

Infant and Toddler Messaging Guide Update

May 2017



Advocacy &
Communication
SOLUTIONS

Infant and Toddler Messaging Guide Update

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Dear early care and education practitioners and stakeholders,

The future prospects of the children we care about depend on how well we communicate on their behalf. When you share resources, knowledge, or key facts with a parent, teacher, business leader, policymaker, or funder, you can play an important role in helping motivate others to support and act on behalf of our country's youngest residents. To do this well, you need the most effective messages possible to reach your communication goals.

In 2015, Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) and ZERO TO THREE created the original *Infant and Toddler Messaging Guide*. As the first of its kind, the 2015 Guide helped fill a void with regard to messaging about the importance of early care and education for infants and toddlers. It included sample messages from across the country, suggestions for how to improve those messages, and guidance on how to develop new effective infant and toddler messages.

A good bit has changed in the last two years, with new developments in every arena from practice to policy. As a result, ACS is pleased to provide this updated version of the *Infant and Toddler Messaging Guide*, which includes:

- Updated tools and tips from experts who use infant and toddler messages;
- New examples of effective infant and toddler messages;
- A synthesis of effective words and phrases used by national experts, for different audiences;
- Trends and themes in messaging; and
- Common questions and answers.

Information in the updated *Infant and Toddler Messaging Guide* builds on our past research and adds new elements.

In 2015, we examined messages used by state and national advocacy organizations and state agencies to determine which messages were most often deployed in communication—then categorized the messages into outcome-based messages and service-based messages to help users determine which type of message would work best for



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their purpose. We also used our first-hand, on-the-ground experience in message implementation to offer suggestions for strengthening each message.

These components are still a core part of the *Infant and Toddler Messaging Guide*.

In 2017, we reviewed additional messages that targeted programs and services for infants and toddlers; conducted interviews with a range of organizations that communicate regularly about infants and toddlers to advocates, providers, policymakers, and parents/caregivers; and incorporated learnings from our interactions with infant and toddler providers, administrators, and advocates during the past two years.

The reality of infant and toddler messaging is that evaluating the true effectiveness of messages remains elusive for many organizations because of the time and financial resources required. Challenges in evaluating infant and toddler messages are discussed in more detail on page [21](#). While we hoped that this update would include new insights based on evaluations used by early care and education organizations, there is not enough evaluation data currently available in the field to do so. As a result, ACS has drawn heavily on its national expertise and experience to improve upon the messages and to provide guidance.

We encourage you to use the *Infant and Toddler Messaging Guide* as you plan your communication and to share it widely with other advocates and allies throughout the field. Together, we will create a stronger positive narrative about the importance of investing in our youngest minds, and build communities that value early care and education as a high priority.

Sincerely,

Lori McClung, President
Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC



ACS thanks the following individuals who were interviewed and provided feedback on messaging approaches that have been incorporated into the content of this guide:

- Janis Biermann, Senior Vice President, Education and Health Promotion, March of Dimes
- Deborah Frazier, Chief Executive Officer, National Healthy Start Association
- Matt Jacob, Director of Communications and Outreach, Child Dental Health Project
- Eileen McMurrer, Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair Family Support Services Division, CT Office of Early Childhood
- Molly O'Connor, Director of Communications, ThriveWA
- Al Race, Deputy Director and Chief Knowledge Officer, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University
- Stephanie Schmit, Senior Policy Analyst, Child Care And Early Education And Legislative Coordinator, Center for Local and State Policy (CLASP)
- Hannah Shultz, Media and Marketing Coordinator, National Women, Infant, Child (WIC) Association
- Julie Sweetland, Vice President for Strategy and Innovation, Frameworks Institute

First Steps to Effective Messaging: How to get started

Whether there is \$400 or \$4 million dedicated to communication, there are some tangible actions early care and education stakeholders can take to improve messaging. Here are a few ideas:

1. Create a roadmap.

Know where the organization or initiative wants to go and think about how to use communication to get there. Prioritize! Pick one goal, develop a plan, and work that plan.

