



**Reimagining Children's Rights:
Impact Report
2022-2025**

MESSAGE FROM THE FOUNDERS

Rights4Children began in 2023 with a \$2.1m gift and a simple but powerful idea: that children have the right to be seen, heard, and empowered. Three years later, we transformed that precept into a burgeoning movement to reimagine children’s rights.

Children bear the brunt of the United States’ inequalities, yet our constitution prioritizes adults’ rights and interests. Constitutional law’s exclusive focus on adults leaves children—especially Black, Brown, and LGBTQ+ children—without legal protections and erects unequal barriers in their paths to adulthood. As law professors and legal scholars, we are uniquely positioned to do something about that tragic and unjust reality.

Rights4Children (R4C) aims to change this adult-centric vision of constitutional rights. We are a think tank founded by three Black women law professors dedicated to justice and equality for children. Our personal experiences, teaching, research, and scholarship have deeply informed our commitment to shift how society sees (or doesn’t see) children by transforming the way law students, lawyers, judges, and the public understand and envision young people’s rights. This report shares our first three years’ work and evolving vision.

While our movement is new, we stand on the shoulders of legal giants who began their innovative work as students. In 1944, in the heart of Jim Crow, discussions at Howard Law School focused on strategies to overturn **Plessy v. Ferguson**, the Supreme Court decision that enshrined “separate but equal” as the law of the land for five decades. Legal efforts at the time sought to dismantle the comprehensive web of discriminatory laws by attacking the reality that segregated facilities (where they existed in Black communities) were not “equal” to facilities available to white people.

One law student—the only woman in the class at Howard Law School that year—suggested challenging the very idea that “separate” educational facilities could ever be equal. The student, Pauli Murray, bet their professor that **Plessy** would be overturned on this theory. History proved Murray right.

Rights4Children is inspiring modern-day Pauli Murrays to take intellectual risks, share their ideas, and advance them in courtrooms and policy arenas towards reimagining children’s rights and building a brighter and more just future for all of us.



Catherine Smith

Vincent L. Bradford Professor of Law at the Washington and Lee University School of Law



Tanya Washington

Marjorie F. Knowles Chair in Law and Professor of Children’s Constitutional Rights at Georgia State University College of Law



Robin Walker Sterling

Mayer Brown-Robert A. Helman Professor of Law at Northwestern Pritzker School of Law

HOW RIGHTS4CHILDREN WORKS

Rights4Children’s multi-pronged strategy includes producing legal scholarship and introducing child-centered constitutional frameworks in classrooms, courts, and communities. We prioritize the experiences and perspectives of children, especially those who have been systemically marginalized.



In the Classroom

Rights4Children is designing and teaching courses on children’s rights; publishing a first-of-its-kind, child-centric children’s rights case book with West Academic Press (forthcoming 2027); and generating novel ideas and theories in legal scholarship about how to frame and advance enforceable rights for children. This full-spectrum learning ecosystem creates robust intellectual engagement with an expanded vision of children’s rights.



In the Community

Rights4Children is convening legal scholars, policy makers, and other experts to collaboratively explore novel approaches to envisioning, articulating, advancing, and enforcing children’s rights, participating in legislative advocacy efforts, and partnering with influential child-centered and youth-powered advocates and organizations.



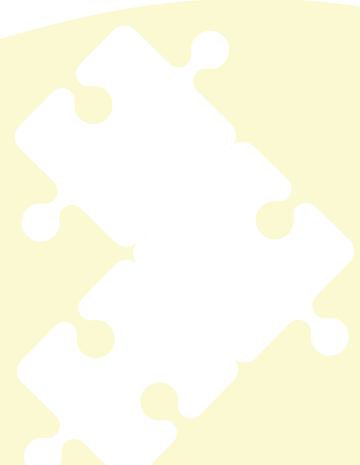
In the Courts

Rights4Children is writing amicus briefs and expert reports to provide lawyers and judges with child-rights centered analyses, insights, and arguments that focus on leveling the playing field for young people, especially children facing structural inequality in our society.



Result

A growing movement of legal scholars, judges, law students, and practicing lawyers dedicated to reimagining children’s constitutional rights to ensure children experience equal justice under the law



IN THE CLASSROOM

Education is essential to uplifting and empowering the voices that will lead the children's rights movement in the future. Rights4Children is preparing the next generation of lawyers in the classroom and producing legal scholarship to propel this child-centered movement forward.

