring Characteristics of Youth in Three Cities*. *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 67, p.84-94. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.06.001>.

11 Dworsky, Amy, et al. (2013 Dec). *Homelessness During the Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood*. *American Journal of Public Health*. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301455>.

half of young people formerly in foster care are employed by age 24.¹² School changes are a significant problem for children and youth when they are removed from home and moved from one foster care placement to another and lose months to years of educational progress.¹³ Moreover, some studies indicate that over 80% of sex trafficking victims had been involved in the child welfare system,¹⁴ as had nearly two-thirds of youth in the juvenile delinquency system.¹⁵ It has been estimated that the societal cost of children aging out of foster care without proper supports is 8 billion dollars a year.¹⁶

Child welfare law and practice implicate some of the most important civil rights and constitutional rights of parents and children and impact nearly every other aspect of their lives. Skilled lawyers use the law to ensure every child is raised by a nurturing family, to remove barriers to education, health care, and housing for children and families, and serve as buffers to keep children and youth from the harms of family separation, human trafficking, the juvenile and criminal legal systems, and more.

Every child, parent, and family should be well-supported in their community and have equitable access to justice through culturally responsive, client-centered legal representation. It is critical for students and attorneys to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively represent their clients during this period of crisis for families. This Guide will help you along the way.

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- 12 Chapin Hall. (2010). *Coordinated Systems Key to Employment for Youth Formerly in State Care*. <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/coordinated-systems-key-to-employment-for-youth-formerly-in-state-care/>
- 13 Legal Center for Foster Care and Education. (2014). *Blueprint for Change: Education Success for Children in Foster Care*. <https://www.fostercareandeducation.org/overview/blueprint>.
- 14 First Focus State Policy Advocacy Reform Center. (2014 Jul). *Child Sex Trafficking and the Child Welfare System*, p.2. <https://firstfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Sex-Trafficking-and-the-Child-Welfare-System.pdf>.
- 15 National Juvenile Justice Network. (2016 Oct). *Snapshot: Dual-Status Youth and Federal Initiatives*. <http://www.njjn.org/our-work/dual-status-youth-and-federal-initiatives-snapshot>.
- 16 Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. (2013 May). *Cost Avoidance: The Business Case for Investing in Youth Aging out of Foster Care*, p.9. <https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/CYOI-CostAvoidance-2013.pdf>.

Section 3: Careers In Child Welfare Law

In a child welfare case, there are three primary parties: the child or children, the parents or legal guardians, and the child welfare agency. In some states there are additional parties, such as the sheriff's office, district attorney, or Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). High-quality legal representation of each party is essential to ensure fairness and due process — for all parties to voice their concerns, assert their rights, and actively participate in reaching solutions that protect children, strengthen families, and serve communities.

But access to counsel for each party varies from state to state. There is no recognized federal constitutional right to counsel for children or parents, and in some jurisdictions, children or parents have no lawyer in court. In other jurisdictions, there are specialized law offices representing children, parents, or both, with multidisciplinary legal teams which include social workers, peer advocates, parent advocates, and investigators. Representation of the child welfare agency varies by state/jurisdiction depending on the model adopted. Many entities are working to ensure access to counsel and improve the quality of legal representation for all parties.

You may be asking yourself “What draws attorneys to child welfare practice?” A recent study¹⁷ in Kentucky identified eight areas of motivation among attorneys who practice child welfare law:

- Advocacy (promoting and protecting the interests of another)
- Justice
- Autonomy (self-determination)
- Mastery (desire to improve)
- Supportive environment
- Achievements
- Intrinsic motivations
- Prosocial motivations (desire to benefit/act for the good of other people)

Each attorney's role in the child welfare legal system is important, and many attorneys will change roles over time, representing different parties over their careers, or becoming judges, professors, or policy advocates.

Children's Attorneys

Children's attorneys use skilled advocacy to protect their clients' legal rights. They protect a child's right to be with their family by challenging removals based on insufficient evidence. They hold the government accountable for intervention into family life and its corresponding obligations to make reasonable efforts to reunify families or find another safe, permanent home for a child. Children's attorneys advocate for child safety during foster placement, urge appropriate assessment of needs and service provision, promote kinship placements and frequent sibling visitation, prevent unnecessary placement in restrictive institutional environments, reduce frivolous placement changes and school moves, and insist upon timely exits from foster care.

¹⁷ Moody, Shannon. (2022 Aug 10). *Conceptualizing Attorney Motivation: A Study of the Representatives for Parents and Children in the Child Welfare System*. Theses and Dissertations—Social Work. 39. https://uknowledge.uky.edu/csw_etds/39.

