



Celebrating National Reunification Month



By Rachel Davidson
OCA Director

This month, we celebrated National Family Reunification Month! There have been many celebrations and events throughout the state to recognize families who have reunified and the efforts of so many supporting them. I was honored to have given a keynote speech at one such event in Dalton, where awards were given to a case manager of the year, a supervisor of the year, a foster/adoptive family of the year, and a reunified family of the year.

The stories shared were inspiring. The case manager is someone who helps ensure others have access to the necessary resources and services. The supervisor is one who makes everyone feel special. The foster/adoptive family strives hard to maintain connections and provide supports to the biological families of the children in their home—even having recently invited a mother and grandparents to join them on a beach trip to Florida! The reunified family is one that had extensive generational history with DFCS. But at the right time, with the right supports, the family was able to get to a place where it was safe and appropriate to reunify. And it was extremely special for everyone to have the ability to celebrate all that hard work!



The Region 1 Foster/Adoptive Family of the Year pictured with Region 1 DFCS staff, DFCS North District Director Ashley Parham, and OCA Director Rachel Davidson

An excerpt from the speech I gave during this event:

"I've always been drawn to the starfish poem about making a difference. In fact, I keep a copy in my office. I suspect many of you have heard this before and some of you may even know it by heart. It's a short

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27th Annual Celebration of Excellence



From left to right: Victoria Salzman (MAAC), Lamar Smith (DFCS), Colleen Mousinho (DFCS), Rachel Davidson (OCA), and Jen King (CASA)

The Georgia Division of Family and Children Services hosted the 27th Annual Celebration of Excellence to honor the educational accomplishments of over 250 youth and young adults who, despite obstacles and adversity, have graduated from high school and college. During the event, the nsoro Foundation awarded more than \$10,000 in scholarships

See [CELEBRATION](#), Page 4

The unedited voices
of young people who have been in care

Youth Voice

By Eshontee Rowe

Dear DFCS,

I remember the first time I was introduced to you. I was fifteen years old when my mother decided to turn me over to your care. At this time, you promised me that you would take custody over me and take care of me. I remembered being picked-up by a child-welfare investigator and dropped off at this lady house. I was scared, because I was going to stay with a stranger which I found out later that she wasn't exactly welcoming and/or friendly. All I had was a few possessions and the clothes on my back. I had no way of getting in contact with any of my family members and no idea if I would ever see my family again. The thought of not knowing what to expect caused me to become very depressed. A couple of days went by before I met my caseworker. I remember when I first met my first caseworker. She briefly introduced herself and gave me an

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Athens-Clarke County Celebrates Reunification Month

Children First, Inc. and Home in 5 hosted the community's first Family Reunification Month Proclamation and Celebration at Athens-Clarke County City Hall on June 10, 2019. The event brought together families who were reunified in the past year, court personnel, lawyers, social workers, service providers, and other members of the community. Speakers included Mayor Kelly Girtz, Western Judicial Circuit Juvenile Judge Robin Shearer, Director of Clarke/Oconee DFCS Mary Bar-



Mayor Kelly Girtz signing the county's proclamation to designate June as Reunification Month. Also pictured are parents who recently reunited with their children, Clarke/Oconee DFCS Director Mary Barrett Yancey, and Juvenile Court Judge Robin Shearer.

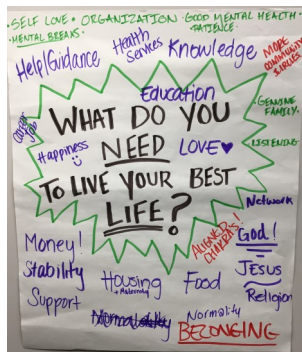
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National Partnership for Child Safety Collaborative

OCA and DFCS represented Georgia at the National Partnership for Child Safety Collaborative. This partnership, supported by Casey Family Programs, involves 11 states/jurisdictions that are focused on child safety and prevention of serious injuries and maltreatment fatalities in the context of child welfare transformation. Also discussed was a platform for standardized Child Death Review for the collaborative, identification of goals and expected outcomes, data gathering and outcomes and the role of the collaborative in national conversations on child safety. Stay tuned; this is just the beginning so there will be more to come!



Left to right: Tiffany Lindsey and Michael Cull from Chapin Hall with Carol Christopher (DFCS), Renee Moore (OCA), LaShundra Stevenson (DFCS), and Martha Dukes (DFCS).



