

How Should We Communicate about Children's Issues?

Words, Images, Frames

A Report from the *Effective Language for Communicating Children's Issues* Forum, August 6, 1999



MAJOR FORUM THEMES

- Children today are more likely to be poor than in preceding generations, but the issues they face are not widely understood by the general public.
- Policymakers and advocates need to move from one-way communications to the public to a genuine dialogue with the public on the issues -- a two-way conversation that builds mutual understanding.
- How the news and entertainment media frame stories about children—the information they include, and how they convey cause and effect—is central to how the public understands the issues.
- Images of children and children's issues in the media tend to show issues as disconnected and beyond the reach of policy solutions.
- Policymakers, citizens and advocates can shape a more effective message by:
 - building on commonly held values about individual and communal responsibility
 - providing a broader and deeper context for media stories about children; showing how the issues are linked
 - offering positive images of children and families
 - offering solutions that are civic and institutional rather than personal and private.

About the Forum

The *Effective Language for Communicating Children's Issues* Forum was convened on August 6, 1999 by the Human Services Policy Center at the Evans School of Public Affairs, University of Washington. About 100 child advocates from Washington and Oregon attended, including representatives of the Washington Association for the Education of Young Children, the Washington State Legislature, Community Networks, the Governor's Commission on Early Learning, the Family Policy Council, City of Seattle Human Services, City of Everett Human Resources, and many other state and local agencies.

Forum presenters are listed on the following page.

FORUM PRESENTERS

Susan Nall Bales, President, Frameworks Institute, Washington, DC: ***Framing the Future: Application of Communications Research to Children's Advocacy***

Dr. Katharine E. Heintz-Knowles, Children's Media Research and Consulting, Seattle, WA: ***Balancing Acts: Work/Family Issues on Prime-Time TV***

Dr. Richard N. Brandon, Human Services Policy Center: ***Communication about Early Care and Education Policy: Opportunities, Cautions & Conundrums***

Dr. Lawrence Aber, Director, National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University: ***Strategic Communications in Child Poverty: Two State Pilot Campaigns, Connecticut & California***

Summary Remarks

Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan, Director, The Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy, Yale University, President, NAEYC

Dr. Heather Weiss, Director, Harvard Family Research Center

A good communications strategy on behalf of children can change public attitudes and, ultimately, public policies. Too often, though, policymakers and program planners try to communicate their policies and concerns for children without knowing enough about what the public already thinks, and what it cares about most. The *Effective Language* conference brought together presenters who shared models of how communication works and what they had learned about public attitudes and beliefs from a variety of communications research techniques. For those who attended, the conference was an opportunity to gather new information and fresh perspectives on how to engage a productive two-way communication process with the public. In this report we draw together and integrate the many common threads that ran through the speakers' presentations and comments to highlight the themes, key learnings, and continuing questions that emerged from the conference as a whole, in the hope that the information will be useful to a wider audience. *

The Communication Challenge

Too many children today face a range of serious and interrelated issues: poverty, inadequate child care, unsafe homes, inadequate health care, and

others. Despite decades of hard work and commitment by a broad array of deeply concerned individuals and institutions, the National Center on Children in Poverty notes that today's young children are still significantly more likely to be poor than preceding generations. Twenty-three million American children under the age of six (22 percent) live in poverty. Ten million children live in low-income families. The costs of child poverty are staggering, both in the short-term and long-term. But there are significant discrepancies between what the public sees as appropriate solutions to problems and what the research and data show as the

* Because this report blends and merges many of the presentations, it has not been possible to identify the speakers individually in every case.

appropriate solutions. The images and metaphors of “family” presented in the media are often inaccurate or are presented in a way that minimizes the relevance of a broad-based institutional response.

Children’s advocates tend to rely on public opinion leaders to set the agenda for addressing these issues, but this may not be an adequate strategy. Legislators want to hear what services constituents want, but often don’t think citizens can understand or frame public policy. When policymakers and advocates design policies for human services they bring together people with a wide range of expertise, look at hard data and human realities, and merge the perspectives of analysts, advocates, program managers and clients. When it comes to public communication, though, they may try to figure out what they want the public to know and how to tell it to them without inviting public input—a one-sided conversation. And without the active support of a well-informed general public there is a “glass ceiling” on how far leaders are willing to go.

To remedy the situation, policymakers and advocates need to ask the public what they think about children and family issues, what influences their beliefs, how they respond to messages that try to change those beliefs, and which solutions they will support. Effective communication strategies bring together all these perspectives.

How the Media Talk about Children: Framing the Issues

In her presentation on media framing and communications research, Susan Nall Bales began by explaining the notion of conceptual frames. One of the most basic tenets of cognitive linguistics, she noted, is that people understand almost everything by applying conceptual frames. For cognitive linguists, framing means the way a social problem is connected to a cognitive-cultural model, usually by metaphor, that allows the public to reason about unknown issues by reference to a human value. The conclusion one draws depends on the frame one uses.

Children In the News. The news media in particular play an important role in mediating the public’s understanding of children’s issues. As we become an increasingly segregated society, fewer people have contact with young children on a regular basis. Most people rely on the media as the interpreter of social realities related to children. The media supply the picture in our head that tells us what to think and sets the public agenda in relation to children’s issues. Less contact with children means there are fewer people to rebut negative perceptions about who children are. The media also frame the public’s perception of the ability of government and citizens to meet the needs of children.

*We want to be hardheaded
without being hard-hearted.
We want to convey our
passion for helping children
and families, but we want
to convey it in a way that
not only expresses our
passions, but also arouses
similar passions in our
public audience.*

—Dr. Richard Brandon

“Framing” is the way a news segment is composed; it allows people to take away an idea or image based on how the elements of a news story are organized. Who you interview, what pictures you show, and what you leave out of the story can determine, for instance, whether the answer to child poverty lies with irresponsible parents or irresponsible officials.

The American media tend to reinforce individualism and undermine the legitimacy of public policy remedies. They do so in the way they compose the narrative, the way they present social problems as a series of disconnected events that befall a victim, and the way they portray government as ineffective, inefficient, or irrelevant to social issues. Americans are treated to a daily dose of poverty, crime victims, and disasters, with no explanation of the social conditions and environmental factors that influence that outcome. As a result, social problems become intractable, and not amenable to change through public policy.

The way the problem is defined determines whether and how we will fix it.

—Susan Nall Bales

At the same time, public opinion data show us that people are attracted to stories that discuss children’s issues, especially stories that are positive and solution oriented. The way the problem is defined determines whether and how we will fix it.

Children in Entertainment. The popular entertainment media are also important in influencing the pictures in our heads and the way we frame how we think about the world, according to Dr. Katharine Heintz-Knowles. Although most people do not consciously turn on entertainment TV for educational purposes, there’s plenty of evidence to suggest that people do learn from entertainment TV and

are more receptive to the entertainment format because they don’t feel that they are being preached to.

Children’s representation on entertainment TV poses its own reframing challenges. Children’s programming often portrays children as having no family connections. They exist in a world without parents and adults. When adults are featured in children’s programs and advertising, they are devalued and humiliated. In adult programming, children, especially young children, are practically nonexistent. The lives of the children are only seen as important in that they exist to be a problem for their parents to work around. Young children are shown as very precocious, mature and adult-like. The separation of children’s lives from adults lives on entertainment TV precludes any serious discussion on making life different for children.

In a study of how TV adults balance commitments to work and family, two weeks of prime time TV were analyzed. TV did a great job of portraying the working life of adults, and a pretty good job of portraying the family lives of adults. What is not seen is how people deal with their family lives and work lives when they conflict. This intersection is where a majority of adults say they have the greatest challenges.

In the two-week survey, there was not a single example of a child who had child care in a day care setting. On TV, usually a family member or nanny takes care of the children. If a child care problem



arises, usually a friend or family member is easily available to care for the child. While two-thirds of women are in the paid work force, on TV only one-third of mothers work for pay. Solutions are always framed as personal ones, with no mention of government or business responsibility.

How People Respond to the Issues: The Research

People do not absorb images and information from the media onto a blank slate; they tend to evaluate what they see and hear according to their own pre-existing values and beliefs. Presenters stressed several research findings that are essential to keep in mind when thinking about how to best frame the issues.

People are affected by pre-existing beliefs and attitudes. There are three basic dispositions that effect people's decision making about public policy:

- Moral imperative: the belief that helping others is a moral obligation
- Reciprocal benefit: the belief that one's efforts to help others should not be taken for granted
- Personal distancing: the tendency to rationalize or distance oneself from problems.

Research has also identified four "profiles of belief":

- Natural givers
- Bystanders
- Apathetics
- Work ethic subscribers

As these categories suggest, programs and policies related to children's issues are often judged through the lens of whether or not they promote the values of work and individual responsibility.

