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Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

Personal reflections about the work of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect

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ABSTRACT

Created by amendments in 1988 to the Child Abuse Treatment and Prevention Act of 1974 and first convened in 1989, the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect issued a series of passion- and research-laden reports that articulated a new neighborhood-based strategy for child protection in the United States. In so doing, the Board went far beyond the vision of its congressional creators, the most relevant federal agencies, and the field itself. The dedication, daring, collegiality, and public spirit of the drafters and ultimately the moral and intellectual power of the reports themselves were awe-inspiring, as was the level of public attention given to the Board's initial declaration of a national emergency. However, the specific effects on policy were quite limited. Possible reasons for the enormous gap between the strength of the Board's vision and the weakness of its implementation are reviewed. In the end, the history of the Board may be a case study of a single but notable step in a long process toward redemptive cultural change in the status and safety of children.

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A Few Personal Reflections About the History of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect

The life of the 15-member U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect was brief but sweet. The Board's output—five reports during the 7 years of its existence (in chronological order: [U.S. Advisory Board, 1990](#), [1991](#), [1993b](#), [1993a](#), [1995](#))—was small but momentous.

From December 1988 until my retirement from federal service in June 1994, I had the extraordinary privilege of serving as the first executive director of the Board. In September 1993, the Board published its keystone report, *Neighbors Helping Neighbors: A New National Strategy for the Protection of Children* ([U.S. Advisory Board, 1993a](#)), which contained its landmark recommendation of a new approach to American child protection efforts. Twenty years after the publication of that remarkable document seems a useful occasion for me both to recount the history of the Board as I experienced it and to consider the lessons that this history may hold for similar efforts in the future.

A few caveats at the outset. First, as I set about preparing this document, I realized that the memories I wished to describe were fading. Heightening that problem was the reality that I was working some 6,000 miles from Washington, DC, in a suburb of Tel Aviv, where I have resided since leaving my position with the Board. Unable to confirm the memories that I

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¹ The author served as the executive director of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect during most of its existence. The opinions expressed are his own.

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do have, I was without access to whatever records of the Board still exist. Over the years, I have also lost contact with other former employees of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) who probably have key memories. All of that said, although some of the details that follow may be inexact, I believe that the substance is correct.

Second, during the 7 years of its existence (May 1989–October 1996), the membership of the Board changed completely. However, the ideas that drove the creation of the five reports for which the Board is justly known were set in motion early in its history by its original members. Therefore, without any intent to demean the contributions of the individuals who replaced the original 15 members, this article focuses on the experiences I shared with the original members.

Third, this article is not an analysis of the overall efforts of the United States government to address the problem of child maltreatment. Others are far more qualified by virtue of expertise and experience to take on that task. Rather, this article is the product of personal and somewhat incomplete musings by a central actor in an interesting and crucial moment. That limitation aside, I hope that the article will illuminate the possibilities and pitfalls of structures and processes intended to enhance external experts' engagement in making and administering child protection policy.

How the Board Came To Be

The Board was established by statute in 1988 in amendments to the [Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974](#), commonly known as CAPTA, which created the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) within the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (now DHHS) and which set the initial agenda for federal action in the field of child protection in the United States. The principal functions of NCCAN were to administer grant programs, support research and demonstration projects, and serve as the focal point for federal child protection efforts. The law also provided modest funding for child protection programs in state governments, in return for action, which all states had already taken, to enact laws for mandated reporting and investigation of suspected child maltreatment. (For an account of the enactment of CAPTA and related early activities in making federal child protection policy, see [Nelson, 1984](#).)

Prior to the initial enactment of CAPTA, the emerging coalition of organizations concerned with child protection proposed the creation of a council to advise NCCAN and to consist of officials of other federal agencies. (Howard Davidson, a future chair of the U.S. Advisory Board and the long-time staff leader of the American Bar Association's activities related to children, recalls having attended the coalition meeting in 1974 when the idea was first discussed.) The relevant provision was indeed included in the statute as enacted.

The adoption of CAPTA energized the National Child Abuse Coalition, which became increasingly important in reauthorizations of the legislation. By 1987, dissatisfaction of the Coalition and the Congress with the federal executive branch's performance in child protection reached a sufficiently high point that a major overhaul of CAPTA was enacted in 1988 (Pub. L. 100-294, Section 3 of which created the Board).

The source of the idea for an ongoing, comprehensive, external review of federal child protection policy is not clear. In 1987, the pertinent report of the House Committee on Education and Labor stated:

The current structure of the Advisory Board [the committee of federal agency officials created in 1974 to advise NCCAN]. . . is a major reason why it has failed to provide the technical assistance and guidance for the Secretary envisioned in the Statute. In response to this situation, the Committee has recommended the establishment of two entities—a 15 member, majority non-Federal Advisory Board and an Inter-Agency Task Force.

Thus, the former Advisory Board was to be reconstituted as an Inter-Agency Task Force to facilitate coordination of child protection policies and programs. However, the advisory role was to be fulfilled by a new U.S. Advisory Board that was comprised primarily of experts representing pertinent constituencies outside the federal government.

The legislative history does not indicate how the Reagan Administration reacted to the creation of the U.S. Advisory Board. However, the reauthorization included a number of elements (the Board being only one) that indicated congressional skepticism about the Administration's seriousness in regard to child protection, an assessment that must have been sobering to the Administration. An illustration of this distrust was the statutory reporting line for the Board, which was directed to *both* the appointing officer (the Cabinet-level secretary of Health and Human Services) and the Congress, a duality that is unusual in a government that is famously grounded in the separation of powers.

Bringing the Board into Being

Whatever the reason, the Reagan Administration (specifically the Office of Human Development Services [OHDS] in DHHS; later known as the Administration for Children and Families [ACF]) was slow to begin to fulfill its mandate to bring the Board into reality. Such steps occurred 7 months after the legislation had been enacted. It was at that point that I came to the Board.

In early 1988, I returned from a 3-year inter-governmental transfer to the State of Israel to find that my 22-year position in the Administration on Aging, the part of OHDS/ACF responsible for social policy on old age, had been abolished. Temporarily assigned to the staff of the President's Committee on Mental Retardation while the powers that be decided what to do with me, I was surprised in late 1988 when outgoing Reagan Administration OHDS/ACF officials offered me the opportunity to establish and then staff the Board. As a seasoned bureaucrat, I immediately recognized the raft of problems inherent in such a body. However, two factors caused me to accept the challenge. First, without a permanent assignment at the time of the

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