Youth Organizing

During EmpowerMENT's statewide summer session the last weekend in June, youth and young adults with foster care experience learned more about youth-led organizing efforts from facilitators with Foster Youth in Action. These young leaders have a goal to use their voices to profoundly impact the foster care system in a positive way.

Youth perspective on what's working, what's not working, opportunities and improvements, and what's needed to live their best life.



Adult Supporters (from left to right): Donjai Calhoun (DFCS), Candis Jones (DFCS), Sarah Bess Hudson (EmpowerMENT), Rachel Davidson (OCA), and Carmen Callaway (DFCS)



When asked to share who they admired, Sebastian and Mi'cal (both recent graduates and COE participants!) pointed towards DFCS State ILP Director Candis Jones

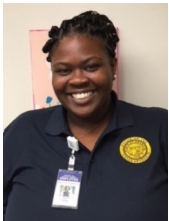




National Foster Parent Association's (NFPA) 29th Annual Education Conference: "Navigating the Future"

Highlights on Internet Safety

(Presented by Cindy Downey)



By Eboni Woodbury
OCA Investigator

We live in a society where social media is plaguing our world. Information is transmitted at a more rapid speed. Almost everyone is engaged in social media; and one of the most vulnerable groups are our children and teenagers. Over ¾ of teenagers, ages 13-17 years old, are using social media. 73% of kids ages 5-15 and 37% of pre-school aged children regularly watch YouTube. They are susceptible to anything generated on the World Wide Web. The greatest concern is, "Are the activities of our children on the internet being monitored?"

The internet gives children access to practically anything and they are interacting with everyone. Personal information is being uploaded to the internet such as one's demographics to their financial information. With pertinent information being readily available, strangers find ways to ease into the lives of vulnerable children. It was discovered that 44% of children admitted to having secrets about internet use from parents. 71% of teenagers admitted to hiding what they do online. 71% of teenagers admitted to blocking parents with privacy settings; hiding browsing history; disabling parental controls; and/or having unknown accounts. The internet has provided children with methods in hiding their activities from their parents.

Hide It Pro allows children and teenagers to create a false screen to hide pictures; text messages; and saved web pages from parents. Icons can look normal when scrolling between the screens. When monitoring chil-

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Highlights on The Children's Ark

(Presented by Molly Kretchmar-Hendricks)



By Beth Smith
OCA Investigator

I had a wonderful time at the NFPA Conference. The conference attendees included Foster and Adoptive parents, child welfare professionals, and numerous child welfare experts.

Workshops included information and discussion on the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), core issues in adoption and permanency, navigating kinship placements, understanding and supporting LGBTQ youth, supporting birth and resource family partnerships, and many other resource based workshops.

One of the more dynamic workshops I attended centered on a presentation from an innovative Model for More Compassionate Foster Care, The Children's Ark. This approach afforded birth parents the opportunity to reside, under supervision, with their children during evaluation and treatment. This method draws valuable lessons to help foster families and professionals respond to the complex needs of children and families in crisis. It was presented by Janet Mann and Molly Kretchmar-Hendricks. Ms. Mann is one of the founders and directors of The Children's Ark. Dr. Kretchmar-Hendricks is a professor of developmental psychology with specialized expertise in attachment theory. Molly was one of the initial research affiliates on the "Circle of Security" intervention program. The "Circle of Security" intervention program helps parents and professionals understand Attachment Theory as related to a child's need for "A Secure Base" in which to explore and a "Safe Haven" which meets their needs to feel protected and welcome.

See [ARK](#), Page 10



CELEBRATION cont'd...



Willie Moore Jr. delivered an inspiring message encouraging youth to be grateful, own their story, and know that they are not a mistake.

to youth in care. Along with the commemorative event, youth were able to engage in enriching workshops, a career fair, and entrepreneurial opportunities that provide additional knowledge and resources as they prepare for life beyond foster care.

Congratulations to all the graduates of the Class of 2019!



GA DFCS ILP Director Candis Jones, Interim Well-Being Services Director Carmen Callaway, Director Tom Rawlings, and GA DHS Commissioner Robyn Crittenden congratulate the graduates as they cross the stage.