At the same time, paradoxically, the public believes that one person cannot make a difference. Americans do care about the fate of children, but they have no idea what they can do to help, and they are reluctant to become a part of something beyond their existing affiliations, which most often are limited to places of faith, social clubs and businesses.

Although most people do not consciously turn on entertainment TV for educational purposes, there's plenty of evidence to suggest that people do learn from entertainment TV and are more receptive to the entertainment format because they don't feel that they are being preached to.

—Dr. Katharine Heintz-Knowles

People do not always recognize how the issues are linked. As mentioned earlier, focus groups and research have discovered disconnections between what the public perception and reality of the most important issues facing children.

- In spite of the overriding importance of child poverty, the public ranks it low on the list of issues facing children, while child abuse and neglect, and family breakdown rank as the most important issues.

There is also a disconnection between what public opinion leaders and the general public perceive as the most important issues facing children and families:

- Public opinion leaders are concerned about lack of day care, while again the public ranks child abuse and neglect as the most important issues facing children.
- The public considers the “disappearance” of women from communities as a major factor in crime and other social problems. Solutions to quality child care that would allow women to work are seen as exacerbating the problem of family and community erosion, rather than helping families and communities.

People look for meaning. The latest focus group research indicates that:

- People are not as interested in highly charged sensationalized stories as the media would have us believe, and that they see through the images they are being fed. It is less understood how their reasoning about children’s issues is affected by those images.
- People are not attracted to numbers. They often do not know what the numbers mean. What they want is to understand the problem behind the numbers. Is it a big problem? Are there people already working to solve the problem, and what are they doing? A narrative attached

Let’s Invest in Families Today (LIFT): Re-framing Child Poverty in Connecticut and California

Presented by Dr. Lawrence Aber

In response to research that revealed significant disparities in the way leaders and the public perceive the realities of persistent and growing child poverty, The National Center for Children in Poverty has developed a campaign with the slogan “LIFT” - Let’s Invest in Families Today. The two-state pilot campaign brings together groups that don’t usually work together—policy researchers and analysts of the National Center for Children in Poverty, grassroots and community groups, and the media experts of a Madison Avenue advertising firm—in an effort to identify and address informational obstacles to improvement in child poverty policy. The campaign uses attitudinal demographics and targets both opinion leaders and the general public. Because individuals’ personal values strongly influence their perception of public issues, LIFT reframes child poverty issues in language that focuses on the most widely accepted values: strengthening families, increasing family incomes, and expanding opportunities.

UCLA Study Looks at How Shoppers Respond to Children's Issues

Presented by Dr. Richard Brandon

In a study by Dr. Frank Gilliam, Jr., of UCLA, people in a shopping mall were randomly divided into three groups and each invited to watch a different version of an 11-minute video newscast that included *one* of the following child-related stories:

- A story about high-quality child care provided by an employer, emphasizing employers' responsibility for assisting with child care.
- A story about a parent who is a middle-school teacher, emphasizing the importance of early childhood development for school-age children's performance.
- A story about a government inspector with a checklist, emphasizing the simple matter of finding safe places for children to stay.

The fourth group, the control group, watched a newscast with no child care story.

Participants were given a pre-video questionnaire on their background, political views, and media habits, and a post-video questionnaire that asked them to rank the importance of the needs of children, early childhood education, crime and violence, drugs and alcohol abuse, and the environment, along with other questions.

The researchers expected that exposure to any of the childcare stories should heighten the saliency of the two items related to children's issues. They also expected that exposure to the early childhood development frame would affect attitudes about early childhood education. The results of the study were mixed, though they suggest that how the child care issue is framed does have a significant impact on viewers' policy preferences. It was found that:

- The employer responsibility frame had the greatest impact on viewer preferences. This story somehow both elevated the general concern with the needs of children and reduced the concern about crime and violence more than any other frame.
- Those who watched any of the early childhood news frames ranked crime and violence significantly lower as an issue, compared to the control group, who ranked it higher than other issues. However, those who saw the childhood frames did not indicate increased concern about early education or development. The focus on young children and employers **thus** provided positive

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feelings about children and avoided the negative connotations of government programs.

- The government regulations news frame moved responses in the same direction as the employer responsibility story. Despite a general disdain for governmental regulations, when it comes to protecting children, the public seems positively inclined. Despite bad news, there is support for increased governmental regulation.
- None of the three stories succeeded in raising the perceived importance of “early childhood education” as an issue. This may point out the difficulty of adopting the “early education” frame when the public has been sold on the “child care” frame, without a specific bridge between the two.