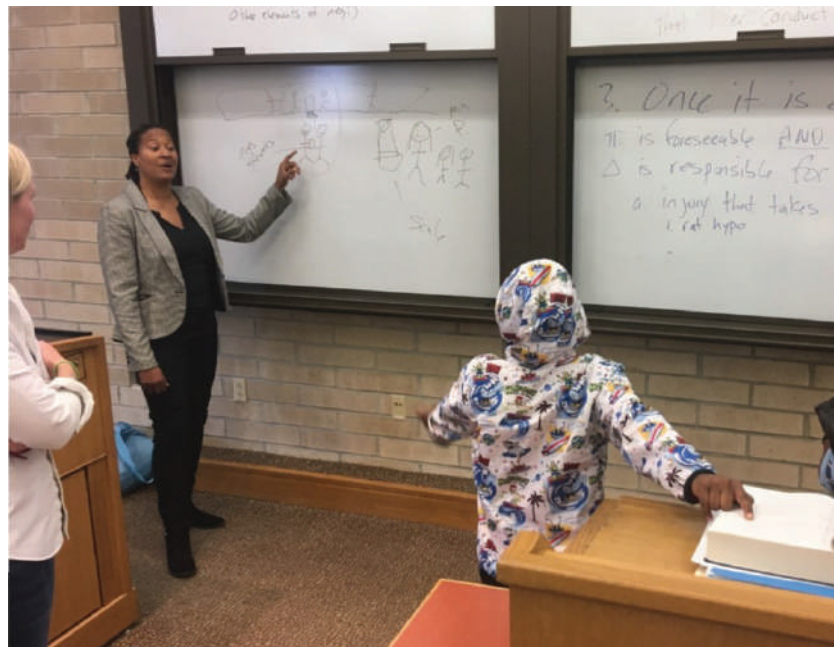
Rights4Children founders are working with students to learn constitutional law, family law, and other legal fields to construct new children's rights frameworks.

As the Associate Dean for Clinical Education and the Mayer Brown-Robert A. Helman Professor of Law, at Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, Professor Walker Sterling advances Rights4Children's educational vision through her teaching both in and outside of the classroom. Walker Sterling is a clinical legal professor. She has over a decade of experience teaching legal clinics that give law students real-life experience representing youth accused of crimes and helping their families navigate the juvenile justice system. For the past three years at Northwestern, Professor Walker Sterling has been teaching the Introduction to Juvenile Delinquency Defense, a simulation that focuses on the special lawyering skills required to represent youth.

As the Vincent L. Bradford Professor of Law, at Washington and Lee University School of Law, Catherine Smith teaches Children and the Law: Constitutional Dimensions, a course focused on examining children's status as right bearers. She also leads a seminar, Children and the Constitution, that supports students in producing publishable scholarship focused on children's rights.

As the Marjorie F. Knowles Chair in Law and Professor of Children's Constitutional Rights at Georgia State University College of Law, Tanya Washington teaches Family Law and Education Law. In these courses—focused on the two domains that most shape children's lived experiences, families and schools—she examines how laws and policies have marginalized children and their rights. As a seasoned educator, she invites her students to recognize children as constitutional actors and to design laws and policies that center and respect their enforceable rights.

Drawing on their collective teaching, research, and scholarship, Rights4Children's founders have developed a new teaching framework that trains law students to analyze law and policy through the children's rights lens they are developing and advancing. This framework includes publication of a first-of-its-kind case book **The Child and The Law: Policy, Practice, and Constitutional Foundations**.



In the proposal for the textbook, Professors Smith, Washington, and Walker Sterling shared, "In our collective experiences as law professors, students are highly energized about young people's futures, and they are hungry for creative, effective ways to represent children to bring about positive changes in their lived experiences."

IN THE COMMUNITY

We are curating a community of our nation’s sharpest legal minds to reimagine legal frameworks that support children’s rights in ways that improve their lives.

Convenings:

December 2024 Convening at Georgia State Law

Rights4Children’s first convening in December 2024 in Atlanta, GA brought together innovators and thought leaders to envision approaches to advance children’s rights in education. The occasion was the 70th anniversary of **Brown v. Board of Education**, a landmark children’s rights decision in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools is unconstitutional.

The convening kicked off with an evening panel and reception at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. Moderated by award-winning journalist Rose Scott, the panel featured Black Georgians who, as children, bravely integrated K-12 public schools across the state, confronting and navigating fierce resistance to desegregation efforts. The event was attended by more than 100 people and publicly launched **Rights4Children**.

The convening’s second and third days at the Georgia State University College of Law brought together 20 scholars, advocates, strategists, and educators to critique and deconstruct the education chapter of Project 2025. This was a starting point for a discussion about how access to a high-quality education can help children meet their full potential. The work was organic, creative, and collaborative; it culminated with action steps to drive progress forward.

March 2025 Symposium at Washington & Lee Law

The success of the education convening was followed by a second gathering in 2025 at Washington and Lee University School of Law that focused on children’s rights in the climate change crisis. The symposium, *Children and the Constitution in the Anthropocene Era*, offered a remarkable range and exchange of ideas. Presenters published articles and essays in the *Washington & Lee Law Review*.

April 2026 Convening at Northwestern Pritzker Law

We are looking forward to our upcoming convening focused on juvenile justice in spring 2026 at the



“Celebrating Brown as a seminal children’s rights case and the courageous children who enforced its mandate was the perfect way to launch our work.”

- Professor Tanya Washington

Northwestern Pritzker School of Law in Chicago. This convening will present TED-style talks by scholars examining children’s rights in pressing contemporary issues—including race discrimination, the school-to-prison pipeline, climate change, freedom of expression, and freedom of association—through a juvenile justice lens.

Partnerships & Testimony:

Rights4Children founders work with select nonprofit organizations and advocates to advance the cause of children’s rights. Our partners include:

- **Education Civil Rights Now (ECRN)** which focuses on children’s right to high quality public school education.
- **Students Engaged in Advancing Texas**, a movement of young people advocating for a voice in state-level policymaking.
- **Our Children’s Trust**, the leading law firm championing the youth-powered climate litigation movement.

In addition, Professor Washington provided oral and written testimony to the Washington, D.C. Board of Education in support of a resolution establishing an enforceable right to high-quality public schools for D.C. children. Professor Walker Sterling delivered written testimony in support of S.B. 952: An Act Concerning Parole Eligibility for an Individual Serving a Lengthy Sentence for a Crime Committed Before the Individual Reached the Age of Twenty-Five, before the Connecticut State Legislature in spring 2023.

IN THE COURTS

R4C engages with the courts through legal briefs and expert reports that advance child-centered legal arguments in state and federal cases.

What follows are representative briefs and reports from their work.

St. Mary Catholic Parish v. Lisa Roy (2024): Filed in the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals, this brief asserts that LGBTQ+ children and children of LGBTQ+ parents in Colorado would be harmed if state-funded religious schools were allowed to deny these children enrollment.

Rikki Held v. State of Montana (2024): Filed with the Supreme Court of Montana, the brief underscored children's rights to a clean and healthy environment under the Montana Constitution.

Navahine v. Hawai'i Department of Transportation (2024): In a case challenging Hawai'i's climate pollution, Professor Smith testified in an expert report that the trial court should recognize Hawaiian youth's rights to a healthy and sustainable climate under the Hawaiian Constitution.

Darren Patterson Christian Academy v. Lisa Roy (2025): Filed in the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals, this brief argues that LGBTQ+ children and children with LGBTQ+ parents in Colorado would be harmed if state-funded religious schools were allowed to discriminate against them in pre-school classrooms.

Mahmoud v. Taylor (2025): Filed in the U.S. Supreme Court, this brief highlights the harmful impact of removing children, based on religion, from classrooms teaching literature featuring LGBTQ+ characters.

The arguments in St. Mary Catholic Parish, Darren Patterson, and Mahmoud build on Rights4Children scholars' past amicus briefs filed with the Supreme Court in **U.S. v. Windsor (2013)** and **Obergefell v. Hodges (2015)**, which highlighted the negative impact of exclusionary marriage laws on children in same-sex headed households. The **Obergefell** brief was cited by Justice Anthony Kennedy in the majority opinion striking down same-sex marriage bans.



"Colorado has bucked federal anti-discrimination law's historically adult-focused lens to become a national leader in prioritizing and protecting young people...Colorado has compelling interests in ensuring children's unencumbered access to equal educational opportunities and in protecting them from discriminatory harms."

amicus brief filed in Darren Patterson Christian Academy v. Roy (2025)



BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

We are laying the foundation for a movement for children’s rights—and our transformative work is just getting started!

NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

We are excited that brilliant, junior scholars have become part of the Rights4Children community. Critical contributions to our forthcoming case book have come from [Jeremiah Chin, Assistant Professor of Law at the University of Washington](#), and [Sara Hildebrand, Assistant Professor of Law at the Delaware Law School at Widener University](#).

Professors Chin and Hildebrand are collaborating on textbook chapters focused on how children’s rights intersect with their health, happiness, and mental and physical well-being. In addition to their work on the case book, they have made important contributions to several Rights4Children amicus briefs. Professors Chin and Hildebrand bring unique perspectives, deep legal expertise, and a genuine commitment to children’s rights and Rights4Children’s projects.

Additionally, Rights4Children worked with [Sarah Camiscoli, Assistant Professor of Law at Rutgers Law School](#), who is committed to elevating and mobilizing youth in society. Camiscoli attended the Atlanta convening, introduced us to Students Engaged in Advancing Texas, and she and the organization joined us in filing the amicus brief in [Mahmoud v. Taylor](#).

“Now is the time for thinking about rights for children and centering their voices so they can best speak, think, and act for themselves.” – Professor Jeremiah Chin



Jeremiah Chin



Sara Hildebrand



Sarah Camiscoli

Awardees

Rights4Children is honored to provide scholarship awards to emerging scholars whose scholarship and research advances children's constitutional rights. Past awardees include:

- **Eduardo Ferrer – Associate Professor of Law, Georgetown University; Policy Director of the Georgetown Juvenile Justice Initiative.**
 - **Current work:** [De/Reconstructing Delinquency](#), 113 Geo L J 1339 (2025).
- **Christopher Mathis – Assistant Professor of Law, University of Maryland.**
 - **Current work:** [School Shouting Louder Than School Bells: An Analysis Exposing Anti-Youth Rationales in Federal Courts](#), 90 Mo. L. Rev. — (2026)(with Eduardo D. Scott)(forthcoming)
- **Madalyn Wasilczuk – Associate Professor of Law, University of South Carolina**
 - **Current work:** [Toward Specialized Requirements for Defense Lawyers in Youth Transfer Cases](#) (in progress)

We recently announced research awards for nine additional scholars. Below are their names, affiliations, and the working titles:

- **Debra Chopp, Clinical Professor of Law, University of Michigan School of Law**
 - [Looking to the States for Leadership: How Michigan Seeks to Improve Educational and Health Outcomes for Children.](#)
- **Julia Hernández, Associate Professor of Law, CUNY School of Law**
 - [Family Policing in the Schoolhouse](#)
- **Jyoti Nanda, Professor of Law, Southwestern Law School**
 - [Incarcerated Pregnant Girls](#)
- **Lia Epperson, Professor of Law, American University Washington College of Law**
 - [Emergent Technology's Encroachment on Student Constitutional Rights and Autonomy](#)
- **Naoka Carey, Acting Assistant Professor of Law, New York University School of Law**
 - [Kinship Care for Whom](#)
- **Nila Bala, Acting Professor of Law, UC Davis School of Law**
 - [Child Time](#)
- **Mary Anne Case, Professor of Law, University of Chicago Law School**
 - [Contesting the New Constitutionalized Parental Rights Claims and Their Effect on Children](#)
- **Jade Craig, Assistant Professor of Law, University of Mississippi School of Law**
 - [Public Resources, Private Schools: The Relationship Between Public School Districts and Segregated Academies in the Civil Rights Era](#)
- **Ryan Thoreson, Associate Professor of Law, University of Cincinnati College of Law**
 - [The Constitutional Rights of the Queer Child](#)

PUBLICATIONS

Creating new ideas to advance children’s rights is at the core of Rights4Children’s work. The past three years have been a time of tremendous creativity and productivity for Rights4Children. However, the founders have been committed to this work for most of their careers as reflected by their full publication list. These full publications can be accessed at www.rights4children.org.

1. Catherine E. Smith, Tanya Washington, Robin Walker Sterling, Jeremiah Chin & Sara Hildebrand, [The Child and the Law: Policy, Practice, and Constitutional Foundations](#) (forthcoming 2027).
2. Tanya Washington, [Real, Not Rhetorical: Children’s Rights as the Strongest Constitutional Defense of Obergefell Against Religious-Liberty Challenges](#), 77 Mercer L. Rev. (forthcoming 2026).
3. Catherine E. Smith, [Navahine v. Hawai’i Dept. of Transportation: The Keiki Will Lead Us](#), 48 Seattle U. L. Rev. 1301 (2025).
4. Tanya Washington, Catherine Smith & Robin Walker Sterling, [Religious Exemptions to Anti-Discrimination Law: Children’s Rights in the Constitutional Calculus](#), 26 Geo. J. Gender & L. 1293 (2025).
5. Catherine E. Smith, [Foreword: Children and Constitutions in the Anthropocene Era](#), 82 Wash. & Lee L. Rev. 961 (2025).
6. Catherine E. Smith, [The Adult Rights-Bearing Archetype and How it Stifles Young People’s Equal Protection](#), 19 Duke J. Const. L. & Pub. Pol’y 1 (2024).
7. Catherine Smith, Tanya Washington & Robin W. Sterling, [The Absence of a Unified Theory in Children’s Fourteenth Amendment Jurisprudence](#), in [International Survey of Family Law](#) (Robin Fretwell Wilson & June Carbone eds., 2024).
8. Catherine E. Smith, [“Children’s Equality Law” in the Age of Parents’ Rights](#), 71 U. Kan. L. Rev. 539 (2023).
9. Catherine E. Smith, [Brown’s Children’s Rights Jurisprudence and How It Was Lost](#), 102 B.U. L. Rev. 2297 (2022).
10. Tanya Washington Hicks, [Fulton’s Flaw: In the Constitutional Clash Between Religious Liberty and LGBTQ+ Rights, Foster Kids are Neither Seen nor Heard](#), 60 Fam. Ct. Rev. 40 (2022).
11. Tanya Washington & Catherine Smith, [In Fulton, Children’s Rights Fall in Supreme Court’s Blindspot](#), Berkley Ctr. for Religion, Peace & World Affs. (August 2021).
12. Catherine E. Smith, [Concurring Opinion, in What Obergefell v. Hodges Should Have Said: The Nation’s Top Legal Experts Rewrite America’s Same-Sex Marriage Decision](#) (Jack Balkin ed. Yale Univ. Press 2020).
13. Catherine E. Smith, [State Action That Penalizes Children as Evidence of a Desire to Harm Politically Unpopular Parents](#), 51 Suffolk U. L. Rev. 439 (2018).
14. Catherine E Smith, [Obergefell’s Missed Opportunity](#), 79 L. & Contemp. Probs. 223 (2016).

15. Tanya Washington, Susannah Pollvogt, Catherine Smith & Lauren Fontana, *Children's Rights in the Midst of Marriage Equality: Amicus Brief in Obergefell v. Hodges by Scholars of the Constitutional Rights of Children*, 14 *Whittier J. Child & Fam. Advoc.* 1 (2015).
16. Tanya Washington, *In Windsor's Wake: Section 2 of DOMA's Defense of Marriage at the Expense of Children*, 48 *Ind. L. Rev.* 1 (2014).
17. Catherine E. Smith & Susannah W. Pollvogt, *Children as Proto-Citizens: Equal Protection, Citizenship, and Lessons from the Child-Centered Cases*, 48 *U.C. Davis L. Rev.* 655 (2014).
18. Robin Walker Sterling, *A Broken Shield: A Plea for Formality in the Juvenile System*, 13 *U. Md. J. Race, Religion, Gender & Class*, 237 (2013).
19. Robin Walker Sterling, *Fundamental Unfairness: In re Gault and the Road Not Taken* 72 *Md. L. Rev.* 607 (2013).
20. Robin Walker Sterling, *Juvenile Sex Offender Registration: An Impermissible Life Sentence*, 82 *U. Chi. L. Rev.* 295 (2015).
21. Tanya M. Washington, *Once Born, Twice Orphaned: Children's Constitutional Case Against Same-Sex Adoption Bans*, 15 *J.L. & Fam. Stud.* 19 (2013).
22. Tanya M. Washington, *Once Born, Twice Orphaned: Children's Constitutional Case Against Same-Sex Adoption Bans*, 2013 *Utah L. Rev.* 19 (2013).
23. Catherine E. Smith, *Equal Protection for Children of Same-Sex Parents*, 90 *Wash. U. L. Rev.* 1589 (2013).
24. Robin Walker Sterling, *Children Are Different: Implicit Bias, Rehabilitation, and the New Juvenile Jurisprudence*, 46 *Loy. L.A. L. Rev.* 1019 (2013).
25. Tanya Washington, *What about the Children?: Child-Centered Challenges to Same-Sex Marriage Bans*, 12 *Whittier J. Child & Fam. Advoc.* 1 (2012).
26. Tanya Washington, *Suffer Not the Little Children: Prioritizing Children's Rights in Constitutional Challenges to Same-Sex Adoption Bans*, 39 *Cap. U. L. Rev.* 231 (2011).
27. Catherine E. Smith, *Equal Protection for Children of Gay and Lesbian Parents: Challenging the Three Pillars of Exclusion—Legitimacy, Dual-Gender Parenting, and Biology*, 28 *L. & Ineq.* 307 (2010).
28. Tanya Washington, *Throwing Black Babies Out With the Bathwater: A Child-Centered Challenge to Same-Sex Adoption Bans*, 6 *Hastings Race & Poverty L.J.* 1 (2008).
29. Tanya Washington, *Loving Grutter: Recognizing Race in Transracial Adoptions*, 16 *Geo. Mason U. C.R. L.J.* 1 (2005).

