



Judicial and System Leaders Focus on Family Involvement in the Dependency Process

“Family voice can be a path to family healing.” This was one of many sentiments heard during the recent National Judicial Leadership Summit IV on Child Welfare by a team of child welfare partners from across the United States. Georgia’s team consisted of Georgia Supreme Court Presiding Justice David Nahmias, OCA Director Rachel Davidson, Forsyth County Juvenile Court Judge Christopher Willis, Georgia DFCS Director Tom Rawlings, Georgia DFCS Deputy Director and Legal Counsel Chris Hempfling, and Fulton County Parent Attorney Emma Brown-Bernstein.

The conference began with a focus on incorporating the voice of children and families in the child protection process. The Summit’s leaders emphasized the role of the courts in creating a culture that values all families. While it can be easy to disregard or minimize the voice of children and families in the court and dependency process, these same children and families can often offer the best insight and solutions that will most help them.

Unfortunately, we don’t always ask families and children for their input. So what can we do differently? Try asking the

See [FAMILY](#), Page 9



Georgia's delegation at the National Judicial Leadership Summit IV on Child Welfare.

Youth Voice

The unedited voices
of young people with foster care experience



*Courtesy of Kyle Minnick, Case Manager
Myjia Tucker and Cobb County DFCS*

Want to know what youth in foster care think of the system and how their voice plays an important role? A great example has been shared through digital story telling by the Cobb County Team in DFCS Region 13. Recently, the team interviewed a youth named Kyle Minnick and his case manager, Myjia Tucker, which told a story of how empowering a youth’s voice through positive relationships can encourage the youth in meaningful ways. Listen to the full interview of Kyle [here](#) and [here](#). To listen to Myjia’s interview, click [here](#). These interviews are great ways to show how DFCS policies, practices, and theories look in real life and how they can change lives in a positive and meaningful way. Here are helpful tips shared by the Cobb County Team to promote **youth voice**:

- ✓ Give youth a seat at the table when you are creating their family’s case plan or generating the child’s case plan. They should be included on an **ongoing basis**.
- ✓ Afford youth the **opportunity to voice** their feedback through transitional roundtables, family team meetings, and treatment teams.

See [VOICE](#), Page 6



September is Suicide Awareness Month



By Renee Moore
Senior OCA Investigator

Brainstorm:

What can YOU do to prevent juvenile suicide?

- Take any written, spoken or other communication of suicide seriously
- If you think someone is at risk, ask if they are considering suicide...this will NOT cause suicide
- Communicate any suspicion that a youth is thinking about suicide to a mental health professional immediately
- Remember...Always stay with the youth. DO NOT leave a suicidal youth alone while you get help
- Know your community resources

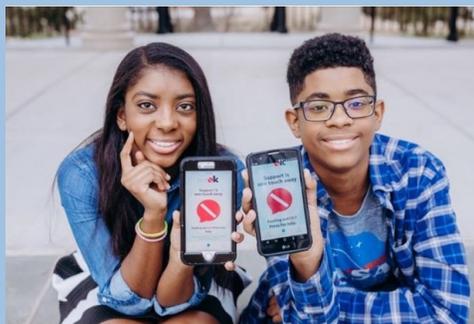
Warning Signs—Recognize Threats of Suicide:

- Talks about committing suicide
- Has trouble eating and/or sleeping
- Experiences drastic changes in behavior
- Loses interest in work, school, hobbies, etc.
- Withdraws from family and/or friends
- Loses interest in personal appearance

See [PREVENTION](#), Page 5

It's okay to be NotOK!

