

ABA Adopts Model Act on Child Representation in Abuse and Neglect Cases

by Andrea Khoury

“You are the one who makes the decisions, [but] I need to be heard so people may understand how I feel or what I need . . . Listen to me, since no one else will, and try to understand where I’m coming from.”

—Former Foster Youth

Sentiments like this one from a former foster youth reinforce the importance of quality, client-directed representation. In August 2011, the ABA House of Delegates passed the most comprehensive policy concerning the child’s representative’s role in dependency cases since *The Standards of Practice for Lawyers Who Represent Children in Abuse and Neglect Cases* were adopted in 1996. *The Model Act Governing the Representation of Children in Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency Proceedings* gives attorneys clear guidance on representing the most vulnerable client, the minor-child.

Children’s attorneys are the voices for the children. Children deserve someone who listens to how they feel and what they want. Representing children is not easy but by implementing *The Model Act* states can ensure that children in abuse

states appoint lawyers to function in the traditional lawyer role. Some states appoint nonlawyers, and some states instruct the lawyer to use a hybrid role. *The Model Act* gives legislatures concrete language to adopt that provides long-needed uniform guidance to lawyers representing children. The following summary highlights the Act’s provisions.

Key requirements

The Model Act provides some basic requirements:

- Every child is appointed a lawyer who is bound by the rules of professional conduct, including confidentiality and zealous advocacy, and has access to the child’s confidential information regarding education, health, mental health, social services, delinquency, and other information relevant to the proceeding.

unreasonable.

- The lawyer’s appointment is in effect until the lawyer is discharged by the court.
- The child’s lawyer’s duties, among other things, include:
 - interviewing and counseling the child
 - preparing the case
 - negotiating and participating in hearings and settlement discussions
 - meeting with the child at least once per quarter
 - consulting with the best interests advocate when appropriate and consistent with confidentiality and the child’s legal interests
 - representing the child in all proceedings before the court
 - eliciting the child’s wishes in a developmentally appropriate manner
- The lawyer is entitled to reasonable and timely fees and expenses.

Diminished capacity

The Model Act includes guidance for lawyers representing a child with diminished capacity.¹ It allows a state to use a rebuttable presumptive age (e.g., 10 years old) to establish a child’s ability to direct the representation. The lawyer may, however, rebut that presumption if the child is younger and deemed capable of directing representation. A child having a different opinion than the lawyer or insisting upon a course of action that the lawyer considers unwise is not diminished capacity. The determination should focus on the decision-making process rather

The Model Act gives legislatures concrete language to adopt that provides long-needed uniform guidance to lawyers representing children.

and neglect proceedings across the country have the best representation.

Historically, states have not been uniform in child attorney governance. Some states appoint guardians ad litem to represent what they think is best for the child. Some

- The judicial officer **may** appoint a best interests advocate who does not function as the child’s lawyer but assists the court in determining best interests of the child.
- Lawyers must have specific child welfare legal training.
- Caseloads for lawyers may not be

than the decision. The lawyer should not expect the child to convey information in the same way as an adult client.

The Model Act provides criteria for determining diminished capacity:

- child's developmental stage
- cognitive ability
- emotional and mental development
- ability to communicate
- ability to understand consequences
- consistency of child's decisions
- strength of wishes and opinions of others (including social worker, therapists, teachers, family members, or hired experts)

Diminished capacity can be incremental and issue specific. A child may be able to make considered decisions about sibling visits but not about another aspect of the case. The child should direct representation in those areas that she does have capacity.

Substituted judgment

Even when the child's capacity is diminished the lawyer must make a good faith effort to determine the child's needs and wishes and maintain a normal client-lawyer relationship with the client as much as possible. Only when this relationship is not possible can the lawyer substitute his or her judgment and represent the child based on that judgment.

Substituted judgment means the lawyer attempts to determine what the child would decide if the child was capable of making an adequately considered decision. The commentary further explains that the lawyer may seek guidance from appropriate professionals and others who know the child and must seek opportunities to see the child in her environment. *The Model Act* makes clear that substituted judgment is

not the same as determining the child's best interests. This is solely left to the judicial officer.

The commentary encourages lawyers to see the world through the eyes of the child and to ensure all advocacy is:

- child-centered,
- research-informed,
- permanency driven, and
- holistic.

The lawyer should consider the child's legal interests and aim to quickly resolve the case.

Protective action

The Model Act reiterates the guidance in the ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct (2004) when lawyers represent a client with diminished capacity who is at risk of substantial physical, financial, or other harm unless action is taken, and cannot adequately act in his or her own interest. Under these circumstances, the lawyer may take reasonably necessary protective action. *See Rule 1.14, ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct.* Protective action includes consulting with family members or professionals who work with the child, taking a reconsideration period to allow for improvement in circumstances or child's capacity, and in extreme cases requesting a best interests advocate be appointed.

Child's participation in proceedings

The Model Act establishes that each child has the right to notice and to attend and fully participate in all hearings related to his or her case. If the child wants to be at a hearing and is not transported, *The Model Act* requires the court to postpone the hearing. The commentary provides the following factors to consider the manner in which the child will participate:

- whether the child wants to attend
- child's age

Resource

For technical assistance on representation of children in abuse in neglect cases, involving youth in dependency court, and other child welfare issues, contact Andrea Khoury at Andrea.Khoury@americanbar.org

- child's developmental ability
- child's emotional maturity
- purpose of the hearing
- whether the child would be severely traumatized by such attendance

The Model Act also provides several options to make court attendance most meaningful for the child, including the child being present throughout the entire hearing, the child speaking with the judicial officer in chambers, and excluding the child during harmful testimony.

Passing *The Model Act* is only the first step. States must adjust their statutes to ensure that every child is appointed an attorney who follows it. States must also ensure that lawyers have training to implement the provisions. The American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law can be a helpful resource.

Andrea Khoury, JD, directs the Bar-Youth Empowerment Project and is an assistant staff director at the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law. She assisted in drafting the *Model Act Governing Representation of Children in Abuse and Neglect Proceedings*.

Endnotes

¹ Previous guidance in the *Standards of Practice for Lawyers Who Represent Children in Abuse and Neglect Cases* and The ABA Model Rules of Professional Responsibility, although helpful, do not provide as much detail and concrete guidance at the Model Act. This clearer guidance will help provide consistency in representation across the country.

**AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION
SECTION OF LITIGATION**

**SECTION OF FAMILY LAW
CRIMINAL JUSTICE SECTION
COMMISSION ON HOMELESSNESS AND POVERTY
COMMISSION ON YOUTH AT RISK**

**GENERAL PRACTICE, SOLO AND SMALL FIRM DIVISION
STEERING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AID AND INDIGENT DEFENSE**

JUDICIAL DIVISION

**PHILADELPHIA BAR ASSOCIATION
LOS ANGELES COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION
LOUISIANA STATE BAR ASSOCIATION
YOUNG LAWYERS DIVISION**

**INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES
GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC SECTOR LAWYERS**

REPORT TO THE HOUSE OF DELEGATES

RESOLUTION

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9 **RESOLVED**, That the American Bar Association adopts the *Model Act Governing the*
10 *Representation of Children in Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency Proceedings*, dated August,
11 2011.