2. Understand the target audiences.

If there are resources available, first check assumptions about the target audiences through polling and focus groups. With regard for their support of infant and toddler issues, ask audiences what they want to hear, what matters to them, and to whom they listen. If there is not a budget or time to dedicate to communication, borrow from publicly available resources found in this guide to better understand what might work for the target audience.

3. Review messaging.

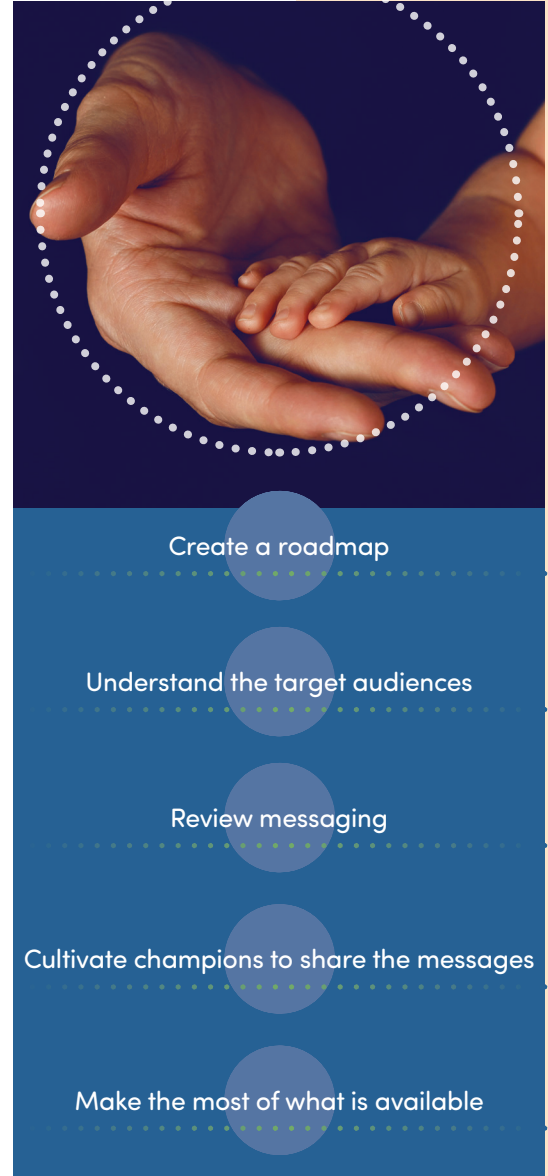
Use the tips and examples found in this guide to update the infant and toddler messages. Make sure the messages are clear, concise, and compelling to the target audience.

4. Cultivate champions to share the messages.

Sometimes the lead organization or agency of an initiative or issue is not the best messenger. Based on what is learned about the target audiences' preferences, cultivate champions such as pediatricians, local business leaders, or school principals.

5. Make the most of what is available.

Make sure the approach and messages are still effective, even when the economy shifts or policy changes affect parents and early care and education providers. Whether it is a free resource like Survey Monkey or services from research firm, investigate what works through surveys, focus groups, and interviews to develop core messages and secondary messages for different target audiences. Make the most of free resources. Use the resources and tips in this guide. Talk to others in similar organizations to get new ideas. [ACS' Giving Jargon the Boot](#) and [Network Mapping](#) tools may be a good place to start. See page [28](#) for additional tools from other organizations.



How do we know when messages work?

Few organizations have resources for formal evaluation. Similar to what ACS found in 2015, organizations are not tracking impact because they do not have the budget or time, or other priorities must come first. Evaluating the effectiveness of messaging remains a significant gap in the field.