**Cobb County DFCS
Celebrates Local Graduates**

On June 7th, the Cobb County DFCS Class of 2019 graduates were honored and celebrated by their local community for their educational accomplishments and achievements. State and county officials, including Georgia First Lady Marty Kemp, State Representative Bert Reeves (Marietta), and Cobb County Commissioner JoAnn Birrell, joined the local community in honoring the graduates at a ceremony in the Cobb County Safety Village. Graduates were showered with support, love, and encouragement through inspirational messages, gifts, and an overall great time spent with friends, colleagues, and loved ones.



Cobb County Deputy Director Carmen Nance welcoming Georgia First Lady Marty Kemp

See [COBB](#), Page 6

Georgia Parent Advisory Council

The Division of Family and Children Services held its first orientation for initial members of the Georgia Parent Advisory Council. The council's goal is to help expand meaningful partnerships between parents and staff throughout the system. Members will serve as representatives for parents in promoting positive changes in DFCS services and practices that strengthen families and help keep them together safely. The council will work with the Prevention and Community Support Section (PCS) within DFCS to help expand meaningful partnerships between parents and staff throughout the system.



DFCS Director Tom Rawlings and DFCS staff with members of the Georgia PAC

See [COUNCIL](#), Page 5



COUNCIL cont'd...

DFCS is currently recruiting new members for its Parent Advisory Council, especially in DFCS Regions 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9! Interested applicants may review the information below and contact DFCS Program Specialist, Lindsey Dale at Lindsey.Dale@dhs.ga.gov.

Georgia Parent Advisory Council

**Join the Georgia
Parent Advisory
Council**

We are inviting applications from parents who have a strong interest in joining the Georgia Parent Advisory Council. The council will work with the Prevention and Community Support

Section (PCS) within the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) to help expand meaningful partnerships between parents and staff throughout the system. PCS is committed to promoting the voices of parents throughout its work to strengthen families, engage communities in child maltreatment and adolescent pregnancy prevention strategies and reduce the need for out-of-home placement of Georgia's children.

The roles of the Georgia Parent Advisory Council members are to:

- Advise PCS about prevention strategies provided in the community to families before they interact with the child welfare system.

- Serve as a representative voice for parents in promoting positive changes in services and practices that strengthen families and help keep them safely together.
- Advise PCS on developing meaningful roles in various department service areas.
- Develop resources to assist PCS staff in creating supportive, strengths-based strategies in their work with parents and families.
- Promote and support implementation of the protective factors framework.
- Serve in various other roles based on the emerging needs of DCFS and PCS such as co-trainers, public speakers, reviewers of funding proposals, contributors to written materials.



Application Process

**Nominate
a Parent
Today!**

Members of the Council are nominated by a DFCS representative, a community-based service provider or other stakeholder with professional connections to parents. You can view a full parent council membership description under the PCS initiatives at <https://dfcs.georgia.gov/initiatives>.

We are inviting nominations of interested parents who have had prior involvement in the child welfare system or experiences using community-based prevention services. If involved with the child welfare system, their case must be closed a minimum of 8–12 months. If applicable, parents in recovery must be sober for at least 12 months prior to applying.



Applications are accepted on an ongoing basis and interviews are scheduled quarterly.

Applications may be submitted online at <http://survey.constantcontact.com/survey/a07eg3rlewjrs3bi6z5/a005js40dhpu/greeting> or in writing to:

**Application
Available
Online**

Lindsey Dale
Program Specialist
Prevention and Community Support Section
Georgia Division of Family and Children Services
2 Peachtree Street, NW, Suite 26-276
Atlanta, Georgia 30303
Office: (404) 651-5129
Lindsey.Dale@dhs.ga.gov

If you need an application form for a parent you wish to nominate or have any questions, please contact Lindsey Dale, Program Specialist, at Lindsey.Dale@dhs.ga.gov.



COBB cont'd...

Cobb County DFCS Director LaSondra Boddie (pictured below) encouraged graduates by saying, "Be bold. Stand out. Be fearless. Be a star amongst the clouds. But most importantly, be you."



State Representative Bert Reeves (pictured below) reminded them of this: "The very thing that tried to break you into a million pieces will be the very same thing that will help you impact a million lives . . . We can choose to make an impact. Some have a platform to make an impact based on their titles, but [your platform] is for the rest of your lives . . . You have the ability to make a forever impact in a way that very few of us in this room could ever do."



