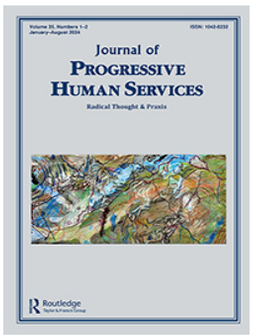

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# Developing Collective Parent Advocacy in Child Protection: A Case Study of the Parent Advocacy Network in Wales

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**ABSTRACT**

This article presents a case study of the Parent Advocacy Network (PAN), a grassroots collective in Wales promoting transformative change in the child protection system (CPS) through parent advocacy. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research documents PAN's early development and its theoretical, ethical, and practical foundations. It identifies three key building blocks: developing a shared ethical commitment to confronting injustices in CPS, bolstering parents' power, knowledge, and leadership, and nurturing relationships within the group and the community. The study discusses challenges, critiques assumptions, and highlights the importance of collective advocacy in transforming CPS policies and practices.

**KEYWORDS**

Child protection; community-based interventions; collective parent advocacy; transformative change

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing consensus regarding the need to shift child protection (CP) policy and practice from a risk-focused, expert-led, and individualized framework to a social, more supportive, and community-based one. Although calls for this shift come from diverse sources and involve various ethical, theoretical, and practical assumptions, they all point to the impact of structural factors on child maltreatment and reflect a recognition of the need to promote a restructuring of the relationships between social workers and parents based on an agenda that emphasizes rights, inclusion, and respect (Davies et al., 2023; Featherstone et al., 2018; Higgins et al., 2022).

Consequently, interest in innovative ways to meaningfully involve parents in the promotion of systemic change has increased worldwide, with various stakeholders calling for a shift in CP policy and practice beyond the focus on parent participation at the interpersonal level to the involvement of parents with lived experiences at broader organizational and political levels (Featherstone et al., 2021; Haworth et al., 2022). Indeed, attempts to develop policies, programs, and initiatives that support parent participation, cultivate

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lived experience, and promote alternative models of community-based practice are on the rise (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2022). The models employed include various forms of parent advocacy (PA) that range from individual case-level peer mentoring to collective, system-level, and policy advocacy (Williamson & Gray, 2011).

Although parent advocacy is gaining increasing attention worldwide, most of the research in the field focuses on case-level peer mentoring programs. Hence, there is a lack of writing on the development and implementation of collective parent advocacy. Based on an in-depth case study of one grassroots community parent advocacy group in Wales – the Parent Advocacy Network (PAN) – this article aims to fill this void by describing the development of the group and conceptualizing the practical and ethical building blocks of this process.

## Collective parent advocacy

Collective parent advocacy, also called program-level or system-level parent advocacy (Tobis et al., 2020), grassroots parent advocacy (Castellano, 2021), or family engagement in system-level change (Augsberger et al., 2022), is a form of peer advocacy in which parents with lived CP experience come together to improve the collective good of families involved with the CP system. Importantly, the collective nature of an action is determined by its underlying objective, irrespective of whether it is carried out by a group or an individual (Seim & Slettebø, 2011).

Collective parent advocacy includes five main practices. The first of these is *political campaigning*, which involves parents taking a central role in the campaign for reforming the child protection system (CPS). To do so, parents participate in protests and media coverage, e.g., by giving interviews and testimonies and pressuring policymakers (Tobis, 2013). The second practice is *advising local and national policymakers*, mainly consisting of parent groups (also known as advisory boards) taking on a consulting role and engaging in service improvement activities such as organizational decision-making, planning, and staff development (Augsberger et al., 2022). The third practice is *mutual aid and support*. Based on the belief that parents are in the best position to help other parents through their shared experiences (Andrews, 2013), these initiatives involve the development of informal support networks in the community for parents. By "creating safe spaces where impacted parents can reflect, heal, connect with peers and share in peer support" (Bachiller, 2022, p. 1), mutual aid initiatives combine emotional and practical support and have the potential to create political agency among group members. The fourth practice is *training social work practitioners and students*. Based on their growing commitment to the inclusion of lived experience in the training of

social work students and practitioners, parents with lived CP experience take on various roles in the development and implementation of training for professionals, e.g., facilitating workshops and activities centered on family engagement for staff and carers from a parent perspective, delivering lectures and holding seminars with undergraduate social work students, and providing input to assist in developing practice resources and tools to support better family engagement practice (Cocks, 2018). The fifth practice is *participation in research*. An additional path to collective parent advocacy can be found in participatory action research projects, which have increased in the last decade (Johnson & Flynn, 2021). Action research projects aim to conduct studies "in collaboration with communities, groups, and individuals living at the margins, that is, those with relatively little sociopolitical power" (Fine et al., 2021, p. 345). Although parents' participation levels in these research projects vary, they all involve active engagement with parents and provide at least some space for them to voice their perspectives, articulate their knowledge, and influence policy and practice (Slettebø, 2013).