ACS interviewed the Frameworks Institute about its process to evaluate messages and what impact those messages have on different audiences. Taking a slightly different approach to early care and education messaging, the Frameworks Institute was created to research messaging frames using social research. Often, in marketing, messages are tested based on what is pleasing to the eyes and ears. Does the picture represent the “product”? Is the content understandable and does it sound “good”?



..... ➤ **The Frameworks Institute emphasizes using messages that make the audience smarter about the issue, engage the audience through a different lens and make them want to learn more.**

These types of messages are more than attractive to an audience. They help reshape the audiences' frames of reference to more strongly increase awareness of infant and toddler issues, or to bolster support for early care and education programs. For each message, the Frameworks Institute tests messages (both text and visuals) by asking: Does this message build support and understanding for early care and education?

..... ➤ **For example, the lessons learned through the Frameworks Institute testing can be applied to infant and toddler messaging. For instance, early care and education professionals know that while parents play an important role in infant and toddler wellbeing, they are not the only influence.**

There are other factors that affect the family, and therefore the very young child. When a visual depicts a mom and baby, it does not take into account other influences in the community. An alternative visual may expand the sense that even though parents are the child's first and most important teacher, there is a community—parents, caregivers, nurses, doctors, teachers, extended family, and neighbors—that surround and support the development of a young child. Such a visual would reinforce the perception that the mom or primary caregiver may not be the only influence on development and elevate the importance of other influences.

..... ➤ **The first step to creating messages that resonate with and change the perception of the target audience is to understand the audience in order to make intentional messaging choices to meet them where they are.**

ACS Messaging Framework

Building off of the messaging framework that appeared in the *2015 Infant and Toddler Messaging Guide*, ACS updated the version that appears below. This guide walks through each step and provides examples.



1. Mission is not message.

Mission statements have their purpose, but they are not audience-directed, often are not memorable, and do not connect the audience to why the issue matters to them. The message on the left is a strong message to increase oral health care services. To make this message even stronger, be more specific in what “positive health trajectory” means for children and their families. The message on the right is about an organization and does not show why the work is important to an intended audience.



Use this:

“Dental health is a critical aspect of healthy development for infants and toddlers, and it starts early. Doctors, nurses, and other health care providers who understand essential preventative oral health services for infants and toddlers can make a big difference in helping set a positive health trajectory that will last a lifetime.”

Not this:

“We believe every infant and child is worthy of the opportunity to benefit from contemporary knowledge and measures that will improve their health. We seek to improve the health trajectory of every child by engaging providers to deliver comprehensive and essential preventive oral health services in early childhood.”



2. Avoid industry jargon.

Every industry has jargon. Terminology can be difficult to understand for new professionals and parents or caregivers, and downright detrimental when talking with policymakers. It is often assumed that the members of the “field” understand more than they do. Sometimes, the use of industry jargon can lead to tension between communication and policy staff within an organization if the goals and target audiences are not defined. Use informal or formal testing of the messages such as focus groups or conversations with an audience sample to ensure the message is concise and easy to understand.

Effective messages avoid acronyms and do not use too many words. The message on the left is stronger than the one on the right because it avoids medical jargon to talk about spacing out pregnancies. To make it even stronger, talk about why this matters for families.

Use this:

“The March of Dimes recommends that women wait at least 18 months between giving birth and getting pregnant again. Women who are older than 35 or have had a miscarriage or stillbirth should talk to their health care providers about how long to wait between pregnancies.”

Not this:

“The adverse consequences of a short interval for infant and child survival and maternal mortality and morbidity have been attributed to the biological effects related to the “maternal depletion syndrome” or more generally the woman not fully recuperating from one pregnancy before supporting the next one (which, may lead, for example, to anemia and premature rupture of membranes).”



3. Use positive language.

Although showing the negative implications of a problem or issue may be shocking and get the point across, ACS' experience shows that positive messages work better. It is important to remember to balance the issues or problems with hope in the words and images used. For example, a visual may show a sick baby, but it needs to have signs of hope, with caregivers and people actively working to heal that baby. The message on the left gives the reader more hope and a solution to the problem. To make this message even stronger, connect healthy development to long-term impacts for children, families, and society.

