

In conversation with...

Sally

Child Advocate Legal Officer



What does your role involve?

As a child advocate I advise children about their rights and assist them to participate in decisions and legal proceedings that affect them. I ensure their voices are heard in meetings and in court and tribunal proceedings and help them make complaints if they feel their rights have not been respected or honoured.

What is your professional background?

I studied law and became a commercial litigation lawyer in a large national law firm before working at the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. After a career break to have children, I became interested in the law which affected children. So I began working with the Youth Advocacy Centre which then led to the opportunity to become a child advocate legal officer at OPG.

What does your typical work day look like?

In the morning you will mostly find me out of the office visiting children and young people in the child protection system to talk about any legal issues they have. My role is listen to their views and wishes and then to advocate for those to be considered in the decisions made about their life. I might meet them in their home before they go to school or, if they are in youth detention, I will travel to visit them there. After my visits, I grab some lunch on the way back to the office and then my afternoons are usually spent following up with clients after school or making appointments to visit them, gathering information from other professionals and negotiating with decision makers. There are always new referrals to review, emails to process and admin tasks to complete.

What challenges have you faced in your role?

I find it hard not to get too emotionally involved! We are privy to a lot of detail about the trauma that our children or young people have experienced, which is challenging emotionally. It is important to maintain work-life balance and look after yourself so you can continue to advocate successfully.

What is the most inspiring thing you've seen or been part of at OPG?

Experiencing the moment where a young person 'finds their voice' and speaks out about what they think and want to happen in their lives. They are almost always nervous beforehand but visibly empowered afterwards. There is a view among some adults that children need to be 'protected' from involvement in decisions about them, particularly if the children have experienced trauma. However, children are experts in their own lives and we need to listen to what they have to say. It can only improve the decisions being made if we understand what they are thinking and where they are coming from.

When have you played an integral role in promoting and protecting our clients' human rights?

I had a client recently who was referred to me because a decision had been made which resulted in him not being allowed to visit his brother who was living with a different foster carer. My client was upset about this decision as he was worried that his brother was being mistreated by his foster carers. So I supported my client to apply to the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal to review this decision. This was reviewed by Child Safety and a decision was made to allow his brother to live with my client and his foster carer. Now he gets to see his brother every day!

What is the best part of your job?

Getting to work with wonderful children and young people. They inspire me daily with their courage and bravery in spite of the challenges they face.