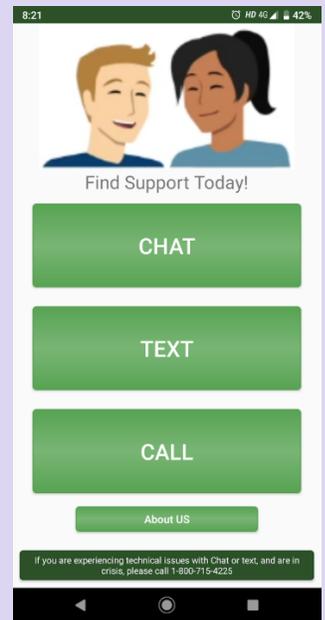
Charlie and Hannah Lucas are a brother-sister duo who developed an app for youth suffering from depression and anxiety. The app allows a user



to alert up to 5 different trusted people that they're "not ok" as a way of asking for help. Learn more [here](#).

Download MyGCAL App

Earlier this year, DBHDD launched its MyGCAL app designed to reach Georgia's youth in times of need with a team staffed by caring professionals - including licensed clinicians - who are available 24/7 to address behavioral health crises, make referrals for treatment, and dispatch mobile crisis response teams. The app is compatible for both [Apple](#) and [Android](#) smartphones. A crisis has no schedule. Download the app today and share this great resource with your friends, family, and colleagues.



We Hear You. Help is Available.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people between 10 to 24 nationwide, according to a 2017 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For those who have thoughts of suicide or know of someone with those thoughts, remember that help is only a conversation away (in person, text, chat, or call). Sometimes our struggle can be underestimated because of our age. But many of us hear you and want to help. Don't be afraid to let your friends, family, or teachers know what you need when they ask: they want to help you. Remember that this feeling can be overcome. Family conflict, relationships, grades, sexual identity, and the loss of important people can seem impossible to deal with. But with support from others, **you can overcome this.**

If you or someone you know is in need of emotional support or help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Trained helpers are available 24/7.

1-800-273-TALK (8255)



Looking Beyond the Behavior

By Eboni Woodbury
OCA Investigator

Did you know that in the State of Georgia, students in Pre-K are being suspended, even expelled, three times higher than students who are in grades kindergarten-twelve? During the Georgia Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect earlier this month, speakers Cheryl Galloway-Benefield and Micole Talley educated the audience of the growing issue of children spending more time at home than in school. Teachers are instructed to educate students on a specific curriculum. However, what if the child is unable to learn due to alarming behaviors? Teachers are not trained to handle children who are battling traumatic childhoods. Sending children home, or to out of school suspension, sends the message, "We do not want you here." They are said to be disruptions to the "learning environment". Children who are repeatedly suspended from school can develop a hatred towards school. Georgia's legislators created a resolution to remedy the concern of sending elementary aged children home before assessing the underlying problem.

Georgia House Bill 740 requires local schools to conduct screenings, assessments, and reviews prior to expelling or suspending students in grades kindergarten through third for five or more consecutive days. It has been recommended that teachers are trained in trauma informed care. Also, to be educated on mental health concerns and services that are available to students in need. Teachers are encouraged to take time to speak to the child to learn about their behaviors rather than considering a child a nuisance. Georgia has a high rate of children in foster care and it is difficult to identify which children are suffering with issues at home. It is the goal to educate children and allow them to express themselves effectively. Educators must look through a different lens. What may be seen as aggression, disrespect, and disobedience may actually be behaviors resulting from neglect, malnutrition, health issues, or a family history of mental health struggles. Georgia's children need us. We should work towards being advocates for those who feel they do not have a voice.



DID YOU KNOW...

Governor Brian Kemp proclaimed September 2019 as **Bullying Prevention Awareness Month** in Georgia? Read the proclamation [here!](#)

BULLYING WARNING SIGNS

Warning Sign #9:
**SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS
LIKE RUNNING AWAY FROM
HOME, SELF HARM, OR TALKING
ABOUT SUICIDE**

Find out what's
going on!

stopbullying.gov





Kinship Care

Kinship care helps children maintain ties with their families and communities when they come into contact with the child welfare system. These connections positively impact the well-being of the child and provide more opportunities for future success.

Kinship care refers to a temporary or permanent arrangement in which a relative or any non-relative adult who has a long-standing relationship or bond with the child and/or family has taken over the full-time, substitute care of a child whose parents are unable or unwilling to do so.