The message on the right may elicit an emotional response, but does not provide hope for the future, and therefore leaves the audience with a negative viewpoint which can translate to your issue.



Use this:

"Research tells us that the most rapid brain development occurs during the first three years of life. An infant's positive attachment to her or his primary caregivers is the foundation for healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development. The presence of a secure, nurturing relationship between a child and his or her primary caregivers protects the developing brain."

Not this:

"Parental depression, extreme poverty, substance abuse or domestic violence in the home can sometimes threaten the quality of early attachment relationships. If not attended to, the developing brain can suffer damage, resulting in life-long behavioral, learning, and physical health problems."

4. Present the issue, problem, and solution.

One way to counteract negativity when developing a new message is to make sure the issue, problem, and solution is stated by identifying each part of your message.

The example below simply states the problem: Too many babies are dying. This is a strong message, especially for policymakers, because of the use of data. No one wants to be in the bottom percentage of infant mortality. Then, the message gives examples of what needs to change. To make this example even stronger, be specific about what the target audience can do to help make these changes. For example, for policymakers, is there a public health program they can support? For practitioners or partners, is there somewhere families can go for assistance or referrals? For families, be direct about what they can do to make sure their baby is safe and offer assistance to the families.

.....▶ “Too many babies die before their first birthday every year in Hamilton County. We rank among the bottom 10% of counties across the nation for infant mortality. We believe that these numbers can change. And they will if, collectively, we invest in changing three things about our community: preventing prematurity by increasing the amount of time between each woman’s pregnancies; reducing tobacco use and other substance abuse in pregnancy; and promoting safe sleep for babies.”



5. Use data to back up your points and help tell your story.

ACS found that organizations generally are savvy about how and when to use data, and there is a time and a place for academic statistics. Many organizations successfully connect data to outcomes, and what that means to children and families who are being served and those who are not. Particularly when talking to policymakers, keep the data and information local; this audience, in particular, wants to know how their constituencies are doing. The key is to use data and numbers, but keep them simple. Provide evidence or examples without becoming academic. Remember to make the information accessible to the general public and policymakers by using round numbers and no more than 1–2 statistics.



The problem should not seem insurmountable but should convey cost-effectiveness or the cost of ignoring the problem. Both messages below discuss difficulties infants and toddlers in poverty face, but the one on the left is less academic and concisely gets the point. To make this message even stronger, integrate information about why high-quality child care is important to families and their children.

Use this:

"The cost of child care makes it out of reach for many families. A family of three is considered poor if they make \$20,000, but child care costs \$12,000 a year, making it difficult for families to make ends meet."

Not this:

"When compared to infants from high SES families, infants from poor and near poor households (family incomes below 200% FPL) were found to have significantly lower average total gray matter volumes ($\beta = -32,345.3$, $p = 0.021$). This represents a difference of 0.40 standard deviations compared to the overall sample average for total gray matter volume ($568,837 \pm 80,812$)."

6. Highlight benefits to society.

To garner the support of those who do not have children or who are not directly associated with early care and education connect infant and toddlers to issues they care about, such as return on investment, a more qualified workforce, less crime, etc., in the community. Find out what the target audiences need to know and who would they listen to in order to support infant and toddler issues. The message below successfully connects infants and toddlers to benefits to society of which everyone in the community can take advantage.

.....→ “Family support and coaching programs, often called “home visiting” because they take place in the homes of vulnerable families, are a proven strategy for strengthening families and saving money. When quality programs, carried out in local communities, are properly implemented, they lead to increased family self-sufficiency, lower health care costs, and reduced need for remedial education. For every \$1 spent on these efforts, they save at least \$2 in future spending.”