Most states and jurisdictions guarantee legal representation for children in child welfare cases, but thirteen states still do not provide children attorneys throughout the duration of the case.¹⁸ The federal government requires all children be represented by guardian ad litem (GALs), who could be a lawyer or could be a volunteer lay advocate. In 2021, NACC launched the Counsel for Kids campaign to change federal law and help states ensure all children have the right to legal representation in child welfare cases.¹⁹

Of the states that do provide lawyers for children, there are a few different models of representation. NACC recommends lawyers practice a client-directed model, to maximize a child's voice and participation in the case.²⁰ The American Bar Association Model Act Governing the Representation of Children in Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency Proceedings also calls for a client-directed model.²¹ While state reforms are trending toward implementing this model, most states still provide a best-interest model of legal representation, where the attorney advocates for what they think is in the client's best interest, or a hybrid model where the attorney is supposed to advocate for both the client's wishes and what they think is in the best interest of the child, unless there is a conflict of interest between those positions.²²

Under any model, representation of children requires legal knowledge and attorney skills, but with special attention to child development. The experience of removal and court proceedings can be an incredibly frightening and traumatic experience for children; building a trusting rapport with clients is essential. Children's attorneys represent infants, to school-aged children, to teens, to young adults. For this reason, children's attorneys must be especially attuned to a child's potential diminished capacity as well as their right to make informed decisions. Understanding child and adolescent development, as well as the impact of trauma on development is part of the training and education for children's attorneys.

In some states attorneys are called "minor's counsel," "attorney for the child" or AFC, or "children's counsel." Attorneys who practice a best-interest model of legal representation may be called guardians ad litem (GALs) or attorneys ad litem (AALs). The term "guardian ad litem" may also be used by a state to describe volunteer lay advocates or Court Appointed Special Advocates. If you are interested in representing children, it will be helpful to understand whether children have a right to counsel in your state or jurisdiction, and the model of legal representation of children.

For more information on representing children see NACC's *Recommendations for Legal Representation of Children and Youth in Neglect and Abuse Proceedings*;²³ NACC's *Seen, Heard, and Represented: A Policymaker's Guide to Counsel for Kids*;²⁴ NACC's *Children's Law OĖce Guidebook, 2nd Edition*;²⁵ NACC's *Child Welfare Law and Practice: Representing Children, Parents, and Agencies in Neglect, Abuse, and Dependency Cases, 4th Edition*, Chapter 31, "Lawyers for Children";²⁶ and the Family Justice Initiative's *Attributes of High-Quality Legal Representation for Children and Parents in Child Welfare Cases*.²⁷

18 NACC's Counsel for Kids Campaign. (2024). *Right to Counsel Map*. <https://counselforkids.org/right-to-counsel-map/>.

19 <https://counselforkids.org/>

20 National Association of Counsel for Children. (2021). *NACC Recommendations for Legal Representation of Children and Youth in Neglect and Abuse Proceedings*, p.7. <https://naccchildlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/NACC-Recommendations-Final.pdf>. A client-directed model is the model of legal representation of children in juvenile delinquency proceedings.

21 American Bar Association. (2011 Aug). *ABA Model Act Governing the Representation of Children in Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency Proceedings*. https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/child_law/aba_model_act_2011.pdf.

22 NACC's Counsel for Kids Campaign. (2023 Aug). *Implementation of Children's Right to Counsel in Child Protection Proceedings*. <https://counselforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Models-of-Representation-2023-Poster-Map-1.png>.

23 Available at <https://naccchildlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/NACC-Recommendations-Final.pdf>.

24 Available at <https://counselforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/C4K-SHR-Policymakers-Guide-202311.pdf>.

25 Available at <https://naccchildlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/NACC-CLOP2%C2%B72023.pdf>.

26 Available at <https://naccchildlaw.org/product/the-red-book/>.

27 Available at <https://familyjusticeinitiative.org/model/high-quality-representation/>.

Parents' Attorneys

Parents' attorneys also use skilled advocacy to protect their clients' legal rights. "The Supreme Court of the United States has consistently held that a parent's constitutional right to raise their children is one of the most critical liberty rights safeguarded by the Constitution."²⁸ While parents have the right to hire their own attorney, in a child welfare case most attorneys are appointed by the court due to low-income status. The appointment typically takes place after the child has been removed, which is an incredibly stressful time for parents. Building a trusting relationship with parent clients requires empathy and compassion, the ability to listen, and the willingness to zealously assert the rights of parents.

Parents' attorneys may be referred to as "respondent counsel," "respondent parent counsel," or "family defender," depending on the language used in a jurisdiction. Parents' attorneys advocate for visitation with children and their return home, hold the government accountable to their burdens of proof, and help clients navigate through an array of services parents may be ordered by the court to participate in as part of the case plan.

Despite the gravity of these matters, the U.S. Supreme Court has yet to find a right to counsel for parents in termination of parental rights cases.²⁹ As with children's representation, this leaves a state-by-state system where states and jurisdictions define whether and at what point parents have the right to counsel. Some states require appointment of counsel before a child is removed; others delay the appointment until and unless there is a termination of parental rights action filed, which can be years into the case.³⁰ To learn more about this practice in your state, find out when and how attorneys for parents are appointed.

For more information about representing parents, see NACC's *Child Welfare Law and Practice: Representing Children, Parents, and Agencies in Neglect, Abuse, and Dependency Cases, 4th Edition*, Chapter 30, "Lawyers for Parents";³¹ American Bar Association's *Representing Parents in Child Welfare Cases: Advice and Guidance for Family Defenders*³² and *First Steps in Representing a Parent Accused of Abuse or Neglect*;³³ the National Alliance for Parent Representation;³⁴ and the Family Justice Initiative's *Attributes of High-Quality Legal Representation for Children and Parents in Child Welfare Cases*.³⁵

Agency Representation

Attorneys who represent the agency or government initiate the case, provide legal guidance, and may represent the child protection agency in court. There are two primary models of agency representation: the prosecutorial model and the agency representation model. In the prosecutorial model, the state or jurisdiction is typically the client. An elected or appointed attorney (e.g., district attorney, county counsel, assistant attorney general) represents the state and uses independent judgment to form a position. Because the state, not the agency, is the attorney's client,

28 National Association of Counsel for Children. (2022). *Child Welfare Law and Practice: Representing Children, Parents, and Agencies in Neglect, Abuse, and Dependency Cases, 4th Edition*. Chapter 30, "Lawyers for Parents". Rajaraman, Jeyanthi (Jey). p. 728.