REUNIFICATION cont'd...

little story that is adapted from a longer essay called "The Star Thrower", written by Loren Eiseley. Some variation of the short version goes as follows:

One day an old man was walking down the beach just before dawn. In the distance he saw a young man picking up stranded starfish and throwing them back into the sea. As the old man approached the young man, he asked, "Why do you spend so much energy doing what seems to be a waste of time?" The young man explained that the stranded starfish would die if left in the morning sun. The old man exclaimed, "But there must be thousands of starfish. How can your efforts make any difference?" The young man looked down at the starfish in his hand and as he threw it to safety in the sea, he said, "It makes a difference to this one!"

The next part of the story is not often told. You see, the old man was accustomed to seeing people collecting the starfish



OCA Director Rachel Davidson giving the key-note speech in DFCS Region 1.

that had already died – or would soon die. And the old man, who was a scientist and a poet, had been troubled by the young man's response. He finally realized that the young man was choosing to not

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Upcoming Events

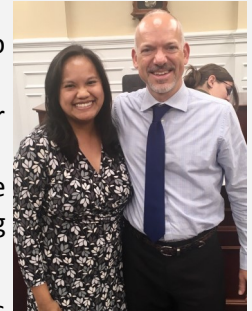
- ✓ July 19: Practical Matters Reality Fair 2019, Atlanta, GA. More info [here](#).
- ✓ July 24: (Free) Darkness to Light's "Stewards of Children Sexual Abuse Prevention" training, Marietta, GA. More info [here](#).
- ✓ August 3: Georgia CASA Conference, Atlanta, GA. More info [here](#).
- ✓ August 20-22: The 28th Annual Summer Conference by Georgia Mental Health Consumer Network at Epworth by the Sea, St. Simons Island, GA. More info [here](#).
- ✓ September 23-25: 2019 Georgia Suicide Prevention Conference in Pine Mountain, GA at The Lodge and Spa at Callaway Gardens. More info [here](#).
- ✓ October 2-4: DBHDD Behavioral Health Symposium and Substance Use Disorder Pre-Symposium at The Lodge at Callaway Gardens in Pine Mountain, GA. More info [here](#).

*Mark your
calendar!*



COUNTY cont'd... rett Yancey, and two parents who have overcome significant challenges to reunify with their children. The event focused on three goals:

- ▶ To celebrate the accomplishments of families who have overcome an array of challenges to reunify safely and successfully.
- ▶ To inspire other parents that it is possible to confront and resolve the issues that led to their separation and reunify with their children.
- ▶ To recognize the vital role that community partners — mental health and substance abuse providers, courts and judges, foster parents and social workers, and others — play in helping to reunify, strengthen, and support families.



OCA Deputy Director Jansen Head and Mayor Kelly Girtz sharing their support for the celebration and proclamation.

During the event, Mayor Kelly Girtz read aloud and signed a proclamation to recognize June as Reunification Month. The mayor shared his experience in working as a DFCS employee in another state and showed his appreciation to those in Athens-Clarke County for the hard work and dedication of county staff and of families that engage in reunification through healing and growth over time. Two parents also shared their experience that led to their recent reunification with their children in the past year.



Clarke/Oconee DFCS Director Mary Barrett Yancey discussing the importance of reunification and the role of foster parents as "bonus parents".



OCA Investigator Beth Smith, OCA Deputy Director Jansen Head, DFCS Placement & Permanency Director Tammy Reed, and DFCS Deputy Director for Child Welfare Mary Havick celebrating reunification.



A father holding his daughter who he recently reunified with just in time for Father's Day. With great support, the father shared his experience on his journey to reunification.

DID YOU KNOW?

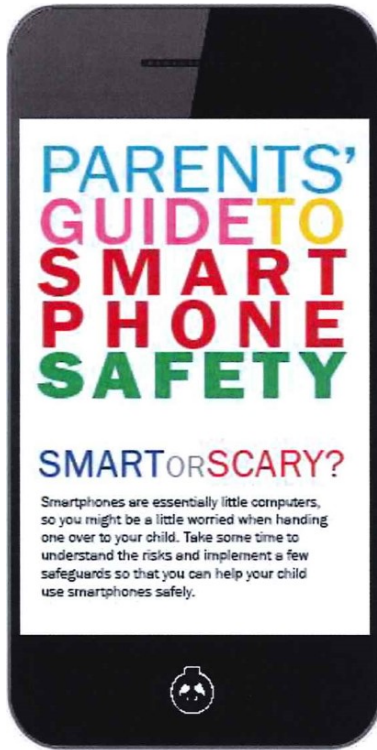
Georgia law requires DFCS to provide notice of any placement change for a child in DFCS custody. Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 15-11-215, DFCS shall provide notice of a placement change at least five days in advance of the change. O.C.G.A. § 15-11-215 further states: "If a child's health or welfare may be endangered by any delay in changing his or her placement, the court and all attorneys of record shall be notified of such placement change within 24 hours of such change."