Kinship care includes those relationships established through an informal arrangement, legal custody, guardianship order, a relative foster care placement, or kinship adoption.

This month, Governor Brian Kemp proclaimed September as Kinship Care Month in Georgia. Georgia's Kinship Care program includes kinship navigators, resources, and supports. To learn more about Kinship Care in Georgia, click [here](#).

Jennifer Los
North District Manager,
Regional Kinship Navigator
DFCS Region 1-5 | 17 years of service

What's the best part of being a Kinship Navigator?
"The big picture is knowing the difference the Kinship Navigator Program makes in the lives of caregivers. We are their listening ear, the one who connects them to services and community resources. We help close the gap to getting services in place. We help troubleshoot and navigate the system on their behalf."

Division of Family & Children Services

Eric Jackson
Kinship Navigator
DFCS Region 8 | 16 years of service

What's the best part of being a Kinship Navigator?
"Delivering on a promise to my families. I was able to physically deliver food and other household products to a 70-year-old grandmother who took in four grandchildren just before Thanksgiving. The grandchildren were teenagers and younger. I was able to help her get clothing and other household items for them before the year ended."

Division of Family & Children Services

Kinship Summit 2019



Tacia Estem, DFCS Kinship Director

The Kinship Care Summit was held this month to educate, support and celebrate the remarkable work being done every day by unsung heroes.

As kinship care continues to be a primary and valuable option for children who cannot live with their parents, emphasis on kinship care policy, practice, and research is necessary to continue to enhance services and supports for kinship caregivers and families. Kinship families appreciated the time to hear from leaders, learn about important and relevant topics and engage in a safe and empathetic space amongst others who identify and understand the joys and challenges of kinship caregiving.

The Summit was provided free of charge to the entire family with activities for children including arts and crafts, caricatures, face painting, and movies!



DHS Commissioner Crittenden chatting with attendees



Fun activities!



Child Welfare Law Specialists Gathering



DFCS Medical Director, Dr. Priyanka Patel discussed reviewing psychotropic medications for children in foster care

A group of Georgia's Child Welfare Law Specialists (CWLS) met for two days of learning and camaraderie this month. The CWLS certification is a professional achievement that signifies an attorney's specialized knowledge, skill, and verified expertise in the field of child welfare law. To learn more about becoming a CWLS, click [here](#).



Networking and socializing



Ashley Willcott, Angela Tyner, Rachel Davidson, and Jerry Bruce



Darice Good, Kristi Lovelace, and Vicky Wallace



Anissa Patton, Temika Murry, Diana Rugh Johnson, Donald Lee, and Nathan Hayes

Prevention, cont'd...

- Loses interest in personal appearance
- Starts or increases use of alcohol or drugs
- Takes unnecessary risks
- Has attempted suicide before
- Has had recent severe losses
- Gives away prized possessions
- Shows happiness after prolonged depression

Resources for Youth

- Free 24/7 text line for youth-in-crisis: 741741
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center: www.sprc.org
- Suicide Prevention Action Network: www.span-ga.org
- Georgia's Suicide Prevention Information Network: www.gspin.org
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: www.afsp.org (Click chapter, then choose Geor-

Out of the Darkness Walk



Barrow County DFCS organized a group to walk in the local Out of the Darkness walk focused on suicide awareness and prevention.

This group, which included DFCS, their SAAG, CASA staff, and family and community members walked in memory of a teenager in care who died by suicide. This teenager's siblings, foster parents, neighbors and friends remember him fondly and were honored to participate in his honor.

The gray t-shirts worn by some in the photo read "Team Reunify" as reunification is the primary goal for children in foster care. If you see someone wearing one of these shirts, ask them about it and how you can help! And remember, you are loved!



DID YOU HEAR...

OCA Director Rachel Davidson, Georgia Supreme Court Justice Nahmias, and other Georgia child welfare leaders were featured in Tom's Tuesday Talk! Check it out [here](#).

