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School-Community Partnerships in Rural Settings: Facilitating Positive Outcomes for Young Children Who Experience Maltreatment

Sara L. Hartman[1] · Jenny Stotts[2] · Jennifer R. Ottley[1] · Rebecca Miller[3]

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Abstract Challenging conditions put young children at risk for maltreatment around the world, including in rural, southeastern Ohio. To combat these situations, several strategies are helpful in facilitating positive outcomes for young children. Specifically, when community entities and local school professionals work together, there is a greater likelihood of positive outcomes for children. This article describes meaningful partnerships that contribute to increased school success in rural settings and offers suggestions for developing effective school-community partnerships in other regions of the United States, as well as in other countries. The benefits of the practices described in this article may be felt across multiple layers of a community and are advantageous for all stakeholders.

Keywords School-community partnerships · Rural settings · Child maltreatment · Community resources · Childhood trauma

✉ Sara L. Hartman
hartmans@ohio.edu

[1] Department of Teacher Education, Gladys W. and David H. Patton College of Education, Ohio University, Athens, OH, USA

[2] Department of Social and Public Health, Athens Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Program, Ohio University, Athens, OH, USA

[3] Athens County Child Advocacy Center, College of Health Sciences and Professions, Ohio University, Athens, OH, USA

A Child's Experience

Adam is an eight-year-old boy in the third grade who grew up living with his biological parents in a rural, Appalachian community. Adam's family values time spent outdoors. During the summer months, Adam frequents a local fishing area with his father, and he and his siblings ride their bicycles on the gravel road in front of their home. The family also spends time together watching television and playing video games. Adam's parents are unmarried, but share a home. For most of his life, Adam has routinely witnessed domestic violence between his parents, substance abuse, and varying degrees of criminal activity in his own home. His family regularly struggles to meet their basic needs, and they largely rely on government support for food, income, and housing. They have experienced utility shutoffs on multiple occasions and have been evicted twice. Although his parents are unemployed, his father sometimes works odd jobs for a local rental company. Occasionally, Adam rides along and helps out with the jobs.

Adam's parents were recently charged with truancy in Juvenile Court due to Adam's school attendance. He has twenty-eight unexcused absences and eighteen tardy days at school. The family has been investigated by child protective services on two occasions in the past year. Recently, after a criminal investigation revealed that Adam's parents were involved in heroin trafficking, Adam was removed from his home. Adam witnessed the arrest of both of his parents and was transported by a child protective services caseworker to a foster home. Although he is placed in the same foster home as his sisters, he will need to attend a neighboring rural school. Adam is angry and distraught about leaving his home and is extremely nervous about starting a new school.

Even though the situation described above is fictional, it depicts a realistic example of child maltreatment in rural, southeastern Ohio. With its forested hills, deep ravines, and eclectic population, southeastern Ohio represents a region of Appalachia that is rich in culture and history. Yet, similar to many rural and urban areas, it is also a region that struggles with the pervasive impact of a longstanding cycle of poverty. While these characteristics create challenging situations for the young children who call southeastern Ohio home, school-community partnerships are working to facilitate positive outcomes for the region's most at-risk children. This article describes some of the meaningful partnerships that have contributed to children's increased school success and offers suggestions for developing effective school-community partnerships in other regions experiencing these challenges.

The Rural Context

Gjelten (1982) identified five possible typologies that describe rural areas, two of which (i.e., depressed and isolated) are characteristic of southeastern Ohio. Depressed rural describes communities in which the number of people leaving the area may be high and economic hardship is common. Isolated rural refers to places that are far from metropolitan areas and commonly have underdeveloped means of reaching them. Depressed and isolated rural regions exist globally and include areas such as the following: forestry and mining regions of northern British Columbia, Canada; coastal fishing regions of southern Bangladesh; and, agricultural regions of northwestern Romania.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, southeastern Ohio encompassed many thriving coal-mining communities (Edwards et al. 2006). The closing of the mines, in conjunction with the isolation of the area, made new job opportunities slim, and the once bustling towns that supported both blue and white collar employment have largely vanished (Edwards et al. 2006). As a result, the economic future of the region continues to be characterized as uncertain at best (Johnson et al. 2014; Seufert and Carrozza 2004). Approximately 30 % of children in southeastern Ohio are food insecure, and nearly 18 % do not finish high school (Pollard and Jacobsen 2014). Only 13.4 % of the region's adults have a bachelor's degree or higher, as opposed 32 % of those living in the nation's nonrural locations (United States Department of Agriculture 2016). These economic conditions have contributed to a serious problem with opiate abuse (Ohio Substance Abuse Monitoring Network 2014), which have resulted in significant numbers of children who need the services of local child welfare organizations like Court Appointed Special Advocate/Guardian Ad Litem (CASA/GAL) and the Child Advocacy Center (CAC).