Below is a full listing of amicus briefs authored by the Rights4Children founders and partners. These briefs enable the organization to engage with—and influence—current cases that shape children’s rights.

1. Brief of Amici Curiae Children’s Rights Scholars and Advocates in Support of Appellants’ Opening Brief, [Lighthiser v. Trump](#), No. 25-6714 (9th Cir. filed Oct. 23, 2025).
2. Brief of Amici Curiae Scholars for the Advancement of Children’s Constitutional Rights in Support of Defendants-Appellants, [Roy v. Darren Patterson Christian Acad.](#), No. 25-1187 (10th Cir. filed May 08, 2025).
3. Brief of Amici Curiae Scholars for the Advancement of Children’s Constitutional Rights and Students Engaged in Advancing Texas in Support of Respondents, [Mahmoud v. Taylor](#), 606 U.S. 522 (2025) (No.24-297).
4. Brief of Amici Curiae Scholars for the Advancement of Children’s Constitutional Rights in Support of Defendants-Appellees, [St. Mary Cath. Par. v. Roy](#), 154 F.4th 752 (10th Cir. 2025) (No. 24-1267), reprinted in 26 *Geo. J. Gender & L.* 1297 (2025).
5. Brief of Children’s Rights Advocates in Support of Appellees, [Held v. Montana](#), 419 Mont. 403 (2024) (DA 23-0575).
6. Brief of Children’s Rights Legal Scholars and Advocates as Amici Curiae in Support of Neither Party, [Trump v. Anderson](#), 601 U.S. 100 (2024) (No. 23-719).
7. Brief of Amici Curiae Scholars of the Constitutional Rights and Interests of Children in Support of , Respondents, [Fulton v. City of Philadelphia](#), 593 U.S. 522 (2021) (No. 19-123).
8. Brief of Amici Curiae Scholars of the Constitutional Rights and Interests of Children in Support of Respondents, filed in [Masterpiece Cakeshop, LTD v. Colorado C.R. Comm’n](#), 584 U.S. 617 (2017) (No. 16-111).
9. Brief of Amici Curiae Scholars of the Constitutional Rights of Children in Support of Petitioners, [Obergefell v. Hodges](#), 576 U.S. 644 (2015) (Nos. 14-556, 14-562, 14-571, 14-574), cited in 576 U.S. at 668, reprinted in 14 *Whittier J. Child & Fam. Advoc.* 1 (2015).
10. Brief of Scholars of the Constitutional Rights of Children [Susannah W. Pollvogt](#), [Catherine E. Smith](#), and [Tanya Washington](#) as Amici Curiae in Support of Plaintiffs-Appellants and Reversal, [Robicheaux v. Caldwell](#), 791 F.3d 616 (5th Cir. 2015) (No. 14-31037).
11. Amicus Brief of Scholars of the Constitutional Rights of Children in Support of Respondent [Edith Windsor](#) Addressing the Merits and Supporting Affirmance, [United States v. Windsor](#), 570 U.S. 744 (2013) (No. 12-307), reprinted in 17 *J. Gender, Race & Just.* 467 (2014).



www.rights4children.org

We work to expand how the Constitution is interpreted and applied, bringing children's constitutional rights from the margins to the center of justice.

With gratitude to Chi Mathias,
R4C Chief-of-Staff

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