Check out the submission form [here!](#)

As Seen on Social Media



AMPED Kids Foundation

September 20 at 12:25 PM · 🌐

Are you a foster parent or know of a foster family in Georgia who would like to grow a foster child's musical talent? Amped Kids offers free music lessons for foster children. Sign up today by contacting us at AmpedKids.org or email us at ampedkidsfoundation@gmail.com

#ampedkidsfoundation #musiclessons #piano #guitar #drums #voice #fostering #fosterfamilies



VOICE, cont'd...

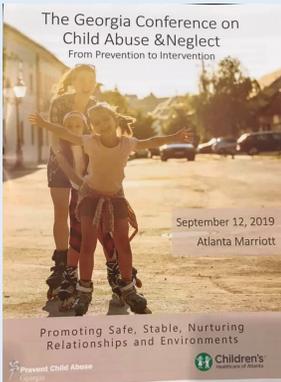
- ✓ Ask the youth about what they think their **fami-ly strengths and needs** are.
- ✓ When visiting with youth, **discuss the youth's goals** with them specifically around education, life, skills, and relationships.
- ✓ Though visits are monthly, **increase the visits** when you assess that the youth is experiencing challenges.
- ✓ Make sure the youth has a copy of their child case plan and that **they understand it**.





The Georgia Conference on Child Abuse & Neglect

By **Shantelle Whitehead**
OCA Investigator



The Georgia Conference on Child Abuse & Neglect was held on September 12, 2019 and was hosted by Prevent Child Abuse Georgia and The Stephanie V. Blank Center for Safe and Healthy Children at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. This year focused on promoting safe, stable and nurturing relationships and environments to prevent child abuse and neglect. The workshops promoted innovative strategies that prevent, intervene, and/or treat children and families who are impacted by adverse childhood experiences.

Exhibitors to highlight:

Fulton County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)

Since 1995 Fulton County Court Appointed Special Advocates (FCCASA) Inc., has been a 501(c)(3) that provides training for community members to become child advocate volunteers to follow abused and neglected children as they navigate the child welfare process in foster care. Fulton County CASA needs volunteers to advocate in the best

interest of abused and neglected children. FultonCountyCASA.org or email recruiter@fultoncountycasa.org.

Connections Matter Georgia

The Connections Matter training focuses on preventing and mitigating the effects of ACEs through stable and nurturing connections. PCA Georgia and the Georgia Center for Child Advocacy are leading this initiative with the help of trainers statewide! The Connections Matter training is intended for all audiences as we believe everyone has a role to play in helping children and families thrive. www.ConnectionsMatterGA.org

Attachment & Trauma Network, Inc.

At the Attachment & Trauma Network, it is our mission to promote healing of children impacted by trauma through supporting their families, schools, and communities. Our parenting program provides training and support for those parenting/caregiving children affected by trauma and our Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools program provides professional development training for school districts. We will be hosting our national conference in Atlanta, Feb 16-18, 2020. www.AttachTrauma.org

Upcoming Events and Deadlines:

- ✓ **October 3-4:** 2019 Embark Georgia Leadership Conference at Columbus State University. More info [here](#).
- ✓ **October 9th:** Deadline to submit artwork for The Summit Youth Art Contest. For more info, contact OCA Investigator Beth Smith (bsmith@oca.ga.gov).
- ✓ **October 23:** Volunteer Training Seminar by Truancy Intervention Project at the Romae T. Powell Juvenile Justice Center in Atlanta. More info [here](#).
- ✓ **October 25:** Third Annual Domestic Violence Forum by Tapestri at Agnes Scott College in Decatur. More info [here](#).
- ✓ **October 28-30:** Georgia Conference on Children and Families at the Augusta Marriott at the Convention Center. More info [here](#).
- ✓ **November 13-15:** The Summit: Georgia's Child Welfare Conference at The Hotel at Avalon in Alpharetta. More info [here](#).





**CHILDHOOD
OBESITY**
AWARENESS & PREVENTION



HOW DO WE DEFINE OBESITY?