Dr. Brandon noted that these findings suggest that the public is sympathetic to positive images of young children. To build on that, we need to craft messages that accept the public’s tendency toward individual family responsibility but move them to support public and community responsibility.

to the numbers is important in helping the public understand the meaning behind the numbers.

Getting a More Effective Message Across

In light of what we know about how framing works, and what the research tells us about public attitudes, presenters suggested the following strategies to make communication more effective.

- **Recognize values in a discussion.** Try to come up with ways that you can bridge to values that people already support.
- **Build in context.** Get newspeople to ask the questions you want. Begin to build in understanding that social problems are not randomized and are related to things in the environment that can be fixed.
- **Fight the individualism frame.** Find ways to craft messages that accept the public’s tendency toward individual family responsibility but move them to support public and community responsibility. Don’t provide tips to parents on finding the best day care center

unless you want child care framed as a parental responsibility issue. Do provide tips to citizens that tell them how to work through their places of faith to support good programs and policies.

- **Link all numbers to a meaning.** When you give out a number, don't give it out without telling exactly what it means. Narratives are more powerful than numbers.
- **Couple the problem with a solution.** Don't put the problem out there without talking about some people who are having an impact on changing this dynamic. Give examples of how children's problems can be and are being reversed. If you can't get that in the news part of the paper, walk it to the editorial board, or opinion page.
- **Build on positive images of young children,** and shift away from negative images of crime and violence.
- **Offer yourself as a resource** to entertainment TV executives, producers and writers. Although it is a challenge to influence how the entertainment media represents certain issues and groups, some groups have been able to influence their representation in entertainment TV; the National Gay Alliance was able to get more positive images of gay people in the media by offering themselves as resources and helping develop positive story lines with gay characters. Kaiser Foundation is working with ER to promote sexual responsibility in storylines. Make writers and producers aware that other people live other kinds of lives, which should be represented on TV.
- **Join a watchdog organization** to monitor what message is being perpetuated.
- **Control your soundbite.** It may be the only part of the story that you own. The media needs your soundbite for their story, and it is your job to come up with the best possible frame.
- **Remember that no one strategy will work at all times.** A good communications strategy balances news media, entertainment media, the Internet, and public service announcements.

What are the positive images and metaphors of "family" in the 21st century? We are stuck back with Mom, Dad, Dick, Jane and Spot.

—Dr. Heather Weiss

The Bigger Picture: Toward a New Way to Talk

In their summary remarks, Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan and Dr. Heather Weiss spoke of the need to think and talk in a new way about children's issues. They stressed the need to involve citizens, business and civic leaders, and the body politic in general in moving toward solutions that are civic and institutional rather than merely personal or parent-oriented.

A strengths-based message across the board. Both respondents emphasized the need to identify strengths and positive images among those who are or should be involved in building solutions to the problems facing children, and offered challenges and questions in doing so:

- **Positive images and aspirations for children and families themselves.** Advocates need to ensure that images of what is normal for families today are widely seen, so that most families can see that the struggles they experience are normal. Looking to the future, what are the positive images and metaphors of “family” in the twenty-first century and how can we work toward them? The LIFT initiative offers one example: it frames itself as a positive effort to promote family strengths and increase family income, rather than to remedy negative conditions.
- **Belief that citizens can understand and help solve complex problems.** It’s important to build citizens’ capacity to think about children’s issues. How do our communication strategies enable citizens to think about complex policy strategies?
- **Child advocates and child workers as experts and key resources.** Too often child advocates and child workers underplay their strengths as purveyors of knowledge. Through astute engagement with the entire media effort, however, they can offer potential solutions to tough policy problems.
- **Program evaluation as a spur to improvement.** Handling the news of failed program and policies is a challenge. But the solution to social problems is ongoing; evaluation is a tool that shows where more work is needed and which new directions to pursue. It makes sense to reframe evaluations in a “continuous improvement” framework.

Ongoing Questions

During the question and answer portion of the forum, the discussion revolved around the balance between individual and communal responsibility. Among the issues raised were:

- how to frame a message of support for the next generation as a generation of productive workers
- how to deal with the implications for letting mothers stay at home with their children
 - how to develop some shared capacity between policymakers and the public to push through policy failures to more success
- how to handle concerns about effective use of tax dollars
- how to reduce competition between subgroups for scarce child programming resources by stressing that the underlying issues affect everybody
- how to ensure that messages are brought by the most effective messenger.



RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

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