While collective parent advocacy initiatives in child protection exist worldwide, most are in their infancy, and all are relatively under-researched. The few studies that have addressed collective advocacy have focused on one form of practice only (e.g., parents' participation in research and parents' participation in training social workers) and not on groups that integrate various forms of practice. Studies on the grassroots parents' activism movement in New York (e.g., Bachiller, 2022 ; Tobis, 2013) and the Family Inclusion Network (FIN) in Australia (e.g., Ainsworth & Berger, 2014; Bennett et al., 2020) are notable exceptions. In both these cases, parents involved with the child welfare system became a collective force for change via a range of organizations and initiatives that operate within the child welfare system and outside of it using various forms of collective advocacy. Tobis (2019) points to four strategies that enabled the successful development of one of the leading organizations in the New York movement, the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP): training parent leaders, creating an inclusive culture, developing a sense of collective efficacy, and maintaining flexibility in the investment of resources and the nature of the work done.

The few studies that have explored the implementation of various forms of collective parent advocacy practices have found that parents who participate in such activities experience them as empowering and transformative (Haworth et al., 2022). Nonetheless, Slettebø (2013) points to various factors that hinder parents' participation in collective advocacy. Among these are anxiety regarding exposure that stems primarily from the stigma of being involved with CP, feelings of isolation and shame, difficulty collaborating with professionals, and lack of practical and emotional resources. Moreover, recent accounts that focus on the New York movement highlight the risk of co-optation by the

child welfare system, the challenge of being genuinely parent-led and resisting the reproduction of social power relationships with allies, and the difficulty of creating an organizational structure that supports parents' leadership (Bachiller, 2022).

Inspired by the international development of parent advocacy networks, collective parent advocacy is developing in the UK. This article is based on a comprehensive study of the development of this movement between 2020 and 2022. Employing a case study methodology, it focuses on the very early phases of the development of the PAN, a Welsh grassroots collective of parents and allies that aspires to develop both case-level and collective parent advocacy. The PAN is a unique case through which to explore the development and implementation of such practices. Therefore, the study aimed to document and conceptualize the PAN's development and reveal its theoretical, ethical, and practical foundations.

In what follows, the PAN is introduced, and the study methods are briefly described. Next, the study findings are presented. In the discussion, I explore the potential ability of collective parent advocacy to promote transformative change in CPS and discuss how opposing approaches may challenge some of this study's findings.

## The PAN

The PAN is a collective of parents with lived experience of the CPS and allies[1] interested in promoting the participation of parents with lived experience in child protection policy and practice. It was established in Wales in 2020 by an independent review officer[2] and a mother with lived experience of having her child removed and adopted through the CPS. The PAN was initially established to develop a case-level peer mentoring service for parents involved with children's services and gradually evolved into a collective grassroots advocacy initiative.

The PAN steering group currently includes 21 active members (twelve parents and nine allies), including two allies seconded by the local safeguarding board in the last two years. Since its inception, the PAN has made significant progress, developed substantially, and carried out myriad activities. The group meets regularly and collectively at least once a month, and its members are involved in various weekly activities. The main ongoing activity is the PAN parent café, a model adopted from the USA that uses small group conversations to facilitate self-reflection, peer-to-peer learning, support, and

[1]Allies are people involved in the project who do not have experience with children's services as parents. The steering group includes allies from social and health services.

[2]An independent review officer is a social worker with particular responsibilities for ensuring individual children receive the care and support services they need (https://socialcare.wales).

education on protective factors to reduce child maltreatment (Be Strong Families) https://www.bestrongfamilies.org/cafes-overview).