A child who is 14 years of age or older, the child's parents, guardian, or other custodian, and any attorney of record may request a hearing with regard to the child's case plan or the permanency plan in order for the court to consider the change in the location of the child's placement and any changes to the case plan or permanency plan resulting from the child's change in placement location. The court is required to hold the hearing within five days of receiving notice of a change in the location of the child's placement. DFCS is prohibited from changing the child's placement prior to the hearing, unless the child's health or welfare may be endangered by any delay in changing the child's placement.

The law is incorporated into DFCS Policy 10.3 which can be accessed in the DFCS Policy Manual found [here](#). The law in its entirety can be found [here](#).

Notice of a child's placement change must be provided to:

- ▶ The court
- ▶ A child who is 14 years of age or older
- ▶ The child's parent, guardian, or legal custodian
- ▶ The person or agency with physical custody of the child
- ▶ The child's attorney
- ▶ The child's guardian ad litem, if any
- ▶ Any other attorney of record



5 Ways to be Smarter than the Smartphone:

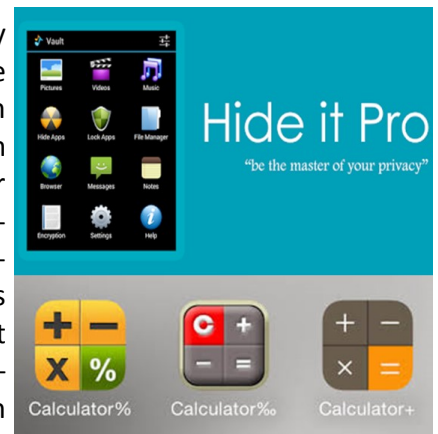
- 1. Be a parent and a source.**
Establish clear guidelines, including time limits and consequences for inappropriate behavior, but be open so your youth will come to you with any problems.
- 2. Set up password protection.**
This will keep everyone but you and your youth from accessing personal information stored on the phone.
- 3. Update the operating system.**
New versions often contain important security fixes.
- 4. Approve apps before they are downloaded.**
Make sure you understand their capabilities and approve their content.
- 5. Understand location services.**
GPS features are useful when using maps, but you'll want to disable location-tagging when your youth posts anything online.

Source: NetSmartz.org/TipSheets

INTERNET, cont'd...

Children and teenagers are at a great risk when having unlimited and unmonitored access to the internet. Children and teenagers are vulnerable to a number of risks when they access the internet. They are at risk of cyberbullying from their immediate cohorts to people across the globe. They are criticized on things ranging from their appearances to their political views. The internet gives people a platform to say what they want and are protected because they sit behind computer screens and other electronic devices. Children and teenagers are also subjected to cyber predators/sexual predators; and inappropriate materials. Predators can pose as anyone that would grant them admittance to our helpless children and teenagers. Predators give children and teenagers attention that they lack. Children and teenagers are "groomed" into engaging in risky behaviors. Parents should be observant to any behavior changes that may result in improper internet use.

Children and teenagers who are improperly using the internet can display various behavior changes. Some behaviors parents should be aware of include phone calls to/from unknown friends; spending excessive hours online, particularly at night; receiving unsolicited gifts; withdrawal from the family; reluctance in discussing online activities; multiple email accounts; and/or becoming upset when restricted from using the internet. Predators have easy and anonymous access to our children and teen-



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REUNIFICATION cont'd...

be an observer – or a bystander, as the old man had been, but was choosing to take action and make a difference – even if for just one starfish. The next morning, he was compelled to join the young man, saying “Call me another thrower.” And he realized that by joining the young man, he was not alone any longer. And knew that there would be other “star throwers” – near and far – who showed the compassion necessary to complete the circle from life to death and back to life again.

At times in our lives, we are all the old man, the young man, or the starfish. Sometimes, as the old man, we don't immediately see the purpose to actions and we can get overwhelmed with all that there is to do. And it can seem like we spend a lot of energy taking actions that seem to be a waste of time. Sometimes, as the young man, we persevere and make a difference – even if for just one starfish. And sometimes, we are the starfish who just need a little help.”

