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School of Ed. Faculty Create App that Trains First Responders to Address Abuse in Children with Disabilities

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April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month and faculty members in the Brooklyn College School of Education are working hard to raise awareness and help first responders advocate more effectively on behalf of one of the most vulnerable populations—children with disabilities. Adjunct Associate Professor Christine Pawelski, the Child Abuse and Disabilities grant project director, with her team created a website structure and an app that provides resources to assist social workers, child protective staff, law enforcement, and medical professionals in better intervening when children with disabilities might be victims of violence and abuse.

The grant lives under the Center for Child and Adult Development (CCAD) in the School of Education's Department of School Psychology, Counseling and Leadership (SPCL). Pawelski worked with the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to secure funding to develop the successful pilot program at Teachers College, Columbia University. In order to sustain and further extend the professional development possibilities of this work, Pawelski reached out to SPCL Department Chairperson Professor Alberto Bursztyn '73, '81 M.S.Ed., '86 M.S.Ed., hoping that the continuing grant could find a home here, which it did in 2015.

"It was clear that the project needed a place that matched the needs of the community—both of children with disabilities and issues of advocacy—in a more direct sense. CCAD was a perfect fit," Pawelski said.

"CCAD has historically been a place to provide this sort of training to individuals of various professions, but it had been relatively dormant for a number of years," said Bursztyn. "I saw this as an opportunity to reawaken the Center, create programs, and provide a forum for extending the work of the department to the larger community, addressing needs that are not exclusively school-based and have a connection to advocacy for children and their well-being. The CCAD at Brooklyn College is uniquely positioned for pioneering ways for addressing the diverse needs of vulnerable children and their families. We're situated in one of the most diverse urban populations in the world."

CCAD spearheaded the [Play Therapy Project at Brooklyn College](#), which provides in-service training for mental health professionals working with children who have experienced trauma.

The digital tools developed by Pawelski have been a boon to child advocates everywhere.

"OCFS staff continue to work to find ways to sustain the Child Abuse and Disabilities website and to support the efforts on this important initiative," said Melaney Szklenka, Child and Family Service specialist and state liaison officer at the Bureau of Program and Community Development for the OCFS. "So many of the victims that our investigation professionals encounter have some form of disability. The app and the website have proven to be invaluable for many of them, giving them access to information to better serve the children and families."



Pinwheels were selected as symbols of innocence to represent childhood and raise awareness during National Child Abuse Prevention Month.

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<https://shar.es/1wpzIQ>

http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/news/bcnews/bcnews_160412.php

Advocating for children with disabilities is essential to Pawelski's work. She served on the New York State Children's Justice Task Force, which reviewed, analyzed and made recommendations for policy, intervention and training. Communication and behavioral challenges found with children with disabilities can often strain families and caregivers, and frustrate professionals less familiar with ways to intervene using sign language or visual supports.

"This work also cannot be fragmented," said Pawelski. "It's not just about research and intervention. It's about public awareness. It's about getting the next generation engaged. The work of child abuse prevention, anti-bullying, and harassment is community work. You don't have to be a social worker. We all can do our part."

Pawelski and Bursztyn are working with undergraduate students from the Children and Youth Studies Program to help raise awareness for these important issues. In their academic course, Career Paths for Working with Children and Youth, Bursztyn and Pawelski have provided opportunities for students to work with field professionals and learn how their programs develop materials and activities around these issues, and explore what new career paths can emerge from them.

Members of the Children First Club, and Graduate Association of School Psychologists (GASP)—two Brooklyn College student organizations—partnered with Future Child Advocates, a national child advocacy/anti-bullying student club initiative created by Pawelski and for which she serves as director, to plan events to raise awareness here on campus.

This month, they are spearheading the campus' Pinwheels for Prevention event, which uses the pinwheel as a symbol for the innocence of childhood to bring attention to efforts to prevent child abuse. Prevent Child Abuse New York partnered with Future Child Advocates to provide the college with 50 free pinwheels and resource materials.

"We've made blue ribbons to distribute on campus throughout the month of April to bring attention to these issues," said Jasmine Lee, president of the Children First Club, and a William E. Macaulay Honors College scholar who double majors in communication and pre-med. "We'll be partnering with organizations on campus to increase community awareness and promote education."

For information on how to support these and other Department of School Psychology, Counseling and Leadership initiatives at the college, please contact Professor Alberto Bursztyn or Christine Pawelski Ed.D.

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The Brooklyn College community gathers in support of child abuse prevention. Left to right: student Jasmine Lee; Christine Pawelski Ed.D.; students Elizabeth Koennicke, Jennie Guzman, and Amelia Blackwood; and Professor Alberto Bursztyn.