The group members underwent a parent café training program led by instructors from the USA, and the PAN Parent Café was successfully launched at a large public event that aimed to engage senior management, organizations, and parents. The Parent Café sessions were held monthly across different authorities until recently, when they were reduced in frequency, and a more informal parent drop-in approach focused on well-being was introduced. These meetings, facilitated by at least one parent and one ally, have consistently grown, attracting 10 to 25 participants per session. Based on government funding from the local safeguarding board, the PAN provides essential support such as transportation, child-care, and refreshments to these participants and token payments to PAN parents for their hosting and support roles.

Since its inception, the PAN Group has actively participated in numerous conferences, workshops, and events where they have presented their work to hundreds of people from diverse backgrounds, e.g., policymakers, professionals, and parents with lived CPS experience. They also meet regularly with social work and senior management teams and participate in community and knowledge development forums. Recently, the group joined an ongoing research project that aims to include lived experience in the upper echelons of professional structures and agencies. Additionally, the group is involved in similar advocacy networks in the UK and the USA and contributes to campaigns that call for child protection reforms in general and the development of PA in particular.

Beyond sharing knowledge, advocating for systemic change, and bringing lived experience to the forefront, all of which are critical, participation in all these events bolstered the PAN's public profile and gave the group an essential role in the development of PA in Wales. This involvement recently led to the allocation of funding for the development of a small-scale case-level peer mentoring program.

Securing funds from the Welsh government was a significant achievement for the PAN and enabled it to establish the Parent Peer Advocacy & Support Service (PPASS), a case-level peer mentoring program. This funding paved the way for the development of an induction program for PPASS workers that covers essential topics such as advocacy roles, skills, safeguarding, and working with difference. Clinical group supervision for PPASS staff was also agreed upon, ensuring trauma-informed support.

In summary, although the PAN is still in its early development stages, it has made immense progress over the past three years. Beginning as the shared vision of two women, it is now a solid group of parents and allies who have undergone training in several programs. It runs a range of activities for parents involved in the Welsh CPS and inspires hundreds of people to develop new

forms of CP practice. Moreover, it has now received funding to further develop collective and case-level parent advocacy.

## Method

An in-depth qualitative case study approach was employed to achieve the study aims, which involved descriptive and explanatory aspects (Yin, 2003). Data collection methods involved 120 hours of participatory observations (Shah, 2017) in a multitude of contexts (e.g., steering group meetings, social events, presentations), 12 in-depth interviews (with six parent activists and six allies), and document reviews. The Royal Holloway, University's ethics committee approved the study.

After making initial contact with the founders of the PAN, the author was invited to its monthly steering group meeting to present himself and the study he was conducting on parent advocacy in the UK. At the end of that meeting, he suggested that the PAN could constitute a case study of the development of parent advocacy. He explained the methods that would be employed and what it would be like to participate in such a study, e.g., he would attend and document many of the activities, and participants would be interviewed if they agreed. He highlighted several ethical issues, e.g., their anonymity would be preserved, their participation was voluntary, and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Following this meeting, the author sent the participants an information sheet and consent form that detailed the issues he had presented at the meeting. All participants consented to participate in the study. Since the group's composition changed during the year and a half of the research, permission to document meetings was required in each observation. The meetings were documented in field notes and digitally recorded with the participants' permission.

Convenience sampling was used for the in-depth interviews. After participating in several steering group meetings, the author explained the rationale for conducting personal in-depth interviews for the study and requested participants' permission to contact them via e-mail. At the time, the steering group included seven parents with lived experience and eight allies. Of the fifteen participants initially contacted by the author, five allies and four parents responded and agreed to be interviewed. Over time, another ally and two parents who joined the PAN later agreed to be interviewed. Overall, 12 members were interviewed. The allies included five women and one man. Four were social workers, one was a support worker, and one was a visiting nurse. Of the six parents, five were women, and one was a man. Five had had at least one of their children taken into care, and one was under a child protection plan. The interviews were all recorded by the author digitally with the interviewees' consent and then transcribed.

The data was analyzed in three phases using systematic content and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, an in-depth, explorative, holistic reading of the interviews and field notes led to the identification of an initial coding framework that included three main categories: practices, experiences, and challenges. Next, all transcripts were coded using the framework, and recordings of relevant meetings were revisited and coded. This analysis produced several themes (e.g., motivations for joining the PAN, personal experiences of being part of the PAN, and collective challenges and dilemmas). The next phase of the analysis involved a collaborative discussion with the steering group. During this meeting, the author presented an initial outline of the findings. A discussion was then conducted in which the group reflected on the findings, responded to some of the questions that arose from them, and added their perspective on the analysis. Next, further analysis of the initial categories led to a new categorization that revolved around the four PAN themes presented in the findings. Last, since data collection ended in 2022, the group was conducted for an update on its situation. This correspondence led to another steering group meeting in which the author presented the updated version of the article.