1 **ABA Model Act Governing the Representation of Children in**
2 **Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency Proceedings**¹

3
4 **SECTION 1. DEFINITIONS. In this [act]:**

5 **(a) “Abuse and neglect proceeding” means a court proceeding under [cite state**
6 **statute] for protection of a child from abuse or neglect or a court proceeding under [cite**
7 **state statute] in which termination of parental rights is at issue.**² **These proceedings**
8 **include:**

9 **(1) abuse;**

10 **(2) neglect;**

11 **(3) dependency;**

12 **(4) child in voluntary placement in state care;**

13 **(5) termination of parental rights;**

14 **(6) permanency hearings; and**

15 **(7) post termination of parental rights through adoption or other**
16 **permanency proceeding.**

17 **(b) A child is:**

18 **(1) an individual under the age of 18; or**

19 **(2) an individual under the age of 22 who remains under the jurisdiction of**
20 **the juvenile court.**

21 **(c) “Child’s lawyer” (or “lawyer for children”) means a lawyer who provides legal**
22 **services for a child and who owes the same duties, including undivided loyalty,**
23 **confidentiality and competent representation, to the child as is due an adult client, subject**
24 **to Section 7 of this Act.**³

25 **(d) “Best interest advocate” means an individual, not functioning or intended to**
26 **function as the child’s lawyer, appointed by the court to assist the court in determining the**
27 **best interests of the child.**

¹ This Model Act was drafted under the auspices of the ABA Section of Litigation Children’s Rights Litigation Committee with the assistance of the Bar-Youth Empowerment Program of the ABA Center on Children and the Law and First Star. The Act incorporates some language from the provisions of the NCCUSL Representation of Children in Abuse, Neglect, and Custody Proceedings Act.

² NCCUSL, 2006 *Uniform Representation of Children in Abuse, Neglect, and Custody Proceedings*, Sec. 2(2) [Hereinafter NCCUSL Act]

³ *Id.*, Sec. 2(6); American Bar Association, *Standards of Practice for Lawyers who Represent Children in Abuse and Neglect Cases*, Part I, Sec A-1, 29 Fam. L. Q. 375 (1995). The standards were formally adopted by the ABA House of Delegates in 1996. [Hereinafter ABA Standards].

101A

28 (e) “Developmental level” is a measure of the ability to communicate and
29 understand others, taking into account such factors as age, mental capacity, level of
30 education, cultural background, and degree of language acquisition.⁴
31

32 *Legislative Note: States should implement a mechanism to bring children into court*
33 *when they have been voluntarily placed into state care, if such procedures do not already exist.*
34 *Court action should be triggered after a specific number of days in voluntary care (not fewer*
35 *than 30 days, but not more than 90 days).*
36

37 *Commentary:*
38

39 Under the Act, a “child’s lawyer” is a client-directed lawyer in a traditional attorney-client
40 relationship with the child. A “best interests advocate” does not function as the child’s lawyer
41 and is not bound by the child’s expressed wishes in determining what to advocate, although the
42 best interests advocate should consider those wishes.
43

44 The best interest advocate may be a lawyer or a lay person, such as a court-appointed special
45 advocate, or CASA. The best interests advocate assists the court in determining the best
46 interests of a child and will therefore perform many of the functions formerly attributable to
47 guardians *ad litem*, but best interests advocates are not to function as the child’s lawyer. A
48 lawyer appointed as a best interest advocate shall function as otherwise set forth in state law.
49

50 SECTION 2. APPLICABILITY AND RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER LAW.

51 (a) This [act] applies to an abuse and neglect proceeding pending or commenced on
52 or after [the effective date of this act].
53

54 (b) The child in these proceedings is a party.
55

56 SECTION 3. APPOINTMENT IN ABUSE OR NEGLECT PROCEEDING.

57 (a) The court shall appoint a child’s lawyer for each child who is the subject of a
58 petition in an abuse and neglect proceeding. The appointment of a child’s lawyer must be
59 made as soon as practicable to ensure effective representation of the child and, in any
60 event, before the first court hearing.

61 (b) In addition to the appointment of a child’s lawyer, the court may appoint a best
62 interest advocate to assist the court in determining the child’s best interests.

63 (c) The court may appoint one child’s lawyer to represent siblings if there is no
64 conflict of interest as defined under the applicable rules of professional conduct.⁵ The

⁴ ABA Standards, Part I, Sec A-3.

⁵ NCCUSL Act, Sec. 4(c); *see also* ABA Standards, Part I, Sec B-1

65 court may appoint additional counsel to represent individual siblings at a child's lawyer's
66 request due to a conflict of interest between or among the siblings.

67 (d) The applicable rules of professional conduct and any law governing the
68 obligations of lawyers to their clients shall apply to such appointed lawyers for children.

69 (e) The appointed child's lawyer shall represent the child at all stages of the
70 proceedings, unless otherwise discharged by order of court.⁶

71 (f) A child's right to counsel may not be waived at any court proceeding.

72

73 *Commentary:*

74

75 This act recognizes the right of every child to have quality legal representation and a voice in
76 any abuse, neglect, dependency, or termination of parental rights proceeding, regardless of
77 developmental level. Nothing in this Act precludes a child from retaining a lawyer. States
78 should provide a lawyer to a child who has been placed into state custody through a voluntary
79 placement arrangement. The fact that the child is in the state's custody through the parent's
80 voluntary decision should not diminish the child's entitlement to a lawyer.

81

82 A best interest advocate does not replace the appointment of a lawyer for the child. A best
83 interest advocate serves to provide guidance to the court with respect to the child's best interest
84 and does not establish a lawyer-client relationship with the child. Nothing in this Act restricts a
85 court's ability to appoint a best interest advocate in any proceeding. Because this Act deals
86 specifically with lawyers for children, it will not further address the role of the best interest
87 advocate.

88

89 The child is entitled to conflict-free representation and the applicable rules of professional
90 conduct must be applied in the same manner as they would be applied for lawyers for adults. A
91 lawyer representing siblings should maintain the same lawyer-client relationship with respect to
92 each child.

93

94 SECTION 4. QUALIFICATIONS OF THE CHILD'S LAWYER.

95 (a) The court shall appoint as the child's lawyer an individual who is qualified
96 through training and experience, according to standards established by [insert reference to
97 source of standards].

98 (b) Lawyers for children shall receive initial training and annual continuing legal
99 education that is specific to child welfare law. Lawyers for children shall be familiar with
100 all relevant federal, state, and local applicable laws.

101 (c) Lawyers for children shall not be appointed to new cases when their present

⁶ ABA Standards, Sec D-13; F-1-5; *see generally* La. Sup. Ct. R. XXXIII, Standard 1; *see generally* Ariz. R. Proc. Juv. Ct. R. 39(b).

101A

caseload exceeds more than a reasonable number given the jurisdiction, the percent of the lawyer's practice spent on abuse and neglect cases, the complexity of the case, and other relevant factors.