Two Community Organizations That are School Partners

The CASA/GAL Program trains community volunteers to serve as CASAs and GALs in cases where children come to the attention of Juvenile Court due to allegations of child maltreatment. The CASA is tasked with completing an independent investigation of the assigned case and reporting back to the Court with recommendations for continued intervention and is also responsible for ensuring that the Court's orders are followed. The CASA is trained to build relationships with the child and any important adults in the child's life such as parents, foster parents, caseworkers, teachers and counselors. Teachers and school personnel are a prioritized source of information about the child, both in the initial investigation and during the ongoing monitoring of case progress. To best meet the needs of children, CASAs routinely attend parent-teacher conferences, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings and communicate regularly with teaching staff. Additionally, CASAs in southeastern Ohio often advocate for educational needs, such as tutoring, special education testing, and extracurricular involvement.

The CAC is a nonprofit community organization that works with children who have been sexually abused to minimize trauma and prevent further abuse. The CAC works collaboratively with other agencies represented on the child's multi-disciplinary team to ensure that children can receive all necessary services in one location after abuse or assault. This means a child can talk with a forensic interviewer, have a medical exam, and be linked with mental health and other services that might be needed by the family all at one time. This is done to provide consistency for a family and to prevent the child from needing to disclose abuse multiple times to various providers, which can exacerbate trauma. The CAC has strong working partnerships with the local Children Services agency, school and privately located mental health providers, local law enforcement, courts and prosecutors' offices. Additionally, the CAC partners with local schools to provide education about child sexual assault and ancillary issues such as healthy relationships, body boundaries, secrets/disclosure, and smart social media use in an effort not only to prevent abuse but also to identify victims and effectively link them to services. This brings a greater level of awareness to the community about available resources in the community, making it more likely that school partners know how and when to report suspected abuse and heightens teachers' and school officials' identification as mandated reporters of suspected child maltreatment.

Impact of Childhood Trauma on School Learning

Multiple researchers have found that a child's environment and experiences play a critical role in shaping the brain's development (Center on the Developing Child 2010). Whereas a positive relationship with caregivers and a stable home environment can have positive impacts on a child, experiencing trauma, such as maltreatment and abuse, can have negative effects on a child's brain and learning. These effects can range from differences in children's cognitive development to their social-emotional and behavioral development (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2015). Unfortunately, when a child experiences trauma in early childhood, it can have detrimental impacts on the child not only during the time the trauma is experienced, but also difficulties that persist into adulthood. Consequently, these and other advocates for the healthy development of young children (e.g., Network of infant/toddler Researchers) have suggested that a more concerted effort is necessary to provide appropriate care, services, and education to children who have experienced trauma.

Facilitating Effective School-Community Partnerships

Ensuring positive outcomes for children who experience maltreatment requires committed collaborative partnerships between schools and community entities (Hardin 2015). Several practices may lead to greater success in developing and sustaining such partnerships. While a majority of these practices are applicable for school-community partnerships in all contexts, specific issues should also be considered for stakeholders in rural settings.

Encourage Dialogue Between Stakeholders

Regular and ongoing dialogue between stakeholders is essential in the struggle to prevent child maltreatment and to ensure that children receive supports and services after experiencing abuse (Green et al. 2008). In rural southeastern Ohio, every attempt is made to engage in regular dialogue between community advocacy organizations and local schools. For example, when a child receives services at the CAC, they have typically been referred by Children Services or school partners. When/if a child's case enters the juvenile court system, CASA/GAL works closely with both the CAC and Children Services. Throughout the process, while community organizations communicate with each other, they also engage in frequent communications with the child's school, including administrators and teachers. Frequent discourse among all parties helps to ensure that children's social, emotional, physical, and educational needs are being met.

Children who experience mistreatment often struggle in school settings, leading to concerns with behavior, inattention, or falling academic achievement (Hardin 2015). Teachers of these children should work to establish strong collaborative partnerships with a child's CASA. As so much impacts a child's school success, it is essential that teachers share concerns and success stories with the child's CASA. Importantly, a child's CASA may choose to share this information during court proceedings, which may lead to better outcomes for the child (Waxman et al. 2009; Weisz and Thai 2003). Conversely, CASAs, when confidentiality constraints permit, should keep a child's teacher updated about significant out-of-school happenings. Thereby, teachers are better able to address social, emotional, and educational needs, because they more fully understand the outside factors that contribute to a child's school persona (Hart and Risley 1995). Thus, a child's well-being is best served by frequent and on-going two-way dialogue between the adults representing various school-community agencies who are consistently present in the child's life.