## Findings

Based on the data collected, the analysis identified three ethical and practical building blocks at the foundation of the PAN and several core challenges the group faced in the development phase. These building blocks, developing a shared ethical commitment to confronting injustices in CPS; bolstering parents' power, knowledge, and leadership; and nurturing relationships within the group and the community, are addressed in the following subsections, which are followed by a subsection on the group's core challenges.

### *Developing a shared ethical commitment to confronting injustices in CPS*

The data points to a collective agreement within the group that CPS, in its current form, is failing to meet the goal of promoting a better and safer society for children and their families. Moreover, participants framed the system's failure as a form of injustice toward parents that must be confronted. This perspective was rooted in members' experiences of involvement with the system. For example, parents described their negative experiences of the oppressive ways in which social workers used their power, as this excerpt demonstrates:

> It was a lot of abuse. I know it's a strong word to use, but that's what it felt like. So, essentially, there was a lot of bullying going on. A lot of "if you don't do this, we're going

> to take your kids . . .” And every time I tried to challenge it, and every time, they didn't do anything about it. (parent)

Similarly, allies described feeling morally distressed by the gap between their values and the practices in which they were obliged to engage:

> So, I felt that we had . . . harmed the children in those decisions. We, as a department, harmed the emotional well-being of these children and made the family relationships far worse than they'd been. I just thought, “This is not for me. This is institutional harm. I don't want to be part of it.” (ally)

Stemming from these lived experiences, group members' commitment and desire to actively change the CPS were prominent in the data. The following excerpt reflects a message that was repeated throughout the study:

> It's a broken system. It's a rotten culture. There are social workers trying to do their best. There are social workers [who] want change . . . but they're massively overworked. And because they're so overworked, that really brings a problem to how they approach cases. So, the system, as I see it, is a broken one. And . . . it needs . . . fixing. (parent)

Based on their agreement regarding the need for change, group members described three avenues through which they wished to pursue change for CP-involved parents and children: changing the stigma regarding parents, influencing child protection policy at the national level, and actively supporting families undergoing child protection interventions.

At the political/public level, they conveyed a desire to influence how parents who have experienced the child protection process are portrayed in the public discourse and professional forums. Members highlighted their aspiration to change the stigma regarding parents through their activity in the group, as the following excerpt shows:

> And I think that's what spurred me on to keep trying to make a change. Because of all these perceptions that people have, because I've heard people say, “Well, if social services are with you, you must have done something wrong,” and it's not always the case, and the general public's point of view is that if you've had social workers in your life, you're a really bad person. And the perception needs to change. (parent)

At the policy level, several group members voiced their wish to influence child protection policy at the national level, as this statement from an ally shows: “The mission is to improve how statutory services work and improve the outcomes for children and families, you know, so that's the aim, that's why I am here, I think. To change the way services work on a broad-based level.”

Last, at the individual-family level, group members expressed their desire to actively support families undergoing child protection interventions. This desire stemmed from the ethical commitment to preventing other parents from experiencing what group members defined as a highly unjust process. In the case of the parent activists, their motivation stemmed from the aspiration to prevent families from coping with the oppressive nature of the system alone.

All parents explicitly expressed the desire "not [to let] anyone else go through what I went through with the system alone" as a central motivating factor for their participation in the group.

### *Bolstering parents' power, knowledge, and leadership*

From the PAN's inception, its members, parents and allies alike, strove to become a parent-led group in which the knowledge embedded in parents' lived experience would be recognized and assimilated systematically into practice. Accordingly, all group members wished to construct the group as a participatory space where the distinctions between parents and allies could be challenged.

Accordingly, the group's attempts to challenge power relationships, empower parents, and bring their knowledge and voices to the forefront came into play in five practices: holding parent consultations, maintaining a balance between parent activists and allies in the steering group, ensuring parents play an active role in all PAN activities, guaranteeing that parents' participation in the PAN contributes to their personal development, and paying parents for their PAN activity except for steering group meetings.