This work is hard. It is especially important to celebrate the wins. And while this month has helped us put a special spotlight on recognizing those wins associated with the generally preferred permanency option of reunification, it shouldn't stop here. Let's continue the hard work to promote healing and effect substantial, heartfelt and long-lasting change within families, as well as within systems. Children and families—all those starfish who just need a little help—deserve that.



Region 1 Supervisor of the Year



Region 1 Reunified Family of the Year



Region 1 Case Manager of the Year

VOICE cont'd...

option of going to a foster home or group home unlike my fellow foster brothers and sisters. It took an additional time for my caseworker to secure a placement for me so in the in between time a transporter had to transport me back and forth to my high school which was in a different county outside of the county I was in. After two weeks of being at that placement, I was eventually transported to my first placement of six placements. This was the start of a beautiful, eye opening, crazy roller-coaster ride through the child welfare system. This system has taught me several life skills that the young adult, in their early twenties don't know, such as adaptability, leadership, and even some professional skills. I found out what youth voice and advocacy was in my roundtables, court hearing, and transitional living meetings. I was the lead creator of my transition plan meanwhile my caseworker and adult supporters in my placement helped me make my plan clear and reasonable. I learned how to passionately fight with more than my fist and how to use my words to express the emotions. I learned that if it's not in black and white then there's no way to prove what was said. I had a strong team of DFCS workers who helped me make my visions, aspirations, and dreams come to reality, and when I misbehaved and acted-out of character the system never gave up on me. I am currently in my senior year in college due to the support and connection with professionals in the child-welfare system. This was not a smooth sailing ride at all, but because I had a persistent group of people behind me even in times that I was fearful, doubtful, and combative I am who I am today, so I would like to say thank you. I also would like to charge you to not only continue your effort, but find more innovative ways to work with young people today.

Sincerely,
Eshontee Rowe
Former Foster Youth/ GA Empowerment Advocate



National CASA Conference

At the 2019 National CASA/GAL Conference, GSU Clinical Associate Professor Dr. Sharon Hill and OCA Director Rachel Davidson and gave a presentation on "Trauma-Informed Systems of Care: Creating a Culture of Well-Being."

We appreciate the CASA/GAL volunteers who continue to demonstrate exemplary service on behalf of the most vulnerable children, especially here in Georgia!



INTERNET cont'd...

agers. Children and teenagers thrive on

the virtual validation they receive from predators; and are oblivious to the dangers that they are prone to. Predators groom children and teenagers into trusting them through manipulation and seduction. Parents must stay alert of the children's activities as more and more predators are meeting up with children and causing lasting harm.

The internet has a wide variety of usage. We have transitioned to an age where everything associated with one's life is plastered on social media. People are learning more and more about an individual based on what a person shares. Children and teenagers are vulnerable if their internet usage is not being monitored. Children and teenagers have admitted to hiding their internet activities from their parents. Additionally, there is a growing concern with predators having access to children and teenagers. Parents must monitor their children's electronic devices to ensure nothing is being hidden; and to ensure the internet is being used properly. The internet is a different world than the reality we live in. We must protect our vulnerable children from being taken advantage of by those that do not mean them well.

ARK cont'd...



Co-Founder of Children's Ark, Jane Mann, reading her book and sharing insights from it.

The workshop was extremely engaging and utilized excerpts and readings by the authors of the book, "Creating Compassionate Foster Care, Lessons of Hope from Children and Families in Crisis". The workshop inspired me to focus on the importance of understanding that I can be a catalyst for change in the work I do at OCA.

What kids conceal from parents online





Save the Date!



November 13-15, 2019 • The Hotel at Avalon

The Georgia Office of the Child Advocate, Supreme Court of Georgia's Committee on Justice for Children, and the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services are pleased to announce the Call for Workshop Proposals for ***The Summit: Georgia's Child Welfare Conference*** to be held on **November 13-15, 2019** at the **Alpharetta Conference Center at The Hotel at Avalon**.

You are invited to join other child welfare professionals at the third annual Summit, a statewide, multi-disciplinary conference for sharing best practices, and collaborating across professions. The agenda is taking shape for an extraordinary program for all child welfare professionals – case managers, lawyers, judges, policy makers, Court Appointed Special Advocates, stakeholders and anyone interested in improving our system of serving Georgia's abused and neglected children.

*Georgia Office of the Child Advocate
for the Protection of Children*

Rachel Davidson, Director

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*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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