

Solutions Storytelling:
Messaging to Mobilize Support for Children's Issues
Suggested Strategies and Messages
Child Advocacy 360
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Overview

This memo addresses strategies and messages that should be used (and avoided) when advocating for children. It is based on a comprehensive research project conducted for Child Advocacy 360 Foundation in late 2009 and early 2010, in the depths of the "Great Recession." Child advocacy groups across the country face immense challenges to mobilize support to preserve funding for basic services and structures designed to improve the lives of disadvantaged children and youth as state budget deficits and competition for resources mount.

The recommendations are based on a significant body of original research, including six focus groups and TalkBack testing among 240 engaged citizens, plus a national online survey to measure the effects of various messages on people's support for various policies and interventions to help children. The survey was comprised of a representative 2,006 American voters.

This memo should be read in combination with the full report summarizing the research which provides statistical support for these recommendations, which is available at Childadvocacy360.org. ("Solutions Storytelling: Messaging to Mobilize Support for Children's Issues" by the Topos Partnership, April 2010)

In addition to language and message recommendations, we present a checklist for creating a narrative or stories that will increase support for your programs and therefore, are likely to increase people's disposition to act.

We believe the research strongly supports our view that effective communications can be a powerful catalyst to:

- Increase public support for policies and programs that improve the lives of children.
- Help people see collective, public responsibility for kids.
- Create a lasting constituency for kids.

At the same time, we realize that communications is just one tool in advocates' toolkit, and outreach tactics are just as important in mobilizing the public. This research finds that solutions-oriented stories change minds and build vocal support: more support for children's policies, more support for government action and investment, and higher public priority for policies for at-risk kids. But no story is a silver bullet. For example, neither the solution nor the problem-oriented stories significantly boost survey respondents' reported willingness to take various actions. The communications strategies that follow will put people in the right frame of mind, but advocates also need to employ smart outreach strategies to move people from vocal support to physical act.

Two Overarching Recommendations

- Tell **solutions stories** that are crafted to make a strong connection to the role of the community, while keeping people focused on the big picture, emphasizing the necessity of programs, how they work, their effectiveness and how citizens can become engaged in change (see below for more specific advice). The poll documents positive movement in support when people hear such stories against people hearing a problem story or no story at all. When we expose people to solutions stories they put more priority on disadvantaged and at-risk kids, which is critical.
- If there is a "master frame" it is the idea of **community**. Keep community in the forefront as both a beneficiary of and a responsible actor in addressing the needs of children. The idea of collective action is highly appealing and taps a core value of shared responsibility.

Ideas to Advance and Avoid

| Advance | Avoid |
|--|--|
| We have solutions | We have problems |
| Getting kids off to the right start | Fixing the problem |
| We all benefit | Kids are struggling |
| The community has a role | Parents are responsible |
| The power of people working together | The power of government |
| We all rely on public structures | Children need a safety net |
| There are lots of effective solutions | Here's one case study |
| There are lots of solutions | There are lots of programs |
| How a solution works | Just the emotional appeal of a solution |
| Hard evidence if available, anecdotal if not | Stories that don't demonstrate effectiveness |

- Don't assault people with a litany of problems or talk of a crisis. You can mention a problem within the context of a solution. For example, "Our community can improve children's health by increasing public structures like the food stamps program."
- When you need to talk about problems, focus on causes, particularly weak public structures and systems. Instead of focusing on increasing awareness of the problem to inspire individual behavior change, your case will be better served by focusing on public structures that can be fixed. For example, "Because our community lacks an adequate structure to detect and rid buildings of lead that can poison children, too many develop learning problems that hold them back" is an approach that builds individual awareness AND collective responsibility. But a message such as "parents need to test their homes for lead paint" places responsibility solely on parents and makes the role of community invisible.
- Avoid focusing solely on "government's" role. Instead, talk about the high quality services and the public structures needed to help children and families. The research shows that Americans are more willing to pay higher taxes for higher quality services.
- Avoid communications "traps" that drive down support. Don't cue up the ideas of "bad parents," partisan politics and other seemingly intractable problems, such as poverty as a root cause of all that ails children.
- Keep the focus on systems not individuals. Dramatic stories about *individual* children or charismatic leaders tends to distract people from learning about systems and public structures.
- Make sure you talk about "effective solutions" and provide some proof that they work. This proof does not need to be heavy on statistics. Merely asserting that a program or approach has been proven effective is good enough for most people.