With regard to the first practice, very early on, the founding group initiated three parent consultations. At these meetings, area parents involved in the CPS were invited to share their experiences with social services and voice their needs and expectations regarding the development of the parent advocacy group. Thus, the group's actions derived from ideas and wishes expressed by parents.

The second practice is reflected in the group's commitment to maintaining a balance between parent activists and allies in the steering group by ensuring that parent activists comprise at least half of the group members. Beyond the quantitative aspect, this commitment involves parents and allies actively sharing responsibilities, e.g., chairing steering group meetings and preparing social and community events.

In line with the motto "never about us without us," adopted from the disability rights movement (Stack & McDonald, 2014), the third practice entails parents playing an active role in all the activities, e.g., meetings, consultations, and presentations, in which the PAN is involved. One of the significant arenas in which this principle came into play was the presentation of the PAN in different forums and contexts, such as meetings with social work teams or academic conferences. A vital feature of this experience was that the parent activists were given a focal role at these meetings. Although taking part was a challenging and intimidating experience for some parents, all the presenters found it very positive. A parent activist described how the fact that, as she put it, "they are coming to us, they want to hear and learn from us, [and] we have a place at the table" gives her hope that change is possible.

Another important outcome of these presentations is the recognition parents receive for their struggles and pain, but, more importantly, for their strengths, abilities, and unique knowledge. For example, a parent activist facilitated a clean language exercise at a meeting with two senior government representatives. The participants' reactions to the exercise highlighted the parent's unique abilities. Thus, the parent received recognition as a whole person and not solely as a "parent with lived experience."

The fourth practice is expressed by group members emphasizing that parents' participation in the PAN should contribute to their personal development. Indeed, parents described their PAN activity as allowing them to do something meaningful and feel empowered. Some noted their motivation to be part of a group and develop new relationships. At a more practical level, participants described the PAN as presenting an opportunity to develop their skills. Thus, in addition to serving on the steering group and gaining experience working as a group, developing services, and collaborating with multiple stakeholders, training is central to the members' personal development. Indeed, parents and allies underwent several joint training programs, e.g., systemic modeling and clean language training, parent café training, and level-two advocacy training. Beyond the developmental benefits of these training sessions, parents gained accreditation and skills that can serve them in other contexts and increase their social capital.

The fifth and last practice that enabled parents to play a leading role in the PAN was deciding that they should receive payment for their PAN activity, except for their participation in steering group meetings. This decision was based on the understanding that while the allies are involved voluntarily in the PAN, their participation is related to their regular jobs and is supported by their superiors. In contrast, parents are required to participate in more meetings and are not acknowledged in any other context for their work with the PAN.

### *Nurturing relationships within the group and the community*

Group members repeatedly pointed to their positive relationships with other group members as a core element of the PAN. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of becoming a group with a friendly atmosphere and shared values. One ally noted, "I guess we've built up a relationship and work closely with each other. I think we've all gone through the training together, which has been quite fun and helpful. We enjoy working together." As this ally explained, shared experiences such as training programs are essential in developing rapport. Beyond training activities and professional meetings, the PAN also conducted social events focused on leisure and fun. Members described these events as important for reinforcing their feeling of being part of a group of people who work together. One ally remarked, "It cemented the bond to work

together – everyone did everything. We evolved to a different position, a hybrid group" (ally). In addition, the activities promoted a better understanding of parents' needs and wishes. Another ally explained, "We've learned that parents want a balance of fun and positive social experiences as well as the opportunity to talk about emotive experiences and how to make a difference to other parents."

The relationship between parents and allies was mentioned as a critical element of the support parents receive in the PAN. Group members cited three types of circumstances that could require allies to stand alongside parents and support them: crises, current involvement with children's services, and coping with difficulties related to their involvement with the PAN. As the following words of an ally demonstrate, while relationships are immensely important, they cannot replace organizational attunement to parents' needs: "I don't know whether the parents feel supported because they asked to set up their own group to support each other, which is great. But is that enough?"

The relational stance was not limited to relationships within the group. The group highlighted the importance of forming connections with various stakeholders in the community. First, there was an attempt to recruit allies from multiple services in the community into the steering group (e.g., education, health). Second, an ally and a parent met with social work teams across the region as representatives of the group. In addition to fulfilling the critical goal of "getting the word out," these meetings enabled parents and allies to initiate a dialogue with social workers about the PAN's aims and aspirations and allowed social workers to learn about the PAN from the parents, as the following statement by a parent shows: "And I feel like that is also the key. Helping other professionals realize that there have to be policy changes in order for this to work, in order for children to have less [sic] adverse experiences in childhood."