7. Talk about outcomes to children and families, not just transactions.

Using outcome data or information is a great way to show the success of a program or activity and why it matters for children. Stay away from transactional results (number of children participating in a program) and talk about the result, using positive, concrete language. For example, highlight long-term success outcomes for young children, such as healthy relationships, ability to learn, or academic achievement. Both examples below talk about outcomes, but the example on the left is much more positive and concrete in what outcomes will be achieved. Connecting why a program or issue matters for children and benefits the community ensures that the message resonates with all target audiences, not just those in the infant and toddler field.

Use this:

“When kids are supported with loving and nurturing relationships and a brain-stimulating environment, it puts them on the path to educational achievement, third-grade reading proficiency, high school graduation and successful futures.”

Not this:

“When a developmental delay is not found early, children must wait to get the help they need. This can make it hard for them to learn when they start school. The sooner children get help, the better off they will be in the long term.”

8. Embed a value or belief.

Messages that integrate core beliefs such as strong families or family engagement or strong communities resonate with a wide variety of audiences. The message below successfully connects to core beliefs and helps create a frame of reference for the audience related to infants and toddlers that they may not have otherwise held. To strengthen this message, help the audience understand what a stable, nurturing environment looks like, and give examples of the tools that could support parents.

.....→ “Strong families are the building blocks of a strong society. It’s crucial that parents have the tools they need to support young children with stable, nurturing environments in their earliest years.”

9. Use concrete examples and language.

Using complex language causes audience members, particularly those outside the field, to “check out” or ignore communication. Simple, precise language is best for getting the message across to all audiences. Use descriptor language for complex ideas or concepts. Language, length, and relevance of a message must resonate with those who do not do this work daily. It is about knowing where your audience is in their understanding and what will resonate with them. Inevitably, this will influence the way you communicate and determine what you choose to say. The example below uses simple, concrete examples to describe language development.

.....→ “As soon as your child is born, start talking, singing and rhyming about anything and everything. These interactions start building your child’s language skills long before he can talk or understand what’s being said. They’re also critical in helping him learn to read.”



10. Use a personal story.

People tend to remember stories more than facts or long explanations. Put a face on the issue and incorporate storytelling using names and real-life examples. Numbers alone do not help paint a full picture. To be fully understood, numbers must be accompanied by a narrative. Provide context and examples that are accessible to the target audience. This allows the audience to think about the issue as one that affects the entire community, and it helps them see that community solutions are needed. Use examples of outcomes or benefits to society that are not too far in the future. The example below is a personal story to help show the benefits of a program.

.....▶ “I lost my job due to cut-backs, and our family was down to one income. That put a lot of stress on our family to pay all our bills and have enough money for groceries. WIC has provided our family with great information that we needed. WIC has provided my girls with the nutrition that is needed for their healthy growth. Fruits, vegetables, cereal, eggs, protein foods, and baby foods are wonderful. I am a nursing mother, so it is very important that I get the nutrition I need to feed my baby. WIC has provided it all for me and my family. If I didn’t have WIC, my family and I would be struggling to buy the nutritional food we need for my girls to stay healthy.”



11. Meet people where they are.

People understand infant and toddler issues to varying degrees. Be aware of what your audience knows to create messages that resonate with them. To meet people where they are, use the following tips:

- Think about what the target audience needs to hear to connect to the issue, and understand their fears or anxieties.
- Use language and visuals that will resonate with the audience, including making materials available in multiple languages.
- Make sure the message is understandable by breaking down complex ideas and concepts by using examples and descriptor language rather than jargon.
- Approach a topic carefully to ensure the audience does not tune out or go on the defensive. Ease into the topic and don't assume the audience wants to do their best for infants and toddlers. For example, one organization helps health professionals talk about sugar consumption to parents in a way that helps them understand without passing judgment on parenting behaviors.
- Make sure recommendations are not out of economic reach for the target audience. For example, an organization that works with low-income families ensures that their recommendations can be easily attained. If a family cannot access the books to be able to take fulfill the recommendation about reading to their child, then the recommendation in the message may need to be modified or provide additional detail.