Use Relevant Literature to Increase Dialogue About Difficult Topics

Unlike previous generations, quality children's literature about every conceivable topic is now available (Russell 2015). Teachers and community entities need an awareness of and access to relevant literature that addresses issues related to difficult children's topics (see Table 1 for quality children's literature discussing difficult topics). Often teachers are concerned about broaching challenging topics with young children, but introducing children to these topics at a young age can lessen the stigma and stereotypes associated with topics such as poverty, substance abuse, divorce, and child mistreatment (Mankiw and Strasser 2013). When collaborative school-community partnerships are developed, community entities can be resources for teachers in choosing and utilizing children's literature with challenging topics within classrooms. For example, during collaborative school workshops, the CAC may introduce relevant literature about sensitive issues that are useful to both teachers and caregivers. Moreover, CASAs have access to a diverse library of literature, which can be helpful resources to teachers. Conversely, teachers and school counselors may also be able to suggest current, relevant literature to community partners that can be used with an organization's clients. Through these partnerships, community and school professionals are able to develop an awareness of quality literature and gain access to the texts that may help children understand and accept their own

Table 1 Picture Books that Address Difficult Topics

Literature	Description
Amazing You! Getting Smart About Your Private Parts, 2008 A: Dr. Gail Saltz I: Lynn Avril Cravath	Knowing about and being able to identify specific body parts is an empowering skill for young children. This picture book explains reproduction, birth, and the physical differences between boys and girls in age-appropriate and clear terms
Maddi's Fridge, 2014 A: Lois Brandt I:Vin Vogel	Sofia and Maddi are best friends who love to play at the park together. When Sofia visits Maddi's home for a snack, she discovers that her friend's refrigerator is nearly empty. Concerningly, Maddi asks Sofia to keep a secret about her food situation. This powerful book prompts discussion about topics such food insecurity and appropriate secret keeping
Maybe Days: A Book for Children in Foster Care, 2002 A: Jennifer Wilgocki and Marcia Kahn Wright I: Alissa Imre Geis	Being placed in a foster home raises many feelings and questions for children. Will they get to go home? Will they have to change schools? While the answer to these questions is often "maybe," they are still important questions to address
Mommy's Disease, 2014 A and I: Carolyn Hannan Bell	Mila's parents are divorced, and she lives with her dad. These changes are because her mom is an alcoholic. She feels sad, angry, and sometimes thinks her mom's behavior is her fault. With language and content appropriate for young children, this book explores adult addiction and its impact on children and families
My Daddy's in Jail, 2015 A and I: Anthony Curcio	This book helps children explore the feelings that they may have when someone they love goes to jail. Was it their fault? Is it okay to feel sad…mad…scared? This book is a powerful tool for discussing ways to support children who have a family member in jail
Some Secrets Should Never Be Kept, 2015 A: Jayneen Sanders I: Craig Smith	What is good touch…bad touch? In a non-threatening and age-appropriate way, this book teaches children about body safety, inappropriate touching, and presents ways to empower children to speak up when they have experienced unsafe touching
The Family Book, 2010 A and I: Todd Parr	Some families have two parents, some have one. Some families are loud, some are quiet. All families have love. This beautiful book honors many types of families and highlights the similarities that make all families special

A author, *I* illustrator

situation or to develop empathy for the experiences of others.

Think Critically About Who to Invite to School Meetings

In southeastern Ohio, about half of children who receive services from child welfare agencies receive special education services. Rural partners are often geographically far from each other, creating a friction of distance that requires creative collaborative strategies to overcome (Ellegard and Vilhelmson 2004). When possible, school officials should include involved parties from community entities at IEP and other school meetings. It is important for each of the involved parties to be knowledgeable about both the contextual variables at home as well as the educational accommodations, supports, and services available for a child. School parties need to be informed about home and judicial proceedings as these situations may impact school life. Similarly, community entities need to know school requirements so that a child can receive effective supports at home. As each setting is integrally connected, all involved parties should be aware of how each environment impacts the other. Achieving this environment of openness between all parties during IEP and other school meetings helps to facilitate positive child outcomes (Guillen and Winton 2015).