One of the most prominent actions taken by the group to consolidate the PAN's relationship with the community was the establishment and operation of the parent café. Although the PAN initiated the training, a range of stakeholders from the community took part in it, enabling a close acquaintance between the group and the community and creating a shared professional language.

Another arena of relationship development that significantly influenced the development of the PAN is the relationship with other parents' advocacy groups in the UK and around the world. Since the PAN's inception, various guests have been invited to the steering group meetings. These have included a parent advocate from the Rise project in New York, a social worker from a London borough who developed a parent advocacy project, a health practitioner who developed a peer support training program, and the director of a parent-led parent advocacy organization in Washington, DC. Group members described the benefits of meeting activists already involved in parent

advocacy and learning from them. These meetings were influential in several respects. They enabled members to learn about different advocacy models and reflect on the kind of model they wanted to develop. In addition, they demonstrated the potential of parent advocacy to help parents and promote change. Moreover, they inspired and motivated members to move forward with the project. One of the allies reported:

> She [the American parent advocate] linked up with us on our meeting, and she spoke, and I was just . . . wow, she was so motivational, full of emotion! But the content of it was so inspirational, and I remember this moment I felt, yes, it's great to be part of that.

### *Core challenges*

As the current status of the PAN indicates, basing the group's work on the three building blocks described above has positive implications. The group is expanding, there is a balance between allies and parents, and new funding was approved. Nonetheless, developing collective advocacy in CPS remains an extremely challenging endeavor. Specifically, the study pointed to three significant challenges that faced the group: the difficulty of maintaining relationships in the context of imbalanced power, recruiting parent activists, and securing funding.

Although relationships are a core element of the group's work, maintaining them in the context of imbalanced power is difficult. Despite the wish to blur the distinctions between parents and allies, participants emphasized the need to acknowledge the differences between the two groups regarding social positioning and past experiences. As one of the parents explained, this is a delicate balance:

> Although we're working together, there still needs to be this understanding that the parents aren't professionals, you know, and I feel most of the time we don't feel it but actually we need to work on what we're trying to do with each other. Because it is [sic] parents, and it is [sic] professionals.

Despite the participatory intentions of the group, members emphasized that the ways in which power can truly shift from allies to parents remain unclear, especially given the gap between allies' and parents' practical and emotional resources. Indeed, some parents and allies expressed concern that the parents' participation is limited. A prominent and rather mundane example of how this challenge is manifested is the decision regarding the chairing of the steering group's monthly meetings. Although the group agreed that there was a need for "sharing the chairing" between parents and allies, in practice, the issue was on the group's agenda for more than three months, and the group struggled to take this decision forward. The explicit explanation for the delay was the group's reluctance to put excessive pressure on individuals. Nevertheless, the data also pointed to the parents' hesitation to take on the role, on the one hand,

and, on the other, the allies' confusion regarding how such changes would work, especially when many of the responsibilities are in the hands of the two leading allies.

Notably, power relations are inherently embedded in all interpersonal relationships and do not only concern who does what. The presence of power imbalances in interpersonal relationships between group members was perhaps the most sensitive issue involved in the group's work. Because many parents in the group experienced abuse of power in their past interactions with professionals, close relationships with professionals are potential triggers for them. This challenge led to a significant crisis in the group when the lead ally ordered a bus for the group's trip to a conference in London. When one of the parents understood that the ally had not reserved places for her child, she felt that making such a decision without involving parents reflected a harmful denial of her needs and perspective.

An additional serious challenge was the recruitment of parent activists. The group found it extremely difficult to locate parents interested in joining the group and willing to commit to at least three hours a month of activity. This issue is critical because of the group's explicit commitment to maintaining an equal balance between parent activists and allies. Explanations for this predicament varied. Many members attributed it to parents' reluctance to revisit their traumatic experiences with social services, as one of the allies explained: "I think some parents are saying, 'I really don't want to go down that road. That was the worst time in my life. I don't want to think about it anymore.' . . . I've had a couple of parents say ' . . . it will just bring back the worst memories."