29 *Lassiter v. Department of Social Services*, 452 U.S. 18 (1981).

30 Sankaran, Vivek S. (2017). Moving Beyond Lassiter: The Need for a Federal Statutory Right to Counsel for Parents in Child Welfare Cases. *J. Legis.* 44, no.1. p. 1-21; See also, National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel. (2024). Status Map, Right to Counsel – Accused Parents. <http://civilrighttocounsel.org/map>.

31 Available at <https://naccchildlaw.org/product/the-red-book/>.

32 Guggenheim, Martin, and Sankaran, Vivek S. (2015 Nov 30). *Representing Parents in Child Welfare Cases: Advice and Guidance for Family Defenders*. ABA Book Publishing. <https://www.americanbar.org/products/inv/book/235554209/>.

33 Fraidin, Matthew. (2016 Jun 01). *First Steps in Representing a Parent Accused of Abuse or Neglect*. Child Law Practice Today, ABA. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-35/june-2016/first-steps-in-representing-a-parent-accused-of-abuse-or-neglect/.

34 American Bar Association, Center on Children and the Law, National Alliance for Parent Representation. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/project-areas/parentrepresentation/.

35 Available at <https://familyjusticeinitiative.org/model/high-quality-representation/>.

attorney-client privilege between the attorney and the caseworker may not apply. Although the attorney does not necessarily have expertise in child welfare nor a duty to ensure that the caseworker's position is considered by the decisionmaker, best practice suggests that the attorney should work with the caseworker to understand the agency's position.

In the agency representation model, which is more commonly utilized, the child protection agency is the client, and the attorney works closely with caseworkers to represent the agency's position throughout the proceedings. The agency attorney may be an employee of the child protection agency or another governmental agency, but the client is the agency. The agency attorney should work closely with the caseworkers and advocate on their behalf to agency administration. However, the caseworkers must understand that the client who directs the legal representation is the agency.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, and the American Bar Association Standards recommend the use of the agency representation model for several reasons. Some of the reasons include attorney familiarity with agency policies and practices, consistency in decision making, and the close working relationship between attorney and caseworker.

Agency attorneys require in-depth knowledge of the child protection system in order to provide guidance regarding major decisions. This may include being involved in pre-removal decisions, participating in family team decision making, working with all parties in negotiations and mediation, ensuring that school stability and other wellbeing indicators are considered, and providing ongoing advice and counsel to agency representatives. The agency attorney must work closely with attorneys for parents and children to move cases to permanency. The goal should be to keep the child out of the child protection system and, if the child ends up in the child protection system, to find an appropriate outcome as quickly as possible.

For more information on agency representation, see NACC's *Child Welfare Law and Practice: Representing Children, Parents, and Agencies in Neglect, Abuse, and Dependency Cases, 4th Edition*, Chapter 29, "Lawyers for the Agency"³⁶ and the ABA's *Standards of Practice for Lawyers Representing Child Welfare Agencies*.³⁷

Appellate Advocacy

The right to appeal is an essential tool for attorneys in child protection cases. Most importantly, appeals serve as a potential means of achieving a client's goals: ending state supervision, bringing a child home, preventing termination of parental rights, or simply having their voice heard by another, higher court. They are also an important means of error correction, ensuring that trial courts and child protection agencies comply with applicable statutes, regulations, and policies. Appellate lawyers engage in legal writing and oral argument to advocate for their clients on legal and procedural issues. They provide an opportunity to educate the appellate courts about the numerous, systemic problems in both the child protection system and the trial-level courts that oversee it. Occasionally, strategic appellate advocacy can even result in significant improvement in the law governing these proceedings — we would not have fundamental constitutional precedents like *Stanley v. Illinois*, 405 U.S. 645 (1972) (on "parental fitness") if not for the concerted efforts of parents and their attorneys.

³⁶ Available at <https://naccchildlaw.org/product/the-red-book/>.

³⁷ Available at https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/child_law/agency-standards.pdf.

Policy Advocacy

Policy advocacy takes place at every level of government — federal, state, and local — where law and other policies are enacted, funded, and administered. State and federal advocates may be tasked with writing and promoting legislation, as well as travelling to the capitol to lobby for their initiatives to legislative representatives and/or the executive branch. While policy advocates need not be lawyers, the advocate's child welfare practice experience can help in effectively and persuasively describing how policies would impact children, parents, and agencies in court. Policy advocates also build relationships with other stakeholders and often serve on coalitions or task forces which develop policy proposals. Policy counsel roles in child, parent, or agency law offices can also offer career advancement opportunities for child welfare attorneys. For more information on state legislative advocacy, see NACC's Counsel for Kids Toolkit.³⁸

Careers in Academia

Law schools and universities provide ample opportunities for lawyers to contribute to the development of future lawyers. Professors may be full-time academics or practicing attorneys teaching a class alongside an experienced professor while maintaining a caseload. You may also consider becoming a law librarian or working in a law school center or program. As an academic career progresses, there may be advancement opportunities directing a legal clinic or center. If you are considering a tenure-track career in academia, a good resource is Stanford Law School's *Career Possibilities: Academia* guide.³⁹

Employment-Specific Considerations

As you review various child welfare attorney roles, take some time to consider the type of office in which you would like to work. Are you looking for a role in the public or private sector? For a government agency, law firm, or a nonprofit? Some differences may include starting salary, caseload, additional funding for professional development, and billable hours worked per week. Government and nonprofit organizations operate to advance the public good, not for the financial benefit of their owners, and salaries will generally be lower than in the private sector.

Lawyers representing children or parents may work in a solo or small law firm taking court appointments, may work for a specialized nonprofit organization, a civil legal aid office, or a public defender office. Lawyers representing the agency will typically work in a county or state government office and be county or state employees. Participating in different internships among these types of offices is the best way to get a sense of the environment, culture, and practice style of the office.

³⁸ Counsel for Kids Toolkit. <https://counselforkids.org/toolkit/>.

³⁹ Stanford Law School. (2024). *Career Possibilities: Academia*. <https://law.stanford.edu/careers/career-possibilities/academia/>.

Section 4: Preparing for a Career in Child Welfare Law

Law School Courses

The courses you take in law school can prepare you for a successful career in child welfare practice. In addition to the classes listed below, consider any other courses your school offers that provide an opportunity to develop your writing, oral advocacy, and mediation skills.

Here is a list of sample course titles to look for as you register for classes. Each school will have different names for these types of classes. You can also ask a school counselor for guidance on which courses offer content similar to, or which are inclusive of, the subjects below:

- Child Welfare Law
- Family Law
- Child, Family, and the State
- Child Welfare Law and Policy
- Juvenile Justice or Juvenile Law
- Legal Writing
- Mediation
- Trial Practice
- Constitutional Law

Independent Studies

Many schools offer students the opportunity to complete an independent study for course credit. This typically means conducting a research project on an area of the law that interests you and working with a faculty sponsor or organization. A publication may come of the project which offers an opportunity to demonstrate your interest to prospective employers.

Similarly, you might want to consider a research position with a faculty member at your school. Professors often look for students to help them with their own publications. This could include legal research, networking opportunities, and continued learning. Some positions are paid but not all. This could be a starting place for anyone looking to learn more about a particular area of law or legal issue. Additionally, the faculty member could serve as a great reference for a future position.

Internships and Externships

Participating in an internship or externship is a great opportunity to explore child welfare law and practice. Many organizations and firms provide student positions during the summer or over the course of the school year. Some opportunities may offer hourly pay or a stipend. While many opportunities remain unpaid, the field is changing to provide internship compensation, and don't be afraid to ask for an hourly rate. Many schools offer students the opportunity to receive school credit for internships and/or externships. Students often find themselves doing an internship part-time during the school year and full-time, or close to full-time, during the summer. This, of course, varies on the student's other obligations, family life, other employment, etc.

As an intern or extern in child welfare law, expect to participate in court observations, practice legal research and writing, develop a writing sample that can be used to obtain future employment, and engage in client meetings and interviews. This is an opportunity to explore your interests in the field, as well as a chance to observe an office's work culture.

Moot Court

Each year, Capital University School of Law hosts its National Competition on Child Welfare and Adoption Law in Columbus, Ohio. This is the only moot court competition of its kind focusing on child welfare law. This competition brings together students from over twenty schools to compete in written and oral competitions for issues relating to child and family law. More information may be found on the Capital University website.⁴⁰ Moot court provides students an opportunity to develop oral advocacy skills, practice legal research and writing, and think on your feet.

Clinics

Many universities offer students the opportunity to gain real-time legal experience while getting class credit through a legal clinic. Clinics provide invaluable hands-on experience — students may manage their own caseload, practice timekeeping, write briefs and motions, and possibly advocate for their clients before a judge. A list of children's rights legal clinics can be found on the ABA website.⁴¹

Fellowships

Pre-Graduate Fellowships

Some universities may offer fellowships to their students such as child and/or family law fellowships. These fellowships may or may not include additional funding but are a great opportunity to narrow in on a child law focus while in school.

Each year, the University of Michigan Law School awards their Bergstrom Child Welfare Law Fellowship to law students. The Bergstrom Child Welfare Law Summer Fellowship is committed to inspiring law students to pursue careers in child welfare law. Through the fellowship, students gain experience and insight into the field and provide much-needed services to various child welfare offices specializing in representing children, parents, and social service agencies. After attending a training session at Michigan Law in May, fellows spend at least ten weeks at a child welfare law internship. More information can be found on the Michigan Law website.⁴²

Post-Graduate Fellowships

A post-graduate fellowship provides students with financial assistance to work in a public interest field upon graduation. This may be in lieu of an organization or agency paying you or in addition to a preset fellow salary. There are several different types of fellowships:

Organization-Based Fellowships

A number of nonprofit organizations administer their own fellowships, usually focused on a specific area of the law. Candidates generally apply directly to the organization, typically with a cover letter, resume, and references. You do not need to develop your own project for these fellowships; instead, your focus is on your commitment to the work the organization already does. Fellows

⁴⁰ <https://www.caplawmcm.com/moot-court/national-child-welfare-adoption-law-competition>

⁴¹ <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/about/committees/childrens-rights/directory/legal-clinics/>

⁴² <https://michigan.law.umich.edu/resource-center/bergstrom-child-welfare-summer-fellowship-1s2ls>

are treated as junior staff attorneys and participate in the various aspects of the organization's workforce for one or two years. An example of an organization-based fellowship is the Zubrow Fellowship in Children's Law — a two-year fellowship at the Children's Law Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.⁴³

Project-Based Fellowships

Some foundations fund fellowships for applicants to develop a specific project in conjunction with sponsoring nonprofit organizations, also called host organizations. Securing a project-based fellowship is often a two-stage process; the candidate must first apply to a potential sponsoring organization and once accepted, apply to the funding program. Fellowships have a finite term of one or two years. Funders usually consider the applicant's qualifications, the organization's ability to supervise the project, the feasibility and benefit of the project, and how well the project matches the foundation's goals. Some examples of project-based fellowships are:

Skadden Fellowships⁴⁴ — The Skadden Fellowship Foundation funds approximately 25 two-year fellowships every year to work in nonprofit organizations on behalf of underserved groups in the United States. The application deadline is typically in early September. It is advised that you check the Skadden Foundation website regularly for the latest information.

Equal Justice Works Fellowships⁴⁵ — Equal Justice Works (EJW) funds several dozen two-year fellowships annually, with the goal of providing a range of legal services to underrepresented communities in the United States. The application deadline is typically in early September.

Soros Justice Advocacy Fellowships⁴⁶ — Open Society Foundations offers 18-month fellowships for projects that address criminal justice issues at local, state, and national levels. The projects may be implemented in conjunction with large or small nonprofit organizations. This may be an opportunity to work with crossover youth (youth involved in both the child welfare system and the juvenile legal or delinquency system).

Other types of fellowships include firm-sponsored fellowships, academic/clinical fellowships, entrepreneurial fellowships, and government fellowships. More information can be found on the Yale Law School Public Interest Fellowship website.⁴⁷

Start/Join an NACC Student Chapter

By joining NACC and establishing a student chapter, you will be helping your fellow students by increasing their awareness of the issues ailing system-impacted children and families. The main goal of NACC student chapters is to raise interest and awareness about the child welfare system and careers that advance the civil and human rights of children, youth, and families. This is accomplished by sponsoring speakers, forums, teach-ins, debates, and film showings on timely child welfare topics and important historical milestones.

No matter what your local chapter's endeavors may be, we hope that your involvement with NACC lasts a lifetime and that your experience working as a child law advocate is very rewarding and meaningful. For more information on NACC student chapters, read NACC's Student Chapter Guide, NACC on Campus.⁴⁸

⁴³ <https://jlc.org/careers/zubrow-fellowship-faq>

⁴⁴ <https://www.skaddenfellowships.org/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.equaljusticeworks.org/fellowships-opportunities/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/grants/soros-justice-fellowships>

⁴⁷ <https://law.yale.edu/student-life/career-development/students/career-pathways/public-interest/public-interest-fellowships>

⁴⁸ Available at https://naccchildlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/nacc_on_campus_-_student_chapter_guide-2-1.pdf.

Join Professional Organizations

Joining a professional organization is a great opportunity to network with likeminded professionals, attend trainings, and find employment opportunities. Many organizations offer free or greatly reduced student rates for membership.

National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC)

Join a thriving and growing community working to advance justice alongside young people and families. Its national network of nearly 2,000 active members includes attorneys, judges, professors, students, doctors, therapists, social workers, policy advocates, and administrators. If you work in the child welfare system or a related field, NACC is here to serve you. NACC provides training, resources, and community support to help you elevate your work and better serve children and families. Student membership is free!⁴⁹ Consider attending NACC's annual National Child Welfare Law Conference and Career Fair, which is held each summer.⁵⁰

American Bar Association (ABA)

The ABA works to promote the best quality legal education, competence, ethical conduct and professionalism, and pro bono and public service work in the legal profession. The ABA provides many resources including trainings, networking and career advancement, personalized memberships, and advocacy initiatives. ABA membership gives law students tools and resources to help them succeed in school and beyond. Student membership is free but can be upgraded to premium membership for \$25 annually.⁵¹ Consider specifically engaging with the ABA Center on Children and the Law and its National Alliance for Parent Representation.

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ)

The NCJFCJ welcomes law school students and any degree-seeking students enrolled in a learning institution who do not otherwise qualify as an Associate Member to join as a Student Member of the NCJFCJ. A copy of a current student ID or form of verification of your student enrollment must be provided. Student memberships are available for \$35 annually.⁵²

Career Fairs

Career fairs can be a great networking opportunity! You may find a position that you didn't think you were originally interested in. As an added bonus, attending a career fair can maximize your time searching for a job. Many job fairs have 25 to 50 or more employers in attendance.

Preparing for a Career Fair

- **Do your research.** Consider looking through the list of employers to find potential opportunities that may match your career goals. You can look up the attendees to find some common ground - maybe they attended the same college as you or perhaps they are from the same town as you. This can be helpful when breaking the ice with employers.
- **Prepare some questions.** Having some questions in mind before approaching an employer can help start a conversation or determine if an organization is the right fit for you.

49 Learn more at <https://naccchildlaw.org/nacc-individual-memberships/>.

50 For more information, visit <https://naccchildlaw.org/conference/>.

51 Learn more at https://www.americanbar.org/groups/law_students/about/membership/.

52 Learn more at <https://www.ncjfcj.org/get-involved/become-a-member/>.

- **Practice introducing yourself.** It can be scary talking to someone new for the first time. Be confident when introducing yourself to help set the tone of the conversation.
- **Know what to expect.** Find out how long the career fair will run. Will onsite interviews be conducted? What will the opportunities for follow up look like? Consider bringing a resume, a list of references, and a writing sample.

Networking

Networking is a key tool to find your next job, make friends, and find and collect potential stakeholders in child welfare law. Networking is an opportunity to meet people, online and in person. You want to make real and genuine connections with the folks you meet. The key is to maintain contact with the people you connect with — invite them to have a cup of coffee with you, add them on LinkedIn, or invite them to events at your school or in your community that you think may interest them.

Finding a place to start can be intimidating, but the good news is there are many networking strategies:

- Consider reaching out to past employers — let them know what areas of law you are interested in, send them an updated resume, and ask them for advice on your job search.
- Alumni from your school can also be a resource. Many programs offer student-alumni meet-and-greet nights or alumni panels.
 - Rely on your career services office at your university to connect you with alumni who might be practicing in a similar area of law that interests you.
- Bar associations are also a great place to make connections as they often have local meetings, mentor programs, and social events which provide ample opportunity to meet lawyers.
- NACC State Coordinators may also be a resource to connect you with legal professionals in your state. NACC State Coordinators connect and support a growing network of child welfare attorneys. An active list of NACC State Coordinators can be found by visiting the NACC website.⁵³ To get connected with a State Coordinator, become an NACC student member and ask NACC to make the connection.

Informational Interviews

This is an opportunity for you to hear a first-hand account from someone who works in a particular field that you are considering; thus, you will get a feel for whether this is the type of job that you may like. This interview may also lead to a job interview or provide you with people you should add to your network. Reach out to someone you're interested in connecting with via email or LinkedIn — they'll be happy to hear you're interested in their work.

Consider questions like:

- What does a typical day look like for you?
- What steps did you take along the way to prepare you for your role?
- What do you like about the firm/organization?
- What are some challenges you've faced in your role?

⁵³ <https://naccchildlaw.org/nacc-state-coordinators/>

- What do you most enjoy about your job?
- Knowing what you know now, what advice would you have given your law student self?

Additional Resources

There are many resources available to continue to explore the field of child welfare law. NACC encourages students to put the voices of people who have lived experience at the forefront of their practice. As such, we encourage you to check out resources like Safe Camp Audio,⁵⁴ a nonprofit audio hub featuring podcasts on topics like foster care, adoption, youth justice, kinship and more. *The Imprint* and *The Children's Law Podcast* would be a great place to start. Additionally, we encourage you to explore books written about the child welfare system by those who have been impacted by it. It remains our goal to uplift the stories and voices of people with lived experience. After all, they are the experts in this field.

⁵⁴ <https://safecampaudio.org/>

Section 5: Getting Ready to Apply and Interview

Law School Career Office

Rely on your law school career office for guidance on job openings and resources. Even if you graduated some time ago, career offices are resources for students and alumni alike. Some available resources may include job boards, interview preparation, job search strategies, and skill development like resume workshops and mock interviewing.

References and Letters of Recommendation

It is good practice to keep a list of references you might use for different applications you might be sending out. Appropriate references might include former employers during your summer or semester internships, mentors, and professors. Ask the person you have in mind before including their name as a reference or recommender. Ensure that you have your references' preferred contact information as some people exclusively use their personal or professional phone numbers or emails.

When asking someone to be a reference, make sure to communicate whether this is a one-time request or if you will be putting them down on several applications. Remember that people are doing this voluntarily — you might consider getting your recommenders a small gift card or thank you card for their time. It may be helpful to your recommender if you equip them with your resume, anything you would like highlighted, or a “brag sheet” (a short list of accomplishments). Similarly, share the position description with your recommenders so that they can tie your qualifications with the desired job skills. Most importantly, be sure to communicate applicable deadlines and/or relevant contact information for your recommenders to send letter(s) to your potential employer(s).

Interviewing

Suggested Attire

This is the time to put your best foot forward! Whether your interview is in person or online, it is highly recommended that you wear business professional attire. Remember, this may already be an anxiety-inducing experience — dress comfortably within the means of business professional. This may mean opting for flats instead of heels. Present yourself to your employers the same way you would show up for your clients — dressed appropriately and with a positive, confident attitude.

Tips for In-Person and Online Interviews

- ① **Come prepared.** Research the organization. Do their mission and vision align with your values? Review the job description. Carry a portfolio with an extra copy of your resume and a pen and paper for notetaking. Bring any questions you may have written down. Practice your answers in a couple of mock interviews with a mentor, trusted peer, or career services office.
- ② **If interviewing virtually,** be sure you have the platform (Zoom, WebEx, Teams) downloaded and updated. Ensure you have a clean, non-distracting background and quiet space.
- ③ **Research your interviewer.** Try to find some common ground. Perhaps you went to the same undergraduate institution or law school. This could be a great ice breaker.