Legislative Note: States that adopt training standards and standards of practice for children's lawyers should include the bracketed portion of this section and insert a reference to the state laws, court rules, or administrative guidelines containing those standards.⁷

Jurisdictions are urged to specify a case limit at the time of passage of this Act.

Commentary:

States should establish minimum training requirements for lawyers who represent children. Such training should focus on applicable law, skills needed to develop a meaningful lawyer-client relationship with child-clients, techniques to assess capacity in children, as well as the many interdisciplinary issues that arise in child welfare cases.

The lawyer needs to spend enough time on each abuse and neglect case to establish a lawyer-client relationship and zealously advocate for the client. A lawyer's caseload must allow realistic performance of functions assigned to the lawyer under the [Act]. The amount of time and the number of children a lawyer can represent effectively will differ based on a number of factors, including type of case, the demands of the jurisdiction, whether the lawyer is affiliated with a children's law office, whether the lawyer is assisted by investigators or other child welfare professionals, and the percent of the lawyer's practice spent on abuse and neglect cases. States are encouraged to conduct caseload analyses to determine guidelines for lawyers representing children in abuse and neglect cases.

SECTION 5. ORDER OF APPOINTMENT.

(a) Subject to subsection (b), an order of appointment of a child's lawyer shall be in writing and on the record, identify the lawyer who will act in that capacity, and clearly set forth the terms of the appointment, including the reasons for the appointment, rights of access as provided under Section 8, and applicable terms of compensation as provided under Section 12.

(b) In an order of appointment issued under subsection (a), the court may identify a private organization, law school clinical program or governmental program through which a child's lawyer will be provided. The organization or program shall designate the lawyer who will act in that capacity and notify the parties and the court of the name of the assigned lawyer as soon as practicable.⁸ Additionally, the organization or program shall notify the parties and the court of any changes in the individual assignment.

⁷ ABA Standards, Part II, Sec L-1-2.

⁸ NCCUSL Act, Sec. 9

141 **SECTION 6. DURATION OF APPOINTMENT.**

142 **Unless otherwise provided by a court order, an appointment of a child’s lawyer in**
 143 **an abuse and neglect proceeding continues in effect until the lawyer is discharged by court**
 144 **order or the case is dismissed.⁹ The appointment includes all stages thereof, from removal**
 145 **from the home or initial appointment through all available appellate proceedings. With**
 146 **the permission of the court, the lawyer may arrange for supplemental or separate counsel**
 147 **to handle proceedings at an appellate stage.¹⁰**

148 *Commentary:*

149 As long as the child remains in state custody, even if the state custody is long-term or permanent,
 150 the child should retain the right to counsel so that the child’s lawyer can deal with the issues that
 151 may arise while the child is in custody but the case is not before the court.

152

153 **SECTION 7. DUTIES OF CHILD’S LAWYER AND SCOPE OF**
 154 **REPRESENTATION.**

155 **(a) A child’s lawyer shall participate in any proceeding concerning the child with**
 156 **the same rights and obligations as any other lawyer for a party to the proceeding.**

157 **(b) The duties of a child’s lawyer include, but are not limited to:**

158 **(1) taking all steps reasonably necessary to represent the client in the**
 159 **proceeding, including but not limited to: interviewing and counseling the client, preparing**
 160 **a case theory and strategy, preparing for and participating in negotiations and hearings,**
 161 **drafting and submitting motions, memoranda and orders, and such other steps as**
 162 **established by the applicable standards of practice for lawyers acting on behalf of children**
 163 **in this jurisdiction;**

164 **(2) reviewing and accepting or declining, after consultation with the client,**
 165 **any proposed stipulation for an order affecting the child and explaining to the court the**
 166 **basis for any opposition;**

167 **(3) taking action the lawyer considers appropriate to expedite the proceeding**
 168 **and the resolution of contested issues;**

169 **(4) where appropriate, after consultation with the client, discussing the**
 170 **possibility of settlement or the use of alternative forms of dispute resolution and**
 171 **participating in such processes to the extent permitted under the law of this state;¹¹**

172 **(5) meeting with the child prior to each hearing and for at least one in-person**
 173 **meeting every quarter;**

⁹ *Id.*, Sec. 10(a)

¹⁰ ABA Standards, Part I, Sec D-13; F-1-5; *see generally* La. Sup. Ct. R. XXXIII, Standard 1.; *see generally* Ariz. R. Proc. Juv. Ct. R. 39(b).

¹¹ NCCUSL Act, Sec. 11 Alternative A..

101A

174 (6) where appropriate and consistent with both confidentiality and the child's
175 legal interests, consulting with the best interests advocate;

176 (7) prior to every hearing, investigating and taking necessary legal action
177 regarding the child's medical, mental health, social, education, and overall well-being;

178 (8) visiting the home, residence, or any prospective residence of the child,
179 including each time the placement is changed;

180 (9) seeking court orders or taking any other necessary steps in accordance
181 with the child's direction to ensure that the child's health, mental health, educational,
182 developmental, cultural and placement needs are met; and

183 (10) representing the child in all proceedings affecting the issues before the
184 court, including hearings on appeal or referring the child's case to the appropriate
185 appellate counsel as provided for by/mandated by [insert local rule/law etc.].

186
187 *Commentary:*

188
189 The national standards mentioned in (b)(1) include the *ABA Standards of Practice for Lawyers*
190 *who Represent Children in Abuse and Neglect Cases*.

191
192 In order to comply with the duties outlined in this section, lawyers must have caseloads that
193 allow realistic performance of these functions.

194
195 The child's lawyer may request authority from the court to pursue issues on behalf of the child,
196 administratively or judicially, even if those issues do not specifically arise from the court
197 appointment.¹² Such ancillary matters include special education, school discipline hearings,
198 mental health treatment, delinquency or criminal issues, status offender matters, guardianship,
199 adoption, paternity, probate, immigration matters, medical care coverage, SSI eligibility, youth
200 transitioning out of care issues, postsecondary education opportunity qualification, and tort
201 actions for injury, as appropriate.¹³ The lawyer should make every effort to ensure that the child
202 is represented by legal counsel in all ancillary legal proceedings, either personally, when the
203 lawyer is competent to do so, or through referral or collaboration. Having one lawyer represent
204 the child across multiple proceedings is valuable because the lawyer is better able to understand
205 and fully appreciate the various issues as they arise and how those issues may affect other
206 proceedings.

207
208 (c) When the child is capable of directing the representation by expressing his or her
209 objectives, the child's lawyer shall maintain a normal client-lawyer relationship with the
210 child in accordance with the rules of professional conduct. In a developmentally
211 appropriate manner, the lawyer shall elicit the child's wishes and advise the child as to

¹² ABA Standards, Part I, Section D-12.

¹³ *Id.*

212 **options.**

213

214 *Commentary:*

215

216 The lawyer-client relationship for the child’s lawyer is fundamentally indistinguishable from the
 217 lawyer-client relationship in any other situation and includes duties of client direction,¹⁴
 218 confidentiality,¹⁵ diligence,¹⁶ competence,¹⁷ loyalty,¹⁸ communication,¹⁹ and the duty to provide
 219 independent advice.²⁰ Client direction requires the lawyer to abide by the client’s decision about
 220 the objectives of the representation. In order for the child to have an independent voice in abuse
 221 and neglect proceedings, the lawyer shall advocate for the child’s counseled and expressed
 222 wishes.²¹ Moreover, providing the child with an independent and client-directed lawyer ensures
 223 that the child’s legal rights and interests are adequately protected.