Body mass index (BMI) is a measurement used to determine weight status. For children and teens, target BMI is specific to age and sex. Obesity is defined as a BMI at or above the 95th percentile for youth of the same age and sex. CDC and Mayo Clinic have BMI calculators and growth charts that indicate target weight; however, always consult your child's physician or pediatrician before making lifestyle modifications.

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

Modern clinical research recognizes childhood obesity as a major public health concern. Children who experience obesity are at an increased risk for high blood pressure and high cholesterol; type 2 diabetes; asthma; sleep apnea; joint problems; musculoskeletal pain; and hormonal imbalances. Obesity in childhood is also more likely to lead to adult obesity, which is associated with serious health complications.



MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS



Research has also shown a link between childhood obesity and mental health outcomes. Children who experience obesity are more likely to have psychological problems, including anxiety and depression; sleep disorders; poor self-image, low self-esteem, and social problems, like bullying and isolation. Although some times less obvious, these comorbidities can be just as harmful as physical complications.

WHAT CAUSES OBESITY?

Why are some children at a higher risk of obesity than others? The causes of childhood obesity are varied and may include genetic, developmental, and behavioral factors. Behavior that influences weight gain might include not getting enough physical activity, eating food that is high in calories and low in nutrients, sedentary activities like watching TV or playing video games, certain medications, and poor sleep hygiene.



DITCHING THE D-WORD



Experts warn that diets are harmful for children. Weight cycling, or "yo-yo dieting," can lead to eating disorders, health complications, and chronic body image problems. Instead, weight management strategies should focus on lifestyle changes that teach children how to take care of their bodies by integrating nutritious foods and physical activity to their daily routines. A whole-family approach that emphasizes making modest changes is most effective in helping children achieve their health goals.

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

Healthy, balanced eating habits and regular exercise are primary tools for preventing and managing childhood obesity. Setting realistic nutrition-based goals, positive reinforcement of healthy behaviors with non-food rewards, and systems that emphasize self-monitoring of target behaviors can be effective in obesity management. Advocating for nutritional goals rather than weight loss goals can help children build a healthy relationship with food and with their bodies.



COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY



It's important that interventions are culturally appropriate. Not all families have access to nutritious, fresh food or affordable and safe physical activities. Oftentimes, "junk food" is more affordable, and therefore, more accessible to low-income families. Communities can support their families by providing access to nutritious foods and safe places for children to get 60 minutes of daily physical activity. Visit www.oca.georgia.gov for more ideas on how to get involved!

SOURCES:

- Casazza, Krista et al. (2013). Weighing the evidence of common beliefs in obesity research. *Critical reviews in food science and nutrition*, vol. 53(4). Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4272658/>
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- Haupt, A. (2011, Oct. 6). Kids who diet: When are they too young? U.S. News. Retrieved from <https://health.usnews.com/health-news/diet/articles/2011/10/06/kids-who-diet-when-are-they-too-young>
- Pandita, A. et al. (2016). Childhood obesity: prevention is better than cure. *Diabetes, metabolic syndrome and obesity - targets and therapy*, 9, 83-89. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4801143/#!fb=1-dms-9-083>

CREATED BY M. KADE OF THE OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
IN HONOR OF NATIONAL CHILDHOOD OBESITY AWARENESS MONTH,
WHICH IS RECOGNIZED EACH SEPTEMBER.



60 A DAY!

**Kids and teens
ages 6 to 17 need 60
minutes of physical
activity every day.**

- Get your heart beating faster!
- Make your muscles and bones stronger!



Do what's fun for you.

Get your 60 minutes of activity all at once — or split it up over the day. It's your choice!

I have basketball practice for an hour after school!



Kickball at recess, P.E., and a walk after dinner with my dog.



I ride my bike to the park to play soccer with my friends.



Yep, they all add up!

Lots of things count as physical activity.

Try a mix of sports and other fun activities.



They all count!

Getting 60 minutes will make you feel good.



*It's true — physical activity can actually help you do better in school.



Um, strengthen my bones?

Sounds weird, right? But bones need pressure to get stronger. So hit the ground running! Jump, sprint, or do a cartwheel.