Other explanations point to parents' inability to commit to contributing the time resources required to participate in group activities or a failure to publicize the group and reach out to other parents adequately. Moreover, some of the group members noted the uncertainty regarding the project's future as a critical challenge regarding recruitment. One parent said, "It's going to be difficult to get people. I think one of the problems is to join and give time if there's no guaranteed job at the end."

Securing funding is another significant barrier to developing collective advocacy. Although the group obtained substantial funding for the initial stages of its development, the foremost challenge, mentioned by all participants as a significant barrier, is moving the project forward without funding. This point arose concerning current activities but mainly regarding the uncertainty of the PAN's sustainability. Since such services depend on the funding allocated to them, members feel that the funding issue contributes significantly to a sense of uncertainty that dominates their experience in the group. In this regard, one of the parents stated:

> But it is a challenge because . . . from my point of view, and I'm sure everybody else feels the same, it feels like it's dragging us because there's [sic] so many different aspects that

we've got to think of and try to do, and we need funding. I think if we had funding, we could put things in place and recruit and train.

## Discussion

Echoing previous studies on the development of collective parent advocacy (Davies et al., 2023; Haworth et al., 2022; Tobis, 2019), the current study's findings offer a positive and hopeful depiction of the PAN's growth and the potential of collective parent advocacy to promote transformative change. Nevertheless, initiatives like the PAN remain marginal in child protection policy and practice. This fact points to the need to examine this phenomenon critically and attempt to situate the findings within a broader political and ideological context.

Thus, this discussion begins with an outline of the reasons why collective parent advocacy of the kind undertaken by the PAN can lead to transformative changes in CPS. Next, the approach taken by the PAN is positioned within a macro-level and political context, and the challenges posed by some opposing approaches to the PAN's key tenets are explored. Finally, the limitations and implications for policy and practice are presented.

The findings point to four reasons collective parent advocacy can support the critical calls for transformative change in child protection systems. First, the PAN members recognize that involvement with the CPS may harm families and children. Moreover, the members agree that this involvement is not necessarily the outcome of parents' faults or actions but rather the result of broad social harms inflicted on parents by poverty, social inequality, and risk-averse organizational cultures, among other factors. The consensus regarding these two PAN assumptions has led to a reframing of what child protection means and how it should look. Specifically, it frames the harms children and families suffer as the consequence of an unjust social structure (Keddell, 2022). This reframing highlights the need to change systems and social arrangements instead of focusing on policies and practices that may assist specific families but will not transform the root causes of children's and families' predicaments.

Second, collective parent advocacy suggests a community-based vision for child protection systems. In recent years, the development of intervention strategies that attempt to address the needs of families and children through community-based methods has grown (Lo & Cho, 2021). However, despite the rhetoric of "partnership" and "community," child protection agencies often comprise large bureaucracies that are separate from the communities they serve rather than embedded in them (Featherstone et al., 2018).

Gross-Manos and Cohen (2022) assert that community-based interventions build on one of two strategies: community development focused on empowering community members to work together and overcome challenges in their shared situation, and social capital development focused on creating

relationships and social networks between individuals and various elements in the community. The PAN provides an example of a project that empowers group participants (e.g., by providing them with training and work-related experience), stimulates the development of social networks (e.g., by opening up spaces where parents can meet and engage with each other), influences how families in the CPS are viewed in the community (e.g., by enhancing the relationships between these families and various stakeholders in the community), and increases the accessibility of services to children and families (e.g., by offering parents community-based, non-stigmatizing services).

The third reason is that bolstering parents' power, knowledge, and leadership is a significant component of the PAN's development process, highlighting the pressing need for practices that challenge the imbalanced power relations that characterize current child protection systems. The study findings suggest that collective parent advocacy challenges power relationships by bringing parents' voices into policymaking, confronting professionals with parents' lived experience and knowledge, and creating collective power.

By bringing parents' voices into policymaking, collective advocacy counters the devaluation of parents' knowledge and challenges the unjust distribution of social power. By confronting professionals with parents' lived experiences and knowledge, collective advocacy undermines the dominance of professional knowledge and validates their knowledge in a manner that empowers their agency within relationships. By bringing parents and allies together, collective advocacy creates collective power and transforms parents into a force that must receive attention and respect.