.....➡ “Grantees have all different demographics, and many are mixed urban, rural, Tribal communities, or border communities. Whatever material we put in a community is appropriate for that community’s demographic and culture.”

12. Piggyback on “popular” issues in your community.

It is not uncommon in early care and education, especially in the infant and toddler field, for organizations to work in silos. Infant and toddler issues connect to many other issues, and it is beneficial to connect to those issues, or systems (such as k–12, higher education, health care, or corrections) in order to further policies or programs for infant and toddlers.

There are many ways to connect your issues to the issues of the day, but the key is to look for related outcomes and be thoughtful about connecting to them. For example, use brain science in the earliest years to talk about how brain development affects high school graduation rates. For instance, explain how stable nurturing relationships for infants and toddlers help with their social and emotional development, and means that children are less likely to be involved in the criminal justice system later in life; show two generational approaches that include stable child care options and demonstrate that parents are more likely to find and hold a job long-term. Some examples of issues that may be “popular” include the following:

- Reducing poverty;
- Closing the school-to-prison pipeline;
- Increasing literacy; and
- Improving graduation rates.

The example below attaches the importance of early relationships with two-generational approaches in the community that ultimately have a positive effect on children and their families.



.....➡ “Early relationships with parents and other primary caregivers are the building blocks of healthy human development. What young children learn from the adults who raise and care for them lays the foundation for future social, emotional, language, and cognitive growth. High-quality early childhood development programs provide more than care and education for children; they partner with parents and serve as a trusted resource. The emphasis on learning and development can provide an opening for parents to explore their own hopes for the future and increase their parenting skills and success in employment or continued education.”

13. Use the right messengers and vehicles.

Find out what works best with the target audience, how they want to hear the information, and to whom they will listen. Think critically about the method of communication and who should convey the message.

Sometimes, the lead organization is not the best messenger. Look for ways to bridge issues through communication. This is an opportunity to expand the list of partners that carry the infant and toddler message. Many people who touch the lives of infant and toddlers come from different backgrounds and perspectives. Dental health, pediatricians, maternal health, mental health, and child care, and others all relate to infant and toddlers and their families. It is important that these professionals venture outside their comfort zone. For example, ask a partner to share a newsletter article with their email list or on their social media; distribute printed materials in their office where families often visit; or give testimony at the statehouse.

.....▶ “Oral health should not be done in a vacuum. Use communication to show that oral health can be part of an overall wellness strategy and also include messages about WIC, home visiting, and maternal health that will improve the health and wellness of a young child and their family.”

When thinking about different methods of communication consider formal and informal vehicles. Be thoughtful and have a strategic purpose for using different types of communication methods. Ensure there is not an over-reliance on things like billboards or printed materials unless they are leveraged and used in coordination with other communication vehicles in a strategic manner. For example, social media can be a powerful way to reach some audiences, but it is easy to tell when it is forced or overly produced. It may be optimal to reach potential and current parents through Facebook or Twitter campaigns. This is also a good opportunity to engage partners and reach different voices and constituencies.

.....▶ “We are running a texting program for dads that will roll out to all Healthy Start sites in 2017 about Learn the Signs messages. This includes interspersed messages such as “read to your baby” and “now is a good time to quit smoking” that go out to new fathers each month. This reinforces what moms are hearing and doing such as smoking cessation, pregnancy spacing, safe sleep practices, and breastfeeding, which supports healthy decisions for infants and toddlers.”

14. Demonstrate the impact of messaging.

How do we know messages are reaching the target audiences and are effective in promoting change? Without evaluation, it is difficult to say. It is widely recognized throughout the infant and toddler field that more should be done to evaluate communication and messaging specifically for infants and toddlers. Most organizations do not have the time or budget for formal testing and evaluation of the effectiveness of their messages. Some organizations use informal or formal focus groups or surveys to test messaging before it is used, and garner feedback to see if the messaging has been effective at reaching and changing the views of the target audience. Consider gathering feedback by holding formal or informal focus groups with partners and parents, or online.