Language and messages

As stated above, advocates should use the "master frame" of community when building a narrative about their work and calling for action on behalf of children. Emphasize the common good (rather than sympathy for children) and the power of people working together for change to successfully engage the public in supporting children's issues. Some widely shared perceptions demonstrate that community is compelling:

- "People working together as a group" can make "a great deal or lot of difference in solving the problems they see." (79%)

- "Being a good citizen means having some special obligations." (69%)
- "The best way to solve the problems we face is by emphasizing shared interests and supporting the common good." (64%)
- "The principle of a strong community is most important. America is most successful when we pursue policies that expand opportunity and create a rising prosperity for all, not just a few." (60%)
- Tell people to vote (89% say they will do this in the next year to benefit children's issues), keep informed (54%), donate (48%) and volunteer (45%).

The most "extremely or very convincing" messages to use when trying to reinforce the connection to community include the following:

- A small investment in getting disadvantaged, at-risk kids off to the right start makes a lot more sense than paying to fix problems later. (64% extremely or very convincing)
- When enough people stand together to demand change, things happen. (64%)
- When we invest in getting disadvantaged, at-risk kids off to the right start, we invest in our community and our future. (59%)
- A variety of effective policies and programs that help kids, from after-school programs to health care and Head Start, lead to significant improvements in kids' performance in school and in life. (59%)
- Communities that support the public structures that help kids, from after-school programs to health care and Head Start, see significant improvements in kids' performance in school and in life. (57%)
- Each of us has been helped by a neighbor, coach, pastor or other selfless person, so each of us has a responsibility to give back. (55%)
- There are many important things we can do as a community or state to help make sure kids grow up to be good citizens. We need to make this a priority. (55%)
- There are lots of effective programs that help kids. For example, one school system has trained "art therapists" who work with troubled kids a couple of times

a week. After going through the program, the kids have better grades and fewer behavior incidents. We need to support these kinds of programs. (54%)

- Declining state budgets threaten to undermine important successes for kids. We can't be short sighted and weaken what will help kids become productive, contributing members of the community in the future. (53%)

You can increase support for a number of important policies if you preface them as "public efforts for children," including the following policies that are widely supported:

- Increasing high school graduation rates.
- Providing health insurance for all children.
- Making quality early education available for all children.

Stress the need for the "public structures" on which children rely, and the need to maintain the quality of those structures and services. Examples of public structures might include programs like food stamps, community health centers and child protective services.

When you talk about government – supported programs, always talk about those that "are effective." Our research demonstrates that people want to know that programs work but they don't require a litany of statistics to make the case. A few examples will suffice.

Story Checklist from The Topos Report

We strongly recommend that communicators incorporate the following five concepts to tell the most convincing stories:

1 -- Connection to Community

- the whole community benefits from kids who grow up to be contributing members:

A small investment in getting disadvantaged, at-risk kids off to the right start makes a lot more sense than paying to fix problems later.

We've proven we can make a difference. Our kids are better off and that means our community has a brighter future.

Getting kids off to the right start is an investment in our community and our future.

- the community can have important beneficial influences on children and families:

A variety of effective policies and programs that help kids, from after-school programs to health care and Head Start, lead to significant improvements in kids' performance in school and in life.

There are many important things we can do as a community or state to help make sure kids grow up to be good citizens.

2-- Big Picture Thinking

- Listing a number of solutions:

The bottom line is that if we want to ensure that all kids have the best chance in life, we have many ways of doing it, such as...

- Public Structures:

Communities that support the public structures that help kids, from after-school programs to health care and Head Start, see significant improvements in kids' performance in school and in life.

Problematically, declining state budgets threaten to put these successful projects at risk. We can't be short sighted and weaken the public systems and services that help kids become productive, contributing members of the community in the future.

3 -- Necessary, not just nice (explain how it works)

In a community where abused children live with their new, adoptive families and volunteer seniors acting as grandparents, all the generations end up forming bonds that are critical to healthy development.

4 -- Inspiring action

When enough people stand together to demand change, things happen.

Each of us has been helped by a neighbor, coach, pastor or other selfless person, so each of us has a responsibility to give back.

I volunteer because I see how our efforts help kids' minds light up.

5 -- "Proving" Effectiveness

Communities throughout the city are seeing the rewards, and now Nashville, Tenn. and other cities are starting to implement the same model.

The results we're seeing in response to all the hard work by people across this community proves it.

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