

**Bridges to Excellence**  
**“10 Commandments for Multidisciplinary Collaboration”**

**Barbara Babb**  
**Baltimore Center for Families, Children and the Courts,**  
**University of Baltimore School of Law**

1. Seek and obtain commitment to multidisciplinary endeavors from top leaders, such as a university president, a law school dean, etc.
2. Identify appropriate disciplines as early in the undertaking as possible.
3. Understand and acknowledge the mission and/or theoretical foundation of each discipline.
4. Identify and understand fundamental conflicts between/among disciplines.
5. Identify and understand the contributions each discipline can provide to the project.

**Frank Cervone**  
**Support Center for Child Advocates**

Know the child

Know those who know.

Know everything there is to be known.

Know your stuff in a thorough, professional way.

Visit the home – together.

Hear what the other is trying to say. That is, they know what they mean, but because we don't live in their professional world (of psychiatry or special education or deafness), we often move through our questions and move past their importantly-seen details.

Ask: what does this child *need*? The answer will cut through family tensions, legal wrangling, and value judgments.

Remember that social change takes a very long time, and that social change and social justice are nowhere close to being done.

There is strength in numbers when working toward social change.

Keep your humor.

**Sasha Coupet**

**Civitas Child Law Center, Loyola University Chicago School of Law**

(1) There must be a meaningful distinction from the outset between "multidisciplinary" and "interdisciplinary," as the former requires only the presence of persons from various professions or disciplines, whereas the later implies something far more interactive, even at times requiring that members transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries to arrive at a melding of views.

(2) To avoid disciplinary "turf" wars, there must be a system of shared governance or an understanding of horizontal and not vertical collaboration. No one discipline should be encouraged to conceive of itself as "leading" the dialogue, even though each might have its own disciplinary aim. Expertise must be balanced with humility.

(3) There must be meaningful relevant representation among as many disciplines related to children and families as possible. Although anything more than one can call itself "multidisciplinary," it is misleading to only have certain representatives at the table.

(4) From a systems perspective, there must be "buy in" for the value of a multidisciplinary collaboration from those in leadership and an accompanying tone set for other staff, including students, regarding respect for and value of other professions and approaches to problem-solving.

**Bernardine Dohrn**

**Children and Family Justice Center, Bluhm Legal Clinic  
Northwestern University School of Law**

*ESSENTIAL CRITERIA AND CONDITONS*

(with apologies for how pompous this sounds)

- Multi-year funding and sustainability. The law reform, systems and institutions we must change on behalf of children and families must know that we will not go away and cannot be waited-out.
- Excellent legal practice. We do not compete with large public systems of lawyers and we seek partnerships, but we model outstanding and zealous legal representation of our clients in systems which accept mediocre and unacceptable legal representation. CFJC attorneys and social workers stick with our clients after disposition and after they are re-arrested. We model our best for our clients and for our students,

and with *pro bono* counsel, and for everyone watching in courtrooms, administrative proceedings, and communities.

- Potential and real conflicts. We are aware of ethical conflicts and legal conflicts, and strive to adopt a clear role as attorneys for the child/youth client, as social workers, as advocates, as professionals. In practice, this is messy. Included here are the tensions between legal case work and legal advocacy for law and institutional reform.
- Focus and Flexibility. The Center requires a strategic focus to harness energies, determine which cases to accept, and consistency of the pursuit of law reform goals. At the same time, it is essential to be able to respond to strategic opportunities, to link issues, to join collaborations.
- Respect. To work in multidisciplinary settings, in all the ways described before, requires an ability to listen and learn, to hear other languages and see different worldviews, to be less certain about legal outcomes, to imagine varying forms of success (and failure).
- Sense of Humor. Best to laugh a lot, take the long view, see the bully fight as worth having, stand up for despised and demonized and brilliant and tenacious children.