224

225 The child’s lawyer needs to explain his or her role to the client and, if applicable, explain in what
 226 strictly limited circumstances the lawyer cannot advocate for the client’s expressed wishes and in
 227 what circumstances the lawyer may be required to reveal confidential information. This
 228 explanation should occur during the first meeting so the client understands the terms of the
 229 relationship.

230

231 In addition to explaining the role of the child’s lawyer, the lawyer should explain the legal
 232 process to the child in a developmentally appropriate manner as required by Rule 1.4 of the ABA
 233 Model Rules of Professional Conduct or its equivalent.²² This explanation can and will change
 234 based on age, cognitive ability, and emotional maturity of the child. The lawyer needs to take the
 235 time to explain thoroughly and in a way that allows and encourages the child to ask questions
 236 and that ensures the child’s understanding. The lawyer should also facilitate the child’s
 237 participation in the proceeding (See Section 9).

238

239 In order to determine the objectives of the representation of the child, the child’s lawyer should
 240 develop a relationship with the client. The lawyer should achieve a thorough knowledge of the
 241 child’s circumstances and needs. The lawyer should visit the child in the child’s home, school,
 242 or other appropriate place where the child is comfortable. The lawyer should observe the child’s
 243 interactions with parents, foster parents, and other caregivers. The lawyer should maintain
 244 regular and ongoing contact with the child throughout the case.

245

246 The child’s lawyer helps to make the child’s wishes and voice heard but is not merely the child’s

¹⁴ ABA Model Rules of Professional Responsibility (hereinafter M.R.) 1.2

¹⁵ M.R. 1.6

¹⁶ M.R. 1.3

¹⁷ M.R. 1.1

¹⁸ M.R. 1.7

¹⁹ M.R. 1.4

²⁰ M.R. 2.1

²¹ ABA Standards, commentary A-1

²² M.R. 1.4

101A

247 mouthpiece. As with any lawyer, a child’s lawyer is both an advocate and a counselor for the
248 client. Without unduly influencing the child, the lawyer should advise the child by providing
249 options and information to assist the child in making decisions. The lawyer should explain the
250 practical effects of taking various positions, the likelihood that a court will accept particular
251 arguments, and the impact of such decisions on the child, other family members, and future legal
252 proceedings.²³ The lawyer should investigate the relevant facts, interview persons with
253 significant knowledge of the child’s history, review relevant records, and work with others in the
254 case.

255

256 **(d) The child’s lawyer shall determine whether the child has diminished capacity**
257 **pursuant to the Model Rules of Professional Conduct. {STATES MAY CONSIDER**
258 **INSERTING THE FOLLOWING TWO SENTENCES:} [Under this subsection a child**
259 **shall be presumed to be capable of directing representation at the age of _____. The**
260 **presumption of diminished capacity is rebutted if, in the sole discretion of the lawyer, the**
261 **child is deemed capable of directing representation.] In making the determination, the**
262 **lawyer should consult the child and may consult other individuals or entities that can**
263 **provide the child’s lawyer with the information and assistance necessary to determine the**
264 **child’s ability to direct the representation.**

265 **When a child client has diminished capacity, the child’s lawyer shall make a good**
266 **faith effort to determine the child’s needs and wishes. The lawyer shall, as far as**
267 **reasonably possible, maintain a normal client-lawyer relationship with the client and fulfill**
268 **the duties as outlined in Section 7(b) of this Act. During a temporary period or on a**
269 **particular issue where a normal client-lawyer relationship is not reasonably possible to**
270 **maintain, the child’s lawyer shall make a substituted judgment determination. A**
271 **substituted judgment determination includes determining what the child would decide if he**
272 **or she were capable of making an adequately considered decision, and representing the**
273 **child in accordance with that determination. The lawyer should take direction from the**
274 **child as the child develops the capacity to direct the lawyer. The lawyer shall advise the**
275 **court of the determination of capacity and any subsequent change in that determination.**
276

277

278 *Commentary:*

279

280 A determination of incapacity may be incremental and issue-specific, thus enabling the child’s
281 lawyer to continue to function as a client-directed lawyer as to major questions in the
282 proceeding. Determination of diminished capacity requires ongoing re-assessment. A child may
283 be able to direct the lawyer with respect to a particular issue at one time but not another.
284 Similarly, a child may be able to determine some positions in the case, but not others. For
285 guidance in assessing diminished capacity, see the commentary to Section (e). The lawyer shall
286 advise the court of the determination of capacity and any subsequent change in that

²³ M.R. 2.1

287 determination.

288

289 In making a substituted judgment determination, the child's lawyer may wish to seek guidance
290 from appropriate professionals and others with knowledge of the child, including the advice of
291 an expert. A substituted judgment determination is not the same as determining the child's best
292 interests; determination of a child's best interests remains solely the province of the court.

293 Rather, it involves determining what the child would decide if he or she were able to make an
294 adequately considered decision.²⁴ A lawyer should determine the child's position based on
295 objective facts and information, not personal beliefs. To assess the needs and interests of *this*
296 child, the lawyer should observe the child in his or her environment, and consult with experts.²⁵

297

298 In formulating a substituted judgment position, the child's lawyer's advocacy should be child-
299 centered, research-informed, permanency-driven, and holistic.²⁶ The child's needs and interests,
300 not the adults' or professionals' interests, must be the center of all advocacy. For example,
301 lawyers representing very young children must truly *see* the world through the child's eyes and
302 formulate their approach from that perspective, gathering information and gaining insight into
303 the child's experiences to inform advocacy related to placement, services, treatment and
304 permanency.²⁷ The child's lawyer should be proactive and seek out opportunities to observe and
305 interact with the very young child client. It is also essential that lawyers for very young children
306 have a firm working knowledge of child development and special entitlements for children under
307 age five.²⁸

308

309 When determining a substituted judgment position, the lawyer shall take into consideration the
310 child's legal interests based on objective criteria as set forth in the laws applicable to the
311 proceeding, the goal of expeditious resolution of the case and the use of the least restrictive or
312 detrimental alternatives available. The child's lawyer should seek to speed the legal process,
313 while also maintaining the child's critical relationships.

314

315 The child's lawyer should not confuse inability to express a preference with unwillingness to
316 express a preference. If an otherwise competent child chooses not to express a preference on a
317 particular matter, the child's lawyer should determine if the child wishes the lawyer to take no
318 position in the proceeding, or if the child wishes the lawyer or someone else to make the decision
319 for him or her. In either case, the lawyer is bound to follow the client's direction. A child may
320 be able to direct the lawyer with respect to a particular issue at one time but not at another. A
321 child may be able to determine some positions in the case but not others.

²⁴ Massachusetts Committee For Public Counsel Services, *Performance Standards Governing The Representation Of Children And Parents in Child Welfare Cases*, Chapter Four: Performance Standards and Complaint Procedures 4-1, Section 1.6(c) (2004).