Create Collaborative Educator Training Opportunities

Rurally located teachers often have decreased access to quality professional development (Monk 2007), making school-community partnerships an important source for place-based professional development opportunities. Recently, child welfare advocates from the CAC and CASA/GAL program have partnered with local schools to provide workshop trainings and resources related to mandatory reporting, child abuse awareness, and trauma response (Table 2). These ongoing collaborations are meant to increase knowledge of (a) child abuse risk signs, (b) the protocol for reporting suspected abuse, and (c) the investigatory process. Local school districts and teachers are incorporating the content into classes, orientations, and

Table 2 Online resources to support children's healthy development

Organization name	Website	Description
CASA for Children: National Casa	http://www.casaforchildren.org/site/c.mtJSJ7MPIsE/b.5301295/k.BE9A/Home.htm	A national organization that provides advocacy services to children who have experienced abuse or neglect
Center on the Developing Child	http://developingchild.harvard.edu/	A multidisciplinary team of researchers who study how to improve outcomes for children who face difficult life circumstances
Child Welfare Information Gateway	https://www.childwelfare.gov	A service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, this resource provides access to print and electronic publications, websites, databases, and online learning tools for improving child welfare practice
Healthy Children	https://healthychildren.org/English/Pages/default.aspx	A parenting website sponsored by the American Academy of Pediatricians that provides relevant information about children's social, physical, and emotional health
National Child Traumatic Stress Network	http://www.nctsn.org/	A collaboration of families, practitioners, and researchers who aim to enhance access to services and care for children who have experienced trauma
National Children's Advocacy Center	http://www.nationalcac.org	A professional organization dedicated to a multidisciplinary team approach to responding to and treating child sexual abuse
ZERO TO THREE	http://www.zerotothree.org/	A professional organization aimed at disseminating knowledge about nurturing young children's early development

Table 3 Five common myths about helping children who experience mistreatment

Myth	Reality
Reported cases of maltreatment often go without investigation	Most cases of reported child abuse are investigated. However, due to strict confidentiality guidelines sometimes people not directly involved with the case do not know the outcome of the investigation. This causes some to believe that cases go uninvestigated, which is simply not true
Removal of a child from her or his home situation is the best way to help	While removing a child from their home may be the best option for a child, it is a complicated and difficult decision to make. Removal from the home can lead to feelings of instability, loss of status and a loss of control as children may always fear or expect to be removed at any time without explanation (Schneider and Vivky 2005). Removal often means children are separated from their siblings and frequently necessitates moving to a new school, which can effect school performance and grade promotion. Many times, working to make safety changes within a child's home is preferable to removal
After a child enters a foster home, he or she should immediately go back to school	Removing children from their homes is a traumatic life event and can have long-term consequences. As home removal represents a significant loss in their lives, children should be given time to grieve the loss of their home and time to adjust to the new foster home environment and caregivers
Teachers are too busy with accountability measures to be of much help in a child maltreatment case	Since teachers spend a significant amount of time with children, teachers are exceptional resources for social service providers and CASAs. Teachers have knowledge of school performance and social interactions, including how children handle conflict, emotional stressors, etc.
Teachers and school professionals do not need to know much about a child's case	Caseworkers and CASAs are good resources for schools. These professionals may help teachers and school professionals understand what the child is experiencing outside of the school environment. Working collaboratively is the key to success for children who have experienced abuse

special events. Participants report that ongoing collaborations are the best way to reinforce the perception of teachers as mandated reporters, to remind educators of their legal and ethical responsibilities as mandated reporters, and to dispel common myths related to child mistreatment (Table 3). In southeastern Ohio's rural region, where opiate abuse leads to higher than normal cases of child mistreatment, school-community partnerships with entities such as

the CAC and CASA/GAL are essential for the well-being of impacted children.

Preservice teachers are valuable members of school settings and often provide teachers with additional observational data about children's behavior and demeanor. Schools and university educators should encourage discussion about issues related to child maltreatment within methods courses and clinical placement sites. Ohio University, located in rural southeastern Ohio, frequently partners with child welfare advocates from community organizations to speak with and offer trainings for preservice teachers. By partnering with community child welfare entities, these discussions about child abuse start early and continue with frequency throughout a preservice teacher's degree program (Kenny 2001). Additionally, as part of clinical placement work, preservice teachers are asked to incorporate child welfare concepts into school-based activities and lessons. For example, after a professional development session with CASA/GAL, preservice teachers planned a service-learning event at a local school where they utilized what they learned to create toiletry kits for children entering foster care. These conversations and curricular activities provide evaluatory feedback, help preservice teachers recognize that they are mandated reporters, and orient them to the warning signs of child maltreatment.