Last, collective parent advocacy has the potential to transform CP thanks to its ability to decrease stigma and shame, which are key barriers to engagement with the child protection system (Saar-Heiman, 2022; Gibson, 2020; Gupta et al., 2018). By addressing injustices and reframing CPS practice as potentially harmful, the PAN strives to shift the system's gaze from parents' actions to their social context. Investing in political campaigning and parents' engagement with social services can change the negative narrative regarding parents involved with the CPS. As parents noted, establishing beneficial relationships and creating a shared space for parents contribute to a sense of collective efficacy, disrupt isolation, and provide support, liberating parents from shame and blame.

When considering these conclusions regarding the potential of collective parent advocacy, it is important to note that they derive from a critical approach that highlights the oppressive potential of CPS interventions and illustrates how they create and perpetuate social inequalities and injustices (Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020). Critical approaches spotlight the influence of macro-level policies and the ideologies that underpin them, e.g., neoliberalism, on CPS policy and practice (Hyslop & Keddell, 2018). Although approaches that share aspects of this analysis are gaining traction globally

(Braithwaite, 2021; Dettlaff, et al., 2020; Feely & Bosk, 2021; Keddell, 2022; Merkel-Holguin et al., 2022), some of them are highly contested (see, e.g., Barth et al., 2022; Garcia et al., 2024) and remain marginal in policy and practice.

Indeed, child-centered and risk-focused approaches that oppose this critical approach challenge the assumption that CPS is structurally harmful to families and children and perpetuates social inequality and oppression. Instead, various scholars assert that despite manifest flaws in the system, the evidence does not support such an assumption, and inequalities in CPS involvement and outcomes stem from the risks children in marginalized communities encounter and not from systemic biases (Barth et al., 2022). Moreover, while critical approaches focus on the need for structural reforms to tackle root causes (Featherstone et al., 2021), other approaches point to procedures, organizational policies, and staff working conditions as the key areas requiring change (Munro, 2011).

Another divergence between these approaches revolves around the attitude toward parents in CPS policy and practice. As the findings demonstrate, the PAN places parents' experiences and needs at the center of its work, emphasizing the value of their lived experiences and rights. Critiques of this emphasis on parents argue that it risks diverting the focus from children, who are the most vulnerable and constitute the raison d'être of CPS (Dubowitz & Barth, 2023). Moreover, it has been claimed that over-reliance on parents' knowledge, especially when the system has harmed them, may lead to a distorted perception of CPS. Accordingly, the PAN aim of handing more power to parents at the expense of professionals may be perceived by critics as a threat to the mission of protecting children. While the disparities between critical and risk-focused, child-centered approaches imply the existence of a binary, in reality, most research, policy, and practice involve aspects of both.

### *Limitations*

The study had several limitations. Despite the parents and allies reporting many positive experiences regarding their participation, it is impossible to conclude that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the building blocks identified in the data and the participants' experiences. Similarly, the study cannot point to the outcomes or efficiency of the groups' work. The exploration of these dimensions of the PAN requires further research. Furthermore, the fact that the study was conducted in the very early phases of the groups' development makes it difficult to determine whether and how the steps taken in the early phases influenced the groups' success in the present. In addition, the study does not shed sufficient light on the conditions that enabled the PAN to develop and thrive. Given that the Welsh child protection

system is portrayed as investigative and individualized (Bunting et al., 2018), the context that enabled the development and funding of the PAN within this organizational and political climate requires further exploration. Finally, the generalizability of these findings must be considered within the limits of the small sample size, the sample characteristics, i.e., parents and allies who are deeply engaged in the development of the PAN and joined at different phases of the process, and the specific context of the Welsh child protection system.

### *Implications for policy and practice*

The study findings point to several implications for policy and practice. Parents with lived experience must be part of any collective advocacy initiative from the beginning and during all the activities conducted by the group. In addition, developing a shared ethical code is essential to solidifying the group and promoting transformative practice. Allocating funding for such initiatives is also crucial. Most importantly, parents with lived experience must be paid for their activities, and funding must be provided for the groups to produce events and create shared spaces. According to Kania and Kramer (2011), developing collective advocacy requires "funders [to] support a long-term process of social change without identifying any particular solution in advance. They must be willing to stay with an initiative for years, recognizing that social change can come from the gradual improvement of an entire system over time, not just from a single breakthrough by an individual organization" (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 41). Finally, for collective parent advocacy to thrive, such initiatives need support from other community services and groups. Only by engaging with the community and broadening the scope of what child protection means can transformative change be achieved.

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