²⁵ Candice L. Maze, JD, *Advocating for Very Young Children in Dependency Proceedings: The Hallmarks of Effective, Ethical Representation*, ABA Center on Children and the Law, October, 2010.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

101A

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323 (e) When the child’s lawyer reasonably believes that the client has diminished
324 capacity, is at risk of substantial physical, financial or other harm unless action is taken,
325 and cannot adequately act in the client's own interest, the lawyer may take reasonably
326 necessary protective action, including consulting with individuals or entities that have the
327 ability to take action to protect the client and, in appropriate cases, seeking the
328 appointment of a best interest advocate or investigator to make an independent
329 recommendation to the court with respect to the best interests of the child.

330 When taking protective action, the lawyer is impliedly authorized under Model Rule
331 1.6(a) to reveal information about the child, but only to the extent reasonably necessary to
332 protect the child’s interests.²⁹ Information relating to the representation of a child with
333 diminished capacity is protected by Rule 1.6 and Rule 1.14 of the ABA Model Rules of
334 Professional Conduct. [OR ENTER STATE RULE CITATION]

335

336 *Commentary:*

337

338 Consistent with Rule 1.14, ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct (2004), the child’s lawyer
339 should determine whether the child has sufficient maturity to understand and form an attorney-
340 client relationship and whether the child is capable of making reasoned judgments and engaging
341 in meaningful communication. It is the responsibility of the child’s lawyer to determine
342 whether the child suffers from diminished capacity. This decision shall be made after sufficient
343 contact and regular communication with the client. Determination about capacity should be
344 grounded in insights from child development science and should focus on the child’s decision-
345 making process rather than the child’s choices themselves. Lawyers should be careful not to
346 conclude that the child suffers diminished capacity from a client’s insistence upon a course of
347 action that the lawyer considers unwise or at variance with lawyer’s view.³⁰

348

349 When determining the child’s capacity the lawyer should elicit the child’s expressed wishes in a
350 developmentally appropriate manner. The lawyer should not expect the child to convey
351 information in the same way as an adult client. A child’s age is not determinative of diminished
352 capacity. For example, even very young children are regarded as having opinions that are
353 entitled to weight in legal proceedings concerning their custody.³¹

354

355 Criteria for determining diminished capacity include the child’s developmental stage, cognitive
356 ability, emotional and mental development, ability to communicate, ability to understand
357 consequences, consistency of the child’s decisions, strength of wishes and the opinions of others,
358 including social workers, therapists, teachers, family members or a hired expert.³² To assist in

²⁹ M.R. 1.14(c)

³⁰ Restatement (Third) of the Law Governing Lawyers Sec. 24 c. c (2000).

³¹ M.R. 1.14 cmt. 1

³² M.R. 1.14, cmt. 1

359 the assessment, the lawyer should ask questions in developmentally appropriate language to
 360 determine whether the child understands the nature and purpose of the proceeding and the risks
 361 and benefits of a desired position.³³ A child may have the ability to make certain decisions, but
 362 not others. A child with diminished capacity often has the ability to understand, deliberate upon,
 363 and reach conclusions about matters affecting the child's own well-being such as sibling visits,
 364 kinship visits and school choice and should continue to direct counsel in those areas in which he
 365 or she does have capacity. The lawyer should continue to assess the child's capacity as it may
 366 change over time.

367
 368 When the lawyer determines that the child has diminished capacity, the child is at risk of
 369 substantial harm, the child cannot adequately act in his or her own interest, and the use of the
 370 lawyer's counseling role is unsuccessful, the lawyer may take protective action. Substantial harm
 371 includes physical, sexual and psychological harm. Protective action includes consultation with
 372 family members, or professionals who work with the child. Lawyers may also utilize a period of
 373 reconsideration to allow for an improvement or clarification of circumstances or to allow for an
 374 improvement in the child's capacity.³⁴ This rule reminds lawyers that, among other things, they
 375 should ultimately be guided by the wishes and values of the child to the extent they can be
 376 determined.³⁵

377
 378 "Information relating to the representation is protected by Model Rule 1.6. Therefore, unless
 379 authorized to do so, the lawyer may not disclose such information. When taking protective
 380 action pursuant to this section, the lawyer is impliedly authorized to make necessary disclosures,
 381 even when the client directs the lawyer to the contrary."³⁶ However the lawyer should make
 382 every effort to avoid disclosures if at all possible. Where disclosures are unavoidable, the lawyer
 383 must limit the disclosures as much as possible. Prior to any consultation, the lawyer should
 384 consider the impact on the client's position, and whether the individual is a party who might use
 385 the information to further his or her own interests. "At the very least, the lawyer should
 386 determine whether it is likely that the person or entity consulted with will act adversely to the
 387 client's interests before discussing matters related to the client."³⁷ If any disclosure by the
 388 lawyer will have a negative impact on the client's case or the lawyer-client relationship, the
 389 lawyer must consider whether representation can continue and whether the lawyer-client
 390 relationship can be re-established. "The lawyer's position in such cases is an unavoidably
 391 difficult one."³⁸

392
 393 A request made for the appointment of a best interest advocate to make an independent
 394 recommendation to the court with respect to the best interests of the child should be reserved for

³³ Anne Graffam Walker, Ph.D. *Handbook on Questioning Children: A Linguistic Perspective* 2nd Edition ABA Center on Children and the Law Copyright 1999 by ABA.

³⁴ M.R. 1.14 cmt. 5

³⁵ M.R. 1.14 cmt. 5

³⁶ M.R. 1.14, cmt. 8

³⁷ M.R. 1.14, cmt. 8

³⁸ M.R. 1.14, cmt 8

101A

395 extreme cases, i.e. where the child is at risk of substantial physical harm, cannot act in his or her
396 own interest and all protective action remedies have been exhausted. Requesting the judge to
397 appoint a best interest advocate may undermine the relationship the lawyer has established with
398 the child. It also potentially compromises confidential information the child may have revealed
399 to the lawyer. The lawyer cannot ever become the best interest advocate, in part due to
400 confidential information that the lawyer receives in the course of representation. Nothing in this
401 section restricts a court from independently appointing a best interest advocate when it deems the
402 appointment appropriate.