### **Deborah Forman**

#### **Center for Children's Rights, Whittier Law School**

1. Law students/lawyers should have regular contact with professionals from other interested disciplines (e.g. social work, mental health, education, medicine), preferably in some structured forum.
2. Law students/lawyers should be provided basic instruction in interpreting/critiquing social science research.
3. Law students/lawyers should be encouraged to take a collaborative, rather than an adversarial, approach, to professionals from other disciplines where appropriate.
4. Law students/lawyers should be encouraged to adopt methodology and insights from other disciplines to develop creative solutions to problems and to deal effectively with their clients.
5. Professionals from other disciplines should be provided basic instruction in the substantive legal principles and processes related to their work.

### **Leslie Harris**

#### **Oregon Child Advocacy Project, University of Oregon School of Law**

1. Disseminate results of research to practitioners and policy makers who are in a position to use them

2. Involve students in meaningful projects so that they can see different ways of using their skills and expertise, as well as making important professional contacts
3. Find out from practitioners and policy makers about what needs they see that the project or program might help satisfy
4. Use resources to pay students so that their debt load is reduced; this kind of work doesn't pay well compared to other kinds of legal work.
5. Give everyone credit for what they do, and thank them publicly.
6. Keep showing up; don't go away just because you aren't successful the first time.

**David Katner**  
**Juvenile Litigation Clinic, Tulane Law School**

- never underestimate the importance of a good psychological/psychiatric evaluation of a juvenile client;
- never underestimate the harmful impact of benign neglect of a child's mental health needs;
- never underestimate the degree of resistance state agencies and their representatives will have towards providing children with mental health treatment and care;
- maintain a healthy sense of skepticism about most expert testimony;
- never take yourself too seriously, but always take the work seriously.

**Alan Lerner**  
**Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice and Research**  
**University of Pennsylvania**

- I. Thou shalt invest the time to do multidisciplinary work.
- II. Thou shalt not be hierarchical.
- III. Thou shalt invest in establishing trust among the parties.
- IV. Thou shalt have a goal and a strategic plan.

V. Thou shalt expect multidisciplinary interaction.

VI. Thou shalt not make chasing money to fund the center be a *de facto* goal.

VII. Thou shalt listen and be open to hearing.

**Sarah Ramsey**

**Family Law and Social Policy Center, Syracuse University College of Law**

1. Provide opportunities for programmatic goal-oriented interaction with leaders and staff from different disciplines. (develop training sessions, evaluations, program goals)
2. Have key leaders from different disciplines personally invested in the success of the project.
3. Provide opportunities for informal discussions and feedback to clarify professional ethics, roles, and language.
4. Join in as many opportunities for multidisciplinary professional interaction as possible. (attend professional meetings, co-author papers, guest lecture in other disciplines classes)
5. Have on-site visits to allow for exploration of the other discipline's territory.

**Suzanne Tomkins**

**Baldy Center, University at Buffalo School of Law**

1. Decode the language
2. Invest time in sharing information with each other- really learn about your partners from other areas, don't assume what you don't know
3. Think outside the box (we partner with geography to learn about geomapping)
4. Create a forum on a topic- poll those attend and ask them their interest, their motivation in attending.

**Karen Worthington**  
**Baron Child Law & Policy Clinic, Emory University**

- Value the contributions of every discipline equally.
- Have a variety of projects that provide students with opportunities to build on their strengths and gain new information.
- Place students of different disciplines on project work teams together. (i.e. if possible, don't segregate students by discipline. Have them work together in teams).
- Maintain an environment that encourages questioning and learning and one in which the instructors are always open to being taught by the students.
- Have the same high expectations for all students regardless of their discipline.
- To the extent possible and practical, incorporate information from a variety of disciplines into the teaching and operation of the Clinic. If it works well, incorporate best practices from other disciplines into the Clinic setting (for example, some Clinics have >grand rounds= types of presentations and suggestions; other Clinics have processing sessions with students handling emotionally and/or ethically challenging situations).
- Teach students about the benefits of utilizing information from a wide variety of sources and disciplines and let them know that to be effective lawyers for children they need to know much more than they law; they need to know about child development, attachment theories, psychological evaluations, etc. Get them used to this type of thinking while they are still in school. Similarly, teach social work students that they need to understand how their case work is guided by federal and state laws and that appellate decisions, for example, may directly impact their work.