.....▶ “We don’t have dedicated funding for messaging evaluation, so we use our annual conference to hold informal focus groups and test messages.”

15. Practice.

Many organizations have great messages and have the right messengers, but some of those messengers are not comfortable with the message or are not disciplined in using it. Practice messages so they become natural and can be integrated into any conversation or presentation. When arranging the time for training, include time for practice on the agenda. Give people instruction and guidance to practice again and again in a short time frame.

.....▶ “It’s easy to fall back into old habits. When we set up communication training related to early childhood health and wellness issues, we always set aside time for messengers to practice.”

16. Refresh.

It is easy for messaging to become stale or outdated. Set aside time every year to refresh messaging and make changes to your communication approach.



Tips for Target Audiences

Based on ACS' experience and interviews with organizations, ACS synthesized words, phrases, and concepts that resonate well with three target audiences: a) parents and caregivers; b) policymakers; and c) partners and stakeholders. Integrate the tips below when engaging these specific audiences.

Parents and Caregivers

Parents and caregivers are often a target audience for messages about services or to increase knowledge about infant and toddler wellbeing. Parents and caregivers always want to provide their children with the best care but may not have the information or resources to access it. The messages should be approachable and assume parents and caregivers have the best interest of the child at heart. For example, beware of messages that create additional anxieties for parents and caregivers or guilt them into doing something different. Remember, clear and concise is best; Parents and caregivers who can repeat the knowledge will pass this knowledge on to others, and word of mouth is sometimes the best messenger.

Use these words and phrases

Start with dental health and weave in oral health.

Because...

It is not always clear what oral health means. Start with what parents and caregivers know.

When talking about fluoride, talk about how it is a mineral that occurs naturally in all water sources.

Do not use the word "chemicals" to describe it, because chemicals can scare off parents and caregivers.

Concepts such as "family support and coaching" are better received than programs such as "home visiting."

Pew research found that both voters and prospective parents respond negatively to the widely used name for these services.

Instead of saying "free services," say "at no out-of-pocket cost to you."

Using the term "free" may devalue the service.

Parents are the first and most important teacher.

This is an effective way to show that the bond should not be broken between parents and caregivers and their children.

Policyholders—Legislators and State and Local Agency Officials

Policyholders, which include elected officials and state and local agency officials, are often a critical audience to engage to increase support and investments for infant and toddler issues. This audience wants to hear local data and information, and how the program or service will benefit their constituents. State and local agency officials may not understand how early care and education issues impact their department and/or their constituents. Often, aside from having children of their own, they may not have worked closely with young children and do not know about the science behind healthy development and how to support it. It is worth finding out background information on the policymaker before you communicate with and to them. It could reveal information that could provide a “hook” and help you create a connection.

Emphasize these concepts

Long-term impact, or return on investment (ROI) for communities, or the future of the country.

Because...

Good impact messages present powerful evidence of why the issue should matter to a broader audience than parents/families.

Connect to child development: Explain why the first years of life are so important (e.g., “It’s never too early”).

Evidence and research provide a rationale and explain why investments in early care and education can mean the difference for healthy child development, and therefore long-term outcomes to prepare children for school and for life.

Connect child care supports and early care and education to family economic stability.

Making this connection supports a poverty reduction strategy and aligns infants and toddlers with a “hot topic” for many communities.

Emphasize high quality and lack of access using local data.

Both the quality and access of early care and education services are often well documented. Using data to support your messages help policymakers understand how children are being served or not served in their community.

Gaps in development and opportunities can be seen as early as nine months—before a child’s first birthday.

This takes a complex issue, related to readiness and learning, and puts a concrete timeframe on it that is easy to grasp.