403

404 **SECTION 8. ACCESS TO CHILD AND INFORMATION RELATING TO THE** 405 **CHILD.**

406 **(a) Subject to subsections (b) and (c), when the court appoints the child’s lawyer, it**
407 **shall issue an order, with notice to all parties, authorizing the child’s lawyer to have access**
408 **to:**

409 **(1) the child; and**

410 **(2) confidential information regarding the child, including the child's**
411 **educational, medical, and mental health records, social services agency files, court records**
412 **including court files involving allegations of abuse or neglect of the child, any delinquency**
413 **records involving the child, and other information relevant to the issues in the proceeding,**
414 **and reports that form the basis of any recommendation made to the court.**

415 **(b) A child’s record that is privileged or confidential under law other than this [act]**
416 **may be released to a child’s lawyer appointed under this [act] only in accordance with that**
417 **law, including any requirements in that law for notice and opportunity to object to release**
418 **of records. Nothing in this act shall diminish or otherwise change the attorney-client**
419 **privilege of the child, nor shall the child have any lesser rights than any other party in**
420 **regard to this or any other evidentiary privilege. Information that is privileged under the**
421 **lawyer-client relationship may not be disclosed except as otherwise permitted by law of this**
422 **state other than this [act].**

423 **(c) An order issued pursuant to subsection (a) shall require that a child’s lawyer**
424 **maintain the confidentiality of information released pursuant to Model Rule 1.6. The court**
425 **may impose any other condition or limitation on an order of access which is required by**
426 **law, rules of professional conduct, the child’s needs, or the circumstances of the**
427 **proceeding.**

428 **(d) The custodian of any record regarding the child shall provide access to the**
429 **record to an individual authorized access by order issued pursuant to subsection (a).**

430 **(e) Subject to subsection (b), an order issued pursuant to subsection (a) takes effect**
431 **upon issuance.³⁹**

³⁹ NCCUSL Act, Sec. 15

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SECTION 9. PARTICIPATION IN PROCEEDINGS.

(a) Each child who is the subject of an abuse and neglect proceeding has the right to attend and fully participate in all hearings related to his or her case.

(b) Each child shall receive notice from the child welfare agency worker and the child's lawyer of his or her right to attend the court hearings.

(c) If the child is not present at the hearing, the court shall determine whether the child was properly notified of his or her right to attend the hearing, whether the child wished to attend the hearing, whether the child had the means (transportation) to attend, and the reasons for the non-appearance.

(d) If the child wished to attend and was not transported to court the matter shall be continued.

(e) The child's presence shall only be excused after the lawyer for the child has consulted with the child and, with informed consent, the child has waived his or her right to attend.

(f) A child's lawyer appointed under this [act] is entitled to:

(1) receive a copy of each pleading or other record filed with the court in the proceeding;

(2) receive notice of and attend each hearing in the proceeding [and participate and receive copies of all records in any appeal that may be filed in the proceeding];

(3) receive notice of and participate in any case staffing or case management conference regarding the child in an abuse and neglect proceeding; and

(4) receive notice of any intent to change the child's placement. In the case of an emergency change, the lawyer shall receive notice as soon as possible but no later than 48 hours following the change of placement.

(g) A child's lawyer appointed under this [act] may not engage in ex parte contact with the court except as authorized by the applicable rules of professional conduct, court order, or other law.

(h) Subject to court approval, a party may call any best interest advocate as a witness for the purpose of cross-examination regarding the advocate's report, even if the advocate is not listed as a witness by a party.

[i] In a jury trial, disclosure to the jury of the contents of a best interest advocate's report is subject to this state's rules of evidence.]⁴⁰

⁴⁰ NCCUSL Act, Sec. 16

101A

467 *Commentary:*

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469 Courts need to provide the child with notification of each hearing. The Court should enforce the
470 child's right to attend and fully participate in all hearings related to his or her abuse and neglect
471 proceeding.⁴¹ Having the child in court emphasizes for the judge and all parties that this hearing
472 is about the child. Factors to consider regarding the child's presence at court and participation in
473 the proceedings include: whether the child wants to attend, the child's age, the child's
474 developmental ability, the child's emotional maturity, the purpose of the hearing and whether the
475 child would be severely traumatized by such attendance.

476

477 Lawyers should consider the following options in determining how to provide the most
478 meaningful experience for the child to participate: allowing the child to be present throughout
479 the entire hearing, presenting the child's testimony in chambers adhering to all applicable rules
480 of evidence, arranging for the child to visit the courtroom in advance, video or teleconferencing
481 the child into the hearing, allowing the child to be present only when the child's input is
482 required, excluding the child during harmful testimony, and presenting the child's statements in
483 court adhering to all applicable rules of evidence.

484

485 Courts should reasonably accommodate the child to ensure the hearing is a meaningful
486 experience for the child. The court should consider: scheduling hearing dates and times when the
487 child is available and least likely to disrupt the child's routine, setting specific hearing times to
488 prevent the child from having to wait, making courtroom waiting areas child friendly, and
489 ensuring the child will be transported to and from each hearing.

490

491 The lawyer for the child plays an important role in the child's court participation. The lawyer
492 shall ensure that the child is properly prepared for the hearing. The lawyer should meet the child
493 in advance to let the child know what to expect at the hearing, who will be present, what their
494 roles are, what will be discussed, and what decisions will be made. If the child would like to
495 address the court, the lawyer should counsel with the child on what to say and how to say it.
496 After the hearing, the lawyer should explain the judge's ruling and allow the child to ask
497 questions about the proceeding.

498

499 Because of the wide range of roles assumed by best interest advocates in different jurisdictions,
500 the question of whether a best interest advocate may be called as a witness should be left to the
501 discretion of the court.

502

503 **SECTION 10. LAWYER WORK PRODUCT AND TESTIMONY.**

504 **(a) Except as authorized by [insert reference to this state's rules of professional**
505 **conduct] or court rule, a child's lawyer may not:**

⁴¹ American Bar Association Youth Transitioning from Foster Care August 2007; American Bar Association Foster Care Reform Act August 2005

- 506 (1) be compelled to produce work product developed during the
- 507 **appointment;**
- 508 (2) be required to disclose the source of information obtained as a result of
- 509 **the appointment;**
- 510 (3) introduce into evidence any report or analysis prepared by the child’s
- 511 **lawyer; or**
- 512 (4) provide any testimony that is subject to the attorney-client privilege or
- 513 **any other testimony unless ordered by the court.**

514
515 *Commentary:*

516
517 Nothing in this act shall diminish or otherwise change the lawyer-work product or attorney-client
518 privilege protection for the child, nor shall the child have any lesser rights than any other party
519 with respect to these protections.

520 If a state requires lawyers to report abuse or neglect under a mandated reporting statute, the state
521 should list that statute under this section.

522

523 **SECTION 11. CHILD’S RIGHT OF ACTION.**

524 (a) The child’s lawyer may be liable for malpractice to the same extent as a lawyer
525 **for any other client.**

526 (b) Only the child has a right of action for money damages against the child’s
527 **lawyer for inaction or action taken in the capacity of child’s lawyer.**

528

529 **SECTION 12. FEES AND EXPENSES IN ABUSE OR NEGLECT**
530 **PROCEEDINGS.**

531 (a) In an abuse or neglect proceeding, a child’s lawyer appointed pursuant to this
532 [act] is entitled to reasonable and timely fees and expenses in an amount set by [court or
533 state agency to be paid from (authorized public funds)].⁴²

534 (b) To receive payment under this section, the payee shall complete and submit a
535 **written claim for payment, whether interim or final, justifying the fees and expenses**
536 **charged.**

537 (c) If after a hearing the court determines that a party whose conduct gave rise to a
538 **finding of abuse or neglect is able to defray all or part of the fees and expenses set pursuant**
539 **to subsection (a), the court shall enter a judgment in favor of [the state, state agency, or**

⁴² N.C. Gen. Stat. Ann. § 7B-603.

101A

540 political subdivision] against the party in an amount the court determines is reasonable.⁴³

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542

SECTION 13. EFFECTIVE DATE. This [act] takes effect on _____.

⁴³ NCCUSL Act, Sec. 19.

Report

“The participation of counsel on behalf of **all** parties subject to juvenile and family court proceedings is essential to the administration of justice and to the fair and accurate resolution of issues at all stages of those proceedings.” IJA/ABA, *Juvenile Justice Standards, Standards Relating to Counsel for Private Parties*, Std. 1.1, at 11 (1980)(emphasis added).

Courts in abuse and neglect cases dramatically shape a child’s entire future in that the court decides where a child lives, with whom the child will live and whether the child’s parental rights will be terminated. No other legal proceeding that pertains to children has such a major effect on their lives. While the outcome of an abuse and neglect case has drastic implications for both the parents and the children involved, only children’s physical liberty is threatened. An abuse and neglect case that results in removal of the child from the home may immediately or ultimately result in the child being thrust into an array of confusing and frightening situations wherein the State moves the child from placement to placement with total strangers, puts the child in a group home, commits the child to an institution, or even locks the child up in detention for running away or otherwise violating a court order. Our notion of basic civil rights, and ABA Policy and Standards, demand that children and youth have a trained legal advocate to speak on their behalf and to protect their legal rights. There would be no question about legal representation for a child who was facing a month in juvenile detention, so why is there an issue for a child in an abuse and neglect case, where State intervention may last up to 18 years? The trauma faced by children in these proceedings has been recognized by at least one federal court which held that foster children have a constitutional right to adequate legal representation.¹

Despite the gravity of these cases, the extent to which a child is entitled to legal representation varies not only from state to state, but from case to case, and all too often, from hearing to hearing. The root of these inconsistencies lies in the lack of a mandate for legal representation for children in abuse and neglect cases, and the lack of uniform standards for the legal representation of children, coupled with the lack of sufficient training necessary for attorneys to provide adequate representation to their child clients.

In 1996 the ABA adopted the ABA Standards of Practice for Lawyers Who Represent Children in Abuse and Neglect Cases (hereinafter “ABA Abuse and Neglect Standards”) calling for a lawyer for every child subject to abuse and neglect proceedings.² The ABA Abuse and Neglect standards state that “All children subject to court proceedings involving allegations of child abuse and neglect should have legal representation as long as the court jurisdiction continue.” In 2005, the ABA unanimously passed policy that calls upon Congress, the States, and territories to ensure that “all dependent youth . . . be

¹ *Kenny A. v. Perdue*, 356 F. Supp. 2d 1353 (2005).

² American Bar Association, *ABA Standards of Practice for Lawyers Who Represent Children in Abuse and Neglect Cases* (1996) at preface.

101A

on equal footing with other parties in the dependency proceeding and have the right to quality legal representation, not simply an appointed lay guardian *ad litem* or lay volunteer advocate with no legal training, acting on their behalf in this court process.”

The proposed *Model Act Governing the Representation of Children in Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency Proceedings* (hereinafter “Model Act”) focuses on the representation of children in abuse and neglect cases to ensure that states have a model of ethical representation for children that is consistent with the ABA Abuse and Neglect Standards,³ ABA Policy, and the ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct (hereinafter “ABA Model Rules”).

Although many states require that a lawyer be appointed for a child in an abuse and neglect proceeding, some require that the child’s lawyer be “client directed” and others require the lawyer to act as a guardian *ad litem* whereby the attorney is charged with the duty of protecting and serving the “best interests” of the child. Often there is not “careful delineation of the distinctions between the ethical responsibilities of a lawyer to the client and the professional obligations of the lay guardian *ad litem* as a best interests witness for the court.”⁴ The states’ use of different statutory language and mandated roles for child representation has led to much confusion within the field.

The proposed Model Act conforms to the clearly stated preference in the ABA Abuse and Neglect Standards for a client-directed lawyer for each child. Similarly, the proposed Model Act is consistent with the ABA Model Rules. The Model Act states that the child’s lawyer should form an attorney-client relationship which is “fundamentally indistinguishable from the attorney-client relationship in any other situation and which includes duties of client direction, confidentiality, diligence, competence, loyalty, communication, and the duty to advise.”⁵

Consonant with the ABA Model Rules, the drafters of the Model Act started from the premise that all child clients have the capacity to form an attorney-client relationship. An attorney must enter into representation of a child treating the child client as he or she would any other client to every extent possible. The attorney should give the child frank advice on what he or she thinks is the best legal remedy to achieve the child’s expressed wishes. This decision should not be based on the attorney’s mores or personal opinions; rather it should focus on the attorney’s knowledge of the situation, the law, options

³ American Bar Association, *ABA Standards of Practice for Lawyers Who Represent Children in Abuse and Neglect Cases* (1996) The Standards can be found at <http://www.abanet.org/leadership/2006/annual/onehundredfourteen.doc>

⁴ *Uniform Representation of Children in Abuse and Neglect, and Custody Proceedings Act* (hereinafter “NCCUSL Act”), National Conference of Commissioners of Uniform State Law. Prefatory Note (2007); the text of the final act can be found at http://www.law.upenn.edu/bll/archives/ulc/rarccda/2007_final.htm. See Atwood, *supra* note 1, at 188-91; Howard A. Davidson, *Child Protection Policy and Practice at Century’s End*, 33 FAM. L. Q. 765, 768-69 (1999). For information about different state practices see *Representing Children Worldwide 2005* (www.law.yale.edu/rcw) or *A Child’s Right to Counsel. First Star’s National Report Card on Legal Representation for Children 2007*.

⁵ ABA Model Act, Commentary to Section 7(c) which refers to ABA Model Rules 1.2, 1.6, 1.3, 1.1, 1.7, 1.4 and 2.1.

available and the child's wishes. The proposed Model Act also provides specific guidance for lawyers charged with representing those child clients with diminished capacity. Some children (including infants, pre-verbal children, and children who are mentally or developmentally challenged) do not have the capacity to form a lawyer-client relationship. These child clients should be considered the exception, not the rule, and the structure of representation for children as a whole should be based upon a theory of competence and capacity.

Providing children in abuse and neglect cases with a client-directed 'traditional' lawyer is consistent with the thinking of national children's law experts. A conference on the representation of children was held at Fordham Law School in 1995 entitled *Ethical Issues in the Legal Representation of Children*. The conference examined the principles set out in the then-proposed (later adopted) ABA Abuse and Neglect Standards and conferees clearly recommended that lawyers for children should act as lawyers, not as guardians *ad litem*.⁶ The co-sponsors and participants at the Fordham conference included national children's law organizations and many ABA entities.⁷

Ten years later in 2006, children's law experts gathered again at a conference at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), to review the state of legal representation of children. Like the Fordham Conference, the UNLV participants produced a set of recommendations.⁸ The UNLV Recommendations encourage lawyers to seek to empower children by helping them develop decision-making capacity. Regarding the role of the lawyer, the UNLV Recommendations strongly support client-directed representation for children capable of making considered decisions.⁹ Again, the list of co-sponsors and participants included nationally respected children's law organizations and many ABA entities.¹⁰

⁶ *Recommendations of the Conference on Ethical Issues in the Legal Representation of Children*, 64 FORDHAM L. REV. 1301 (1996) (Fordham Recommendations) (attorney must follow child's expressed preferences and attempt to discern wishes in context in developmentally appropriate way if child is incapable of expressing viewpoint).