- ④ **Know what to expect.** Will the interview be in person or virtually? Will you be interviewed by a panel or just one person? How long will the interview be? Knowing some of these answers ahead of time may help ease any jitters or anxiety you may have.
- ⑤ **Arrive early.** Things change! It's important to be flexible in your timing. You also want to ensure that you are not late for your interview because you could not find parking or the correct building.
- ⑥ **Be yourself.** We all have our insecurities but be confident in who you are and all the hard work you put into preparing for this opportunity.

Suggested Questions to Ask Employers

Pro Tip: You should always ask questions as though you are also interviewing the interviewer. This should help you determine if this job or employer is a good fit.

Reviewing the organization's website and asking questions are excellent ways to show your interest and your preparedness.

Internships:

- How do interns interact with the staff at your firm/organization?
- What do staff like most about the firm/organization?
- Describe the physical location of the firm/organization (amenities in the neighborhood, big city, small town, transportation, etc.).
- Are there internship/externship opportunities for current students?
- If I need accommodations, how should I approach these with the firm/organization for assistance and support?

Employment:

- What is the mission and vision of the organization?
- How has the organization integrated lived experience into its staff and work?
- How often are staff expected to be in person, in the office?
- What do opportunities for growth look like (pay raises, promotion opportunities, etc.)?
- How does the firm/organization commit to the professional development of its employees?
- What do you look for in an application/candidate?
- What can I expect as a next step in this process?

Diversity

- What does diversity mean at your firm/organization?
- What is the diversity of your current staff?
- Does diversity include life experience, special talents, skills, and other factors?

Pro Tip: Don't be afraid to ask how the organization is addressing equity!

Section 6: Words of Wisdom

Child welfare attorneys including law professors, assistant/deputy directors, tribal attorneys, parents' attorneys, and children's attorneys have come together to reflect on their time as a student, the challenges overcome, the lessons learned, and the wisdom gained along the way.

If you could give your student-self advice, what would you say to them?

- Develop and nurture relationships with people who you admire personally and professionally. Find a mentor who can guide you professionally.
- Pursue a job/career in something that matters to you. You can always have a job. Find one that you want to do every day. If it is social issues, don't chase money, chase purpose.
- Remain open to the opportunities that present themselves that aren't always what you "want" at that moment.
- Find mentors - people that are open to learning and discussing and being flexible. This work isn't one-size-fits-all and the most effective people can use all the tools (being friendly, mediating, trial, whatever).
- Be open to all paths.
- You can't read every case. Prioritize and use your resources.
- Keep doing what you are doing. I was told in law school that I was too focused on children's law and that I should widen my horizons. I ignored the advice and continued to do what I loved, which was advocate for children and their rights. Being so focused assisted me in securing a fellowship upon my graduation.

What prepared you for a successful legal career?

- My law school internships and litigation training.
- My willingness to move between jobs and roles. My ability to continue learning and to adjust.
- Humility, finding my people (i.e. those people dedicated to doing the work), and a sense of humor.
- I feel like it was somewhat luck to end up in a role with great support — people that encouraged me to look at things differently and supported zealous advocacy in court but also zealous advocacy working outside trial/court. (I send so many nagging emails — and then if ignored, the record [I've created] of the Tribe asking is crystal clear).
- I would also recommend constantly challenging your own beliefs, biases, or assumptions on people's lives that aren't like mine (as a white women). I still have to check my bias in situations and having people that can help you do that is also helpful. There is so much racism and bias in the system already — it can be easy to fall into (even in small ways) if you aren't actively questioning things.
- Making connections and expanding my practical education in law school: working for professors, doing pro bono for nonprofits.
- Clinics and externships, reading non-law materials on child welfare.
- I worked in group homes and a domestic violence shelter prior to law school and then had work-study jobs and 3 internships in children's law that helped me prepare.

Is there anything you wish you had done differently as a student or early-career lawyer?

- I wish I had taken more courses during law school that taught practical lawyering skills, such as law practice management.
- I wish that I had sought out work in something I wanted to do. I took a job and then had to find my way to a career. I wish that I had taken more chances earlier. Now I am where I want to be.
- I wish I would have seen the families as the experts in their lives as opposed to being part of a system that saw themselves as experts in the lives of families and children they didn't know.
- I actively avoided trial skills in law school (bad decision in retrospect). It's been ok because there are great hands-on learning options after you are out. Make time for those because the work is full. Or in classes. The learning curve is steep starting out and having some foundations may help.
- I was a public defender before going into parent legal rep and public policy advocacy. Having litigation experience is vital for understanding legal processes as a policy advocate; helping low-income clients helps you to see all the barriers low-income families face in our society.
- Getting in the courtroom as much as possible is the most important thing to feel comfortable there.
- I did not have a supervisor for my first year of practice and I sought — but had trouble finding — mentors to help. I wish I had been more persistent in trying to find support for myself. I also wish I had taken better care of myself as a young lawyer and worked fewer hours!

Section 7: You Got the Job! ... Now What?

Updating LinkedIn

A LinkedIn profile can be an important tool for a young professional to showcase their professional experience, skills, and accomplishments to potential employers and clients. Having a LinkedIn profile allows you to have a public, online presence that can help you stand out in a crowded job market.

Onboarding, Orientation, and Training

For new employees, onboarding and orientation provides you the opportunity to meet your coworkers, get a sense of your day-to-day tasks, and ask any lingering questions. You may be asked to attend a series of events and trainings, which includes orientation that helps you learn how to do your job. This is more role-specific. You may need to seek out specialized training if it is not offered in your community or by your employer. Be sure to ask your employers for their go-to trainings and if additional professional development funding is available.

Pro Tip: If your job allows, shadowing current employees is also helpful when getting started in your role when you are learning the ropes.

Become a Mentor

Mentoring is one of the best ways to give back to your community. You'll always remember the feeling of being an uncomfortable first-year law student who didn't quite know what they were doing yet. You'll also remember the feeling of applying for internships or your first job. You can use those experiences to provide guidance and advice to students and young professionals who might need a helping hand in navigating the legal world. Law schools and bar associations often seek mentors for current students. Reach out to your career services office or local bar association to find out how you can get involved. Mentoring provides a sense of achievement in that you can now share what's helped you along the way and it also provides the confidence that students need to be successful.

NACC Early Career Membership

NACC provides an Early Career Bronze membership⁵⁵ for anyone who is 0–2 years into their legal career. For \$75 annually, you receive access to:

- *The Advocate*, the monthly newsletter
- *The Guardian*, the quarterly law publication
- Member-only webinars (monthly live access to trainings and web access to recordings)
- Access to NACC's listserv
- Discount on NACC national conference registration
- Discount on the Red Book Training Course (online) and onsite Red Book Trainings
- Discount on Child Welfare Law Specialist (CWLS) application fee

⁵⁵ Learn more at <https://naccchildlaw.org/nacc-individual-memberships/>.

- Discount on Child Welfare Law and Practice: Representing Children, Parents, and Agencies in Neglect, Abuse, and Dependency Cases (the “Red Book”)

Become a Child Welfare Law Specialist (CWLS)

NACC is the only national organization accredited by the ABA to certify attorneys as specialists in the field of child welfare law. Child Welfare Law Specialist (CWLS) certification signifies an attorney’s specialized knowledge, skill, and verified expertise. NACC only grants the CWLS credential to attorneys who successfully complete a rigorous application and examination process. This professional achievement is the highest testament to an attorney’s dedication and demonstrated excellence in child welfare law. Eligibility and application requirements vary by state, but in most jurisdictions they include:

- 3 or more years practicing law
- Evidence of substantial involvement in child welfare law (time equivalent to at least 30% of a full-time position during the three years preceding application)
- Continuing legal education hours in child welfare law and related topics
- Good standing and disciplinary history
- A writing sample demonstrating legal analysis in the field of child welfare law
- Peer review by a minimum of four attorneys and one judicial officer
- Passage of a child welfare law proficiency exam

The application can be completed online, and additional information is available on NACC’s website.⁵⁶ CWLS certification is not currently available in Maine, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, or West Virginia.

Maintain Continued Education and Professional Development

Ensuring that you’re staying up to date on the latest practices and research is important. Never assume that you know everything you need to know about a particular area. Your state may require a certain number of continuing legal education (CLE) credit hours per year to maintain licensure.⁵⁷

Join your state bar! There are child protection committees that may be relevant to your work. This is a great place to stay up to date on practice and trainings. You can also consider writing for the bar journal or committee newsletter early in your career. If you’ve exhausted the resources from your state bar, consider joining more local or affinity bar groups. There are LGBTQ+ bar associations, Latinx bar associations, and African American/Black bar associations, among many others. Your state/local bar may offer young lawyers many professional development and networking opportunities.

Publishing Opportunities

Publishing is a great way to learn more about a particular area of law, give your work visibility among others in your field, and promote yourself. Most legal journals don’t allow students to

⁵⁶ See <https://naccchildlaw.org/cwls-certification/apply-for-certification/> for more information.

⁵⁷ Always check with the attorney licensing authority in your state for specifics, but a summary can be found here: <https://ceuinstitute.net/attorney-continuing-education/>.

submit their work for publication; however post-graduation might be the perfect time to polish off a paper you wrote for a class and submit it for publication. You don't have to limit yourself to one focus or one journal, but it is worth mentioning that Loyola University Chicago's Children's Legal Rights Journal is the only children's law journal in the country.

Post-Graduate Debt Management

The first step is to make a plan. Find out how much you owe in loans and what you can afford to pay each month. You may want to consider consolidating all student loan debt. While repaying your loans, don't forget to claim the student-loan interest deduction every year on your federal income tax returns. You can deduct up to \$2,500 a year in interest paid on both federal and private student loans. Lastly, create a budget and stick to it. Some banks offer free financial planning, this may be helpful if you'd like some third-party advice on how to plan for loan repayment. For Budgeting 101, refer to resources like NerdWallet.⁵⁸

Public Service Loan Forgiveness programs may also be available to some employees to help repay student debts at low interest. However, they require you to have made 120 payments on your Federal Direct loans while working in a qualifying public service position. If you meet the conditions, you could receive 10-year forgiveness. For general information on school-specific Loan Repayment Assistance Programs (LRAP), visit the ABA's LRAP website.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ This NerdWallet article discusses budgeting basics: <https://www.nerdwallet.com/article/finance/how-to-budget>

⁵⁹ https://www.americanbar.org/groups/center-pro-bono/resources/directory_of_law_school_public_interest_pro_bono_programs/definitions/pi_lraps/