60 minutes all at once? I'm pretty busy.

Not a problem! Split up your 60 minutes over the day however you want — it all adds up!



Walk. Run. Dance. Play. **What's your move?**

For more information on physical activity, visit the DPHP website [here](http://www.dphp.ga.gov).





FAMILY, cont'd...

parents and children you work with the following:

Unfortunately, we don't always ask families and children for their input. So what can we do differently? Try asking the parents and children you work with the following:

- What do you need?
- What can we do to mitigate these concerns?
- What do you want in life?
- What are your goals, hopes, and visions for the future?

When we take the time to listen to people's needs, it can help us become more empathetic and understanding. Taking the time to listen may help you understand that a parent made every effort to make it to court on time but encountered difficulties beyond her control that resulted in her arriving late. This understanding may then help you realize just how truly committed that parent is and that her tardiness should not be interpreted as a lack of interest in her child or respect for the court process. The empathy that results from that realization can help you move past any preconceived notions or prejudices to target the underlying issues and work towards actual and long-lasting improvements.

One young lady at the Summit shared her experience of

entering and exiting the foster care system multiple times as a result of neglect by her mother. She felt the court and the system showed no empathy or humanity for either her mom or herself and, as a result, came to believe the system to be malicious. She also noticed that while she was not the least bit fearful of her mom, at least one set of foster parents were truly fearful of her mom because they didn't know or understand her. If they had the opportunity to do that, perhaps they would have been able to see in her mom what she saw in her.

Jerry Milner, Associate Commissioner of the federal Children's Bureau, spoke about needing to value parents and the parent-child relationship as opposed to only valuing the "rescue" of children. By recognizing those values, it's possible to dramatically change the foster care experience for both children and parents. When holding true to these values, parent-child contact should never be used as a reward or punishment. Robust family time supports the bonding and attachment necessary to support and sustain the parent-child relationship.

Let's actively listen, hear, and engage children and families throughout the entire dependency process. With the right supports and interventions, people can change. As one parent with lived experience stated during this Summit, "People do change. I'm living proof of that."

Practicing Self-Care

Mental wellness is vital to our overall health and it is just as important as our physical well-being. Below are a few self-care tips that can help keep you mentally strong!

- ✓ Practice good emotional hygiene (i.e. maintain self-esteem)
- ✓ Make time for friends and family
- ✓ Make time for yourself
- ✓ Nourish your body with healthy food
- ✓ Get enough sleep
- ✓ Move your body
- ✓ Help others
- ✓ Manage your stress
- ✓ Manage other medical or physical problems
- ✓ Ask for help

To learn more, visit the [Take 5 to Save Lives campaign](#).





Register Today!



November 13-15, 2019 • The Hotel at Avalon

REGISTRATION:

October 1st is the last day for the early registration rate. Please visit the conference website [here](#) where you can find additional information on registration fees, hotel reservations, conference agenda and workshops, speakers, and much more. **Keep in mind that the reservation cut-off date for The Hotel at Avalon is October 11th.** If you have any registration questions, please contact AK Consulting Group at annette@akconsultinggroup.org or 850-523-4200.

EXHIBITORS AND SPONSORS: DEADLINE IS OCTOBER 10TH

The Summit is a great opportunity to promote your organization, services, and products while interacting with over 500 conference attendees composed of advocates, judges, attorneys, guardians ad litem, child protective services investigators, case managers, community-based care providers, juvenile justice professionals, law enforcement professionals, mental health and medical providers, and many other stakeholders. Click [here](#) for more information.

*Georgia Office of the Child Advocate
for the Protection of Children*
Rachel Davidson, Director
<https://oca.georgia.gov>
7 MLK Jr. Blvd, Ste. 347
Atlanta, GA 30334

*For general inquiries, assistance, or to file
a complaint:*

- Phone: (404) 656-4200
- Internet: <https://oca.georgia.gov/webform/request-oca-assistance-or-investigation>

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Jansen Head: jhead@oca.ga.gov*

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