Partners and Stakeholders

The chart below offers tips when inviting partners and stakeholders, such as doctors, child care providers, or mental health specialists to become supporters of an effort.

Keep in mind

Allow room for partners to customize the message for specific geographic regions, topic areas, or constituents.

Because...

Partners know their local context, nuances of the field, culture, and values, which should take priority over national trends. For example, words such as grit and resilience may work in different regions of a state or the country depending on the context. See page [21](#) for more on these words.

Provide guidance on where emphasis can be placed and effective words and phrases.

You are the expert in your field, and if there is a word or phrase that is effective, partners should use it consistently.

Be cautious when talking about toxic stress in babies and young children, and ways to mitigate it.

It is important to incorporate hope into the message, to ensure stakeholders continue efforts to prioritize early care and education and support parents and caregivers.

The phrase “serve and return interaction” can help stakeholders understand infant and toddler interactions and how they develop brain architecture.

Similar to a conversation, exchanges are unique. Young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions, and gestures, and adults respond with the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back at them. For example, when children see an object, the adult says the object’s name, making connections between sounds and objects.

Trends and Themes in Messaging

This section includes trends and themes from recent ACS research and experience. ACS has learned over the years that there are national trends and themes to pay attention to, but there is no cookie cutter approach to creating messages that resonate. Local context, politics, culture, and people must be considered and layered to create the most effective messaging. For example, while something may be researched nationally and used broadly with a general audience, it may not play well for certain communities and with particular audiences. How well a message is received also depends on the comfort level of the messenger and the target audience's belief system. Additional customization of the messages may be needed. All of the following examples work *somewhere*, but not all of them work *everywhere*.



Serve and return: Much like a game of tennis this back-and-forth is a fun way to build a child's brain capacity and offers stimulating exchanges between the adult and child. Like conversations, serve and return exchanges are understood to be unique, and each back-and-forth exchange builds upon the previous interaction. These exchanges build a foundation for learning and behaviors that follow. Serve and return is a complex concept; develop language or messages to describe serve and return based on the comfort level of your messenger and your audience. For more information on serve and return see:

<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/serve-return-interaction-shapes-brain-circuitry/>

Brain architecture: Scientists use "building a house" as a metaphor for brain architecture. A strong foundation and four walls are critical to a strong future. If one of those areas is not developed, the brain is missing a key structural component. The four walls of a child's brain are cognitive, emotional, physical, and social. Each of those walls needs the other three to function well. This metaphor is useful for many different types of audiences across the country and puts a complicated concept into a concrete visual. For more information about brain architecture see: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

Resilience and grit: Context matters, and often belief systems shape how audiences interpret the words "resilience" and "grit." In some parts of the country or for some audiences, a word like "grit" and the idea of personal responsibility have worked well. This concept fits into the audience's belief system.

But for other audiences, this model of thinking and the idea that “anyone can do well regardless of context” does not resonate. One way to stay away from words like “grit” is to talk about developing resilience. To talk about resilience, help the audience visualize a seesaw. On one side are negative outcomes, and on the other are positive outcomes. If the seesaw tips toward the positive outcomes, even when there are negative factors on the other side, there is resilience. Helping audiences understand why some children do well despite adverse early experiences is crucial because it can inform more effective policies and programs that help more children reach their full potential. Research shows that the single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or another adult. For more about this topic, see: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/> and http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/ECD/resilience_em_report_final.pdf

Return on investment: Return on investment is a popular concept because it uses data to take the emotional side out of support for the issue, and shows what investment into programs can mean for the broader community. These messages are important for those who may not have children or otherwise care about early care and education issues. Research has shown this is often an effective message for business audiences, but it does not work well for everyone. For example, return on investment messages have not worked well with audiences in communities that have experienced economic hardship because they believe investment in long-term strategies is out of reach and not in their budget. In both examples, “strong families, strong communