

A View From The Bench: Advocating For Infants and Toddlers

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October 23, 2026

***This session is being recorded**

CASA GAL
Court Appointed Special Advocates
Guardians ad Litem
FOR CHILDREN

Panelists:
Honorable Michael Dickinson, Judge
Harrison County Youth Court, Biloxi, Mississippi

Honorable S. Trent Favre, Judge
Hancock County Court, Bay St. Louis, Mississippi

Honorable William Owens, Senior Judge
Juvenile Court, 8th Judicial District, Wapello County, Ottumwa, Iowa

Moderator:

Honorable Sheila Calloway, Judge
Davidson County Juvenile Court, Nashville, Tennessee

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Description/Objectives

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- This session will focus on infants and toddlers in child welfare court cases, and the questions that judges would like CASA/GAL advocates to ask when gathering information to report and make recommendations to the court as to what is in the best interests of the child.

- Presenters will also share tools and resources and discuss best practices from around the country.

Framing the Discussion

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Framing the Discussion

- Infants and toddlers in the dependency court system, whether remaining at home, or in out-of-home placement, have unique developmental, emotional, and physical needs that rapidly change during their first few years.

- Age related non-verbal and limited-verbal children present special challenges for CASA/GAL advocates, the court, and other child welfare and legal professionals. This session will focus on providing CASA/GAL best interest advocacy for those children and how to provide information to the court about their special needs and service requirements.

Infants and Young Children in the Child Welfare System - By the Numbers and Reasons for Entry

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Infants and Young Children in the Child Welfare System
By the Numbers and Reasons for Entry

- Approximately 7% of the children in foster care are under the age of one
- Approximately 34% of the children in foster care are one to five years of age
- Infants and toddlers are more likely than older children to enter foster care because of neglect and parental substance use disorder.

Panel Discussion and Questions

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Panel Discussion and Questions

Since a year represents a big fraction of a child's life, what are common issues that CASA/GAL volunteers need to be aware of when advocating for an infant or toddler?

Panel Discussion and Questions

What information would you like from the CASA/GAL advocate's visits to an infant or toddler?

Panel Discussion and Questions

Since infants and toddlers are more likely than older children to enter foster care because of neglect due to parental substance abuse, what information, if any, would you like from the CASA/GAL advocate about treatment services, including residential programs that permit the infant or toddler to remain with their parent?

Panel Discussion and Questions

What information would you like to see in a report if a CASA/GAL advocate learns through direct observations or interviews with medical professionals, family members, or childcare providers, that the infant or toddler is not meeting developmental milestones, such as delays in communication, motor skills, or social-emotional growth?

Panel Discussion and Questions

What information does a judge want from the CASA/GAL advocate, where appropriate, about visitation with parent, including institutionalized parents, and sibling visitation?

Panel Discussion and Questions

What information does a judge want from the CASA/GAL advocate if the court proceedings and permanency decisions are mandated to move faster than in standard child welfare cases?

Panel Discussion and Questions

- What are Zero to Three Courts (Baby Courts)?
  - What is the role of a CASA/GAL advocate in these courts?
- What is the role of a CASA/GAL advocate in other specialty courts that include infants and toddlers, such as family treatment courts?

Summary and Wrap-up

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Thank You

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