⁷ Co-sponsors included the Administration for Children, Youth and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; ABA Center on Children and the Law, Young Lawyers Division; ABA Center for Professional Responsibility, ABA Section of Criminal Justice, Juvenile Justice Committee; ABA Section of Family Law; ABA Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities; ABA Section of Litigation Task Force on Children; ABA Steering Committee on the Unmet Legal Needs of Children; Juvenile Law Center; National Association of Counsel for Children; National Center for Youth Law; National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges; Stein Center for Ethics and Public Interest Law, Fordham University School of Law.

⁸ See *Recommendations of the UNLV Conference on Representing Children in Families: Children's Advocacy and Justice Ten Years after Fordham*, 6 NEV. L. J. 592-687 (2006) (UNLV Recommendations).

⁹ As stated in the Recommendations, "[c]hildren's attorneys should take their direction from the client and should not substitute for the child's wishes the attorney's own judgment of what is best for children or for that child." *Id.* at 609.

¹⁰ Co-sponsors of UNLV included the ABA Center on Children and the Law, Young Lawyers Division; ABA Center for Professional Responsibility; ABA Child Custody and Adoption Pro Bono Project; ABA Section of Family Law; ABA Section of Litigation; Home at Last, Children's Law Center of Los Angeles; Juvenile Law Center; National Association of Counsel for Children; National Center for Youth Law; National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges; National Juvenile Defender Center; Stein Center

101A

Consistent with the ABA Abuse and Neglect Standards, ABA policy, and the recommendations of national children’s law experts, Section 3 of this Model Act mandates that an attorney, acting in a traditional role, should be appointed for every child who is the subject of an abuse or neglect proceeding.¹¹ Attorneys can identify legal issues regarding their child clients, use their legal skills to ensure the protection of their clients’ rights and needs, and advocate for their clients. The Model Act requires lawyers to complete a thorough and independent investigation and participate fully in all stages of the litigation. Lawyers for children, as lawyers for any client, have a role as a counselor to their clients and should assist their clients in exploring the practical effects of taking various positions, the likelihood that a court will accept particular arguments, and the impact of such decisions on the child, other family members, and future legal proceedings.¹²

Lawyers for children allow children to be participants in the proceedings that affect their lives and safety. Children who are represented by a lawyer often feel the process is fairer because they had a chance to participate and to be heard. Consequently, children are more likely to accept the court’s decision because of their own involvement in the process.

Requiring lawyers to represent children in abuse and neglect cases is also consistent with federal law. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) requires the appointment of a “guardian *ad litem*” for a child as a condition of receiving federal funds for child abuse prevention and treatment programs. Providing a child with a lawyer is consistent with the requirements of CAPTA. No state with a lawyer model has been held out of compliance with CAPTA and Health and Human Services (HHS) has issued guidance suggesting that appointing counsel for a child promotes the child’s “best interest” consistent with CAPTA.¹³

The Model Act also provides lawyers guidance when representing children with diminished capacity, which includes young children. Like all children in these proceedings, young children are entitled to proceedings that fully examine and address their needs, including *inter alia* their physical, behavioral, and developmental health and well-being, their education and early-learning needs, their need for family permanency and stability, and their need to be safe from harm. The Model Act also allows states to set an age of capacity if they so choose.

The Model Act allows and welcomes “best interest advocates” in child welfare cases. A best interest advocate is defined as “an individual, not functioning or intended to function

for Law and Ethics, Fordham University School of Law; Support Center for Child Advocates; and Youth Law Center.

¹¹ Federal law has long authorized the discretionary appointment of counsel for Indian children subject to the Indian Child Welfare Act. *See* 25 U.S.C. § 1912(b) (2000).

¹² Model Act, Commentary for Section (7)(c)(1).

¹³ U.S. Department of HHS Children's Bureau, *Adoption 2002: The President's Initiative on Adoption and Permanence for Children*, Commentary to Guideline 15A

as the child's lawyer, appointed by the court to assist in determining the best interests of the child."¹⁴ The advisor may be a court-appointed special advocate (CASA), a guardian *ad litem* or other person who has received training specific to the best interest of the child. The Act endorses and in no way restricts the widespread use of CASAs to fulfill the role of court appointed advisor.¹⁵

A state's law regarding abuse and neglect proceedings should be designed to provide children involved in an abuse and neglect case with a well-trained, high quality lawyer who is well-compensated and whose caseload allows for effective representation. Lawyers for children are essential for ensuring that the child's legal rights are protected. "Unless children are allowed by lawyers to set the objectives of their cases, they would not only be effectively deprived of a number of constitutional rights, they would be denied procedures that are fundamental to the rule of law."¹⁶

Children in dependency court proceedings are often taken from their parents, their siblings and extended families, their schools, and everything that is familiar to them. Children and youth deserve a voice when important and life-altering decisions are being made about them. They deserve to have their opinions heard, valued and considered. They have interests that are often distinct or are opposed to those of the state and their parents in dependency proceedings and, as the ABA has recognized many times, they deserve ethical legal representation.

In preparing this Model Act, the drafters have taken into consideration the enormous contributions of various organizations and advocates in defining standards of representation, most notably that of the American Bar Association (ABA), the National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC), the Uniform Law Commission (ULC), participants in the Representing Children in Families UNLV Conference, and the states themselves. In addition, drafters have sought input from the ABA Standing Committee on Ethics, various sections within the ABA, and more than 30 children's law centers around the country who represent children every day.

¹⁴ Model Act, Section 1.

¹⁵ The Court Appointed Special Advocate is a lay volunteer who advocates as a non-lawyer on behalf of a child in child abuse and neglect proceedings. Volunteers are screened and trained at the local level, but all CASA programs that are affiliated with the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association must comply with the standards issued by that organization. See www.nationalcasa.org. In addition, many states have established their own standards to ensure that the volunteers representing children are competent and possess relevant training and experience. See generally Michael S. Piraino, *Lay Representation of Abused and Neglected Children: Variations on Court Appointed Special Advocate Programs and Their Relationship to Quality Advocacy*, 1 JOURNAL OF CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND THE COURTS 63 (1999). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the United States Department of Justice is authorized to enter into cooperative agreements with the National CASA Association to expand CASA programs nationally. See 42 U.S.C.A. § 13013 (2005 & Supp. 2006). One of the key strengths of the CASA program is that a CASA volunteer generally represents only one child at a time. Moreover, an attorney for the child working in tandem with a CASA volunteer can provide a powerful "team" approach in juvenile court. In addition, CASA volunteers may have access to the CASA program's own legal representative for legal advice.

¹⁶ Martin Guggenheim, *A Paradigm for Determining the Role of Counsel for Children*, 64 Fordham L.Rev. 1399, 1423-24 (1996).

101A

Respectfully Submitted,
Hilarie Bass, Chair
Section of Litigation
August, 2011

