

DEVELOPING AND COMMUNICATING MESSAGES

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In 2008, the consulting firm Luntz, Maslansky Strategic Research authored a chapter in the report *Big Ideas for Children* for the children's advocacy group First Focus.

They developed guidelines for communicating about children's issues and made the following recommendations:

- Make it personal.
- Every child matters – no exceptions.
- Positive impact grabs attention...but negative consequences drive action.
- Results, not efforts, matter most.
- This is America – we're better than...



These insights are as important today as they were five years ago. As the Advocates focus on developing messages for this collaborative, the following approaches are key:

- Define your goals.
- Define the audience.
- Appeal to values: why do I care?
- Describe the threat to values.
- Offer solutions.
- Address the urgency of the problem and the consequences of action and inaction.
- Give people something to do.
- Use an anecdote or story, including images.
- Anticipate attacks.
- Be repetitive.

Be mindful of the research done by the Frameworks Institute on the ways people process information and frames. We know that:

- People use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world.
- People look for cues to help them “file” new material; they ask: “Is this a concept or a story I know?” If the answer is yes, they will often stop processing.
- People get most of their information about public affairs from the news media, which, over time, create a framework of expectations, or a dominant frame.

This last point is especially true of foster care, as less than half of Americans know, understand or have been touched by the child welfare system. A frame that touches a positive value of the audience can create the cue of familiarity that lets the new information be “filed” in a positive way.

We also know that issues are most relevant to target audiences when messages are based on core values. This means that when reframing foster care, advocates must speak in a language the target audiences understand at a gut level.

They must refer to the strongest possible values: fairness, family, community and helping people help themselves, couched in terms of safety, education and training. Understanding the central importance of values in this debate is key to moving public opinion.

Values-based messaging

Pollsters and academics have been doing research and writing about the connections among values, framing and communications for several decades.

For example, in 1993, pollster Daniel Yankelovich examined the ways that changes in the economy reshape American values. He studied a set of core American values that include freedom, equality before the law, fairness, achievement, democracy, religion, luck and caring beyond self.



“A focus on core values is not enough,” Yankelovich noted in the book, *Values and Public Policy*. “It must be supplemented by a working understanding of how changing cultural values interact with core values.”

Recent cultural changes relevant to foster care include the communications revolution and its flood of available information; environmental awareness; growing social acceptance for gays and lesbians; and understanding of scientific and brain research on the importance to human development of early education and social stability.

Safety, protection, family, prevention, nurturing, loving, community, education and learning are therefore all strong values from which to develop messages about foster care.

The Power of Stories:

Storytelling is both an art and a science. Stories reflect – and evoke – core values and widely held beliefs.

For features on foster care, storytelling has become the norm. Reporters say: “I need to put a face on the facts for my audience.”

This approach makes reporting much more interesting and compelling for readers, but it also presents a serious challenge for advocates.

If the focus is just on an individual, the audience can conclude that the story describes one person’s problem, without noting the broader public issue or its possible solutions. Or the story may make any policy solution seem too overwhelming, so that readers’ eyes glaze over.

Pieces on foster families should have a narrative that tells a personal success story; paints a *portrait* of the parent, child, teen or family group; and at the same time shows the bigger *landscape* of the issue and its solution. The item should end in a way that encourages readers to become foster parents, to join in helping foster kids or to think about adoption.

Frames, messages and strategic communications:

Frames tell people what a communication is ABOUT. Frames trigger shared and durable cultural models or meta-messages.

Frames should signal what counts and what can be ignored. Frames “fill in” or infer missing information about a topic people may not know or understand.

Most importantly, good messages are framed so as to influence people’s attitudes and behavior. For policymakers, the right message in the right frame can effect legislative decisions and outcomes.

Keep in mind that messages should be:

- True;
- Believable;
- Emotional;
- Supported by the facts, but not just facts;
- Framed to gain support and win;
- Aligned with cultural values and priority issues;
- Supported by visuals for videos, photos and web sites; and
- Repeated over and over.