

what is 'child advocacy'?

Mary Savage, Educational Associate with the Early Learning Resource Unit, Cape Town, explains a concept which has gained equal status with 'service' and 'research' as a strategy to fulfill children's needs.

Definitions of child advocacy vary but the 'rights of the child' are embedded in the concept, which has broadened from individual casework undertaken by child advocates to wider concerns for justice and a fair deal for children.

The idea began to take shape in the late 1960s in the United States and Britain. In South Africa, child advocacy has begun to imply an intervention on behalf of children in order to address the circumstances that impinge on their lives. A number of initiatives have drawn attention to the widespread plight of children and their families illustrated by: high infant mortality rates in some areas, the phenomenon of 'stunted children' (below weight for age), child labour, child soldiers, street children, high primary school dropout rates (50% for African children by Std 5), teenage pregnancy, child abuse.

Strategies range from gimmicky to confrontational in order to influence public awareness and exert political clout towards redefining priorities such as the dire need for a coherent overall plan for children and changes in inadequate and discriminatory resource allocation. Despite the existence of a number of sound programmes for children in various parts of the country, South Africa's children are presently fragmented into 17 ethnically organised education departments - let alone further divisions of health and social welfare.

Child advocacy in South Africa emerges out of the recognition that children's rights are legally binding and have to be kept upfront at the local and national levels if the serious inequities and deficiencies which exist are to be addressed. Child advocacy recognises that changes in social systems, institutions and laws require planning, persistence and pressure in order to compete for scarce resources. □

