



**Government
of South Australia**

Office of the Guardian
for Children and
Young People

Advocating for children and young people in care

Transcript of video

This is a transcript of the video [Advocates talk about: advocating for children and young people in care](#) which comprises interviews with advocates from the Office of the Guardian, Amanda Shaw, Jodie Evans and Melissa Clarke.

Jodie: Young people can sometimes find it difficult to express themselves. They find it difficult to negotiate for what they want or what they need. Or sometimes they don't feel like they're being heard. They might actually tell the adults in their world or the people who make decisions that they weren't happy with the circumstances or decision that's been made but don't know how to take it to that next place.

Melissa: Anyone can advocate for a young person, from friends, their teacher to a relative - anyone at all that's in that person's life.

Amanda: Advocacy is about representing the voice of children so we want to hear from them in their words, their message.

Advocates talk about: advocating for children and young people in care

Jodie: When a young person first makes contact and requests advocacy the first thing I'll do is make sure that I'm very clear about what it is they're asking from me. Not just from what they want but what they expect, what it is they think I can achieve - and obviously work through that conversation in more detail. From that point I'd need to be clear with them that I need to make some further enquiries, to ask some questions – so I'll talk to them about what I will be asking, who I will be making contact with and I'll check in with them that that's OK.

understanding the context

Amanda: While the job of an advocate is to represent the views of the child, talking to others gives us a perspective and a context to the issue. It also gives us the opportunity to assess what are the impacts of the advocacy. If we are advocating for a child on a particular issue we can assess how that might impact on other areas of the child's life by gaining information from others who are part of their lives.

Melissa: In training centres I have had young people asking me to advocate for them on certain issues and for whatever reason I don't think that a position of advocacy for me. But what I try to do is to get them to understand why advocacy isn't appropriate, why decisions that have been made can't be overturned.

Jodie: Just by having a conversation about how they might negotiate their way through the issue and a decision that's been made or how they can raise a complaint, or perhaps talk to the adults who might have made decisions differently. Sometimes at the end of that conversation they don't feel the need to actually have us get involved. So they might have resolved it themselves and then we'll ask them to check in with us and offer the opportunity to have a follow-up conversation and at times it can be left at that.

Melissa: I listen to that person and I'm satisfied that their voice has been heard in whatever decision making processes there's been, that they feel that they've been able to talk it through, they've been able to understand why that decision was made and they are also able to understand why there is no place for me to have a role in advocacy.

Amanda: We need to assess the safety and well-being of the child and then maybe at times when a child is wanting me to advocate for a circumstance or a situation that may put them at risk or that is already unsafe for them. So an advocate needs to have the conversation with the child around the limitations of advocacy. An advocate could not seek an outcome for a child where it would put them at risk.

be careful what you promise

Melissa: I tell all the young people I advocate for that I'm not the person who makes the decisions, I can't change the decision. I can present their views - I can present their voice and I can advocate really hard that their voice and their views are heard throughout the processes, throughout the decisions that are being made but I cannot... I am not in a position to change the decisions. Hopefully, just the process of having their voice heard may sometimes influences the outcome of certain decisions.

Jodie: One of the really important things when you are going to enter into an agreement if, when and how you are going to advocate for them, is that you don't make any promises. It's important that from the outset a young person is aware of your limitations and has a clear understanding of your role as an advocate but also has some sort of realistic expectation of what you can and cannot achieve and that you're honest with a young person about that.

Amanda: If a child wants something that can't be achieved or might be bad for them we need to be honest with children about the limitations of advocacy. We would need to be honest with them about what risks there might be. In that, there would probably be some common ground - if there's a root cause to an issue, talk with the young people about the opportunities - where there are opportunities for advocacy - rather than a particular outcome.

timing is important for young people

Amanda: Ideally advocacy is something that happens in a timely fashion because children and young people's importance and concept of time it is not something they want dragged out but not all resolutions come quickly either.

Melissa: The one thing that I will always tell a child or a young person is that I will keep them informed and I'll keep contact with them even if that means 'I don't actually have any update for you at the moment but I am still working on this.'

Amanda: It's also important to promise a young person that you will keep them informed as to what's happening.

Melissa: I will always tell a young person that 'I will call you back on this day or next week.' I give them a timeframe so they're not left wondering what's going on.

Amanda: And I think it's important not to promise that they're going to get the outcome necessarily that they want. And it's also important not to make promises that can't be kept.

maintaining relationships

Jodie: Often young people will approach us out of frustration because they fear that someone who is responsible for making decisions isn't hearing them, isn't listening and doesn't care about what they've got to say. So one of the things that we need to remember is that we're only involved in that young person's life for a short time and that other relationships are there for a long time.

Amanda: If an advocate has not assessed the impacts that advocacy may have on a young person's life and relationships with key people in other areas of their lives then there may be unintended consequences. Part of undertaking advocacy is talking with the child about their views and showing you understand their views is also talking with them about what else is happening in their lives and how the advocacy itself may impact on that and whether they feel there are issues.

Melissa: It can be dangerous if you were to advocate on that matter in isolation. It is important to get as much information as you can about the whole circumstances because everything in that person's life affects everything else.

Jodie: Don't take sides. Don't let them think you are completely on their side and that all adults are making wrong decisions or bad decisions because, again, you need to preserve those relationships and support them in having healthy and supportive relationships. And don't reflect any personal frustrations so if you're finding a certain situation difficult if you're finding it hard to work your way through it, don't share that with the young person. They've already got their own frustrations.

breaking the news

Amanda: Breaking the news to a child or young person that advocacy has not been successful can be difficult because there are expectations about what can be achieved. Honesty about what the discussion involved and what outcomes could be negotiated... It's often that, although an outcome might not be achieved in full, there's often room for negotiation and so those negotiations can be discussed with the child or young person around the process of being involved aside from just the outcome itself. It's often more important to a child to know and feel confident that they've been involved in decision making and had their voice heard rather than the outcome itself.

Jodie: The approach that I take is 'what learnings can we have gained from that' - what have they achieved. Well what have they achieved? They have successfully sought help They have successfully been heard. They have been clear about what they want. They have sat down with the people who have made those decisions and explained why they want what they want. Sadly, for whatever reason, they might not have got what they wanted but I guess you can encourage them to use that as a way 'next time you want to advocate for something you know how to – you know who to get support from and how to go about it.' And that under these circumstances at this time this can't happen it doesn't mean that it can't happen in the future and you can't revisit it.

into the future

Amanda: Ideally, advocacy is an opportunity to empower children and young people to believe that they have the right to be heard and that there are individuals who will support their voice to be heard. And where, if they are lacking confidence to speak up themselves, that person will speak on their behalf. But hopefully through advocacy, they have developed confidence to speak out for themselves and have learned how to advocate for themselves.



Also available from the website is a set of [questions for discussion](#) .