Treat the Closeness of Rural Communities as an Asset

Researchers have long described the distrust of outsiders that exists in rural areas (Cooper et al. 2010), often times describing it as a negative characteristic that impedes progress. However, this paradigm also creates close and supportive community bonds that help to facilitate swift reactions to issues of child maltreatment. In southeastern Ohio, it is not uncommon for the community to quickly rally to identify and respond to the needs of a child or family in distress. School and community collaborators in rural areas should leverage the closeness of rural communities as an asset for facilitating supportive partnerships founded on mutual trust and care for children and the community (Hartman and Hines-Bergmeier 2015). Treating the rural community as an asset helps promote a supportive environment that is responsive to the needs of children.

Make Evaluation an Ongoing Process

Evaluation provides essential information that allows collaborating organizations to examine the success of their partnerships and the degree to which goals are being met. Baker and Charvat (2008) advocate for ongoing evaluatory processes within child welfare agencies and stress the importance of evaluating the development and implementation of organizational programming, even if the data collected are not published. This focus is especially important in rural communities where, due to time and staffing constraints, small child welfare organizations feel pressure to concentrate on delivering program services, as opposed to dissemination of data (Pecora et al. 2012). Rural child welfare providers also typically lack access to training about effective evaluation methods (Collins et al. 2007). Despite this, recognizing the value of ongoing evaluation that positively impacts development and implementation of programs and services may allow small, rural organizations to find ways to engage in meaningful evaluation of collaborative efforts.

In southeastern Ohio, child welfare organizations have formalized measures that track individual child and group outcomes. This includes databases that record and track case-specific descriptive information and court mandated, frequent review of individual child welfare cases. While meeting the immediate needs of a child who experiences maltreatment is always a child welfare organization's first priority, finding time and personnel to evaluate community-school collaborative efforts is an essential way to facilitate far-reaching positive child outcomes. Both CASA/GAL and the CAC track to whom and when collaborative school programming occurs, frequently revisit the goals and objectives of programming, and track how often they are asked to continue collaborations. Either through follow-up conversations or surveys, both community entities solicit feedback from participating teachers and administrators. These efforts allow collaborative partnerships to develop and evolve in natural ways that are tailored to meet the individual needs of school partners. Finally, evaluation methods in rural areas should not be developed with a "one size fits all" philosophy, but rather need to be customized to an area's available resources (Akintobi et al. 2013). For example, some rural areas may have access to technology that makes tracking and analyzing data more manageable. To make evaluation efforts more reliable and ongoing, those and other options should continue to be explored and individualized based on the organizations' needs and resources.

Final Thoughts

Shortly after being placed in his foster home, Adam is assigned to a CASA named Mary. Within the first week, Mary visits Adam at his home and meets with his foster parents. While getting to know Adam, she learns about the anxiety he is feeling regarding his new school and making new friends, as well as that he is struggling to complete his

homework. In response to hearing about his school concerns, Mary meets with his new teacher and the two early childhood preservice teachers placed in the classroom. She learns that Adam's teacher is also concerned about his academic progress but was unaware of his anxiety about making friends. Communicating frequently, Mary, his educators, and his foster parents embark on a course of action designed to facilitate positive outcomes for Adam. His teacher contacts intervention services for suggestions about accommodations that can support Adam's academic success, his foster parents arrange for an afterschool tutor with a private agency, and Mary and his teachers identify literature that helps Adam to acknowledge his feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Reaching out to local families who are privy to and sensitive of Adam's situation, all work together to facilitate positive peer interactions, both inside and outside of school.

One month later, Adam feels much better about his new school and can name two boys who he considers his friends. At school, a multi-disciplinary team is assessing his academic progress, and based on data collected, his teacher expects to refer him for a special education assessment. As such, she and her preservice teachers are already differentiating instruction for Adam within the classroom. In two weeks, Mary will attend a court hearing about his long-term placement. She will provide testimony about Adam's progress, the partnerships that are supporting him at home and at school, and will make recommendations about his future care. Although Adam's long-term placement is still unclear, with collaborative efforts between school and community advocates, Adam's chances of moving quickly through the juvenile court system are greatly increased.

Without the facilitating factors of the school-community partnerships described in this article, it is likely that cases of child maltreatment in rural southeastern Ohio would have poorer outcomes. Encouraging frequent dialogue between partners, utilizing relevant literature to increase discussions of difficult topics, thinking critically about how to involve key stakeholders in meetings, establishing an environment of collaborative educator training, and conducting ongoing evaluations of programming and partnerships are all essential in working to provide positive outcomes for young children. Additionally, in rural areas, stakeholders should embrace opportunities for place-based professional development partnerships and should leverage close community ties to build partnerships that are supportive for children who face challenging life situations. When community entities and local school professionals work together, there is a greater likelihood of positive outcomes for children, with the benefits of these practices felt across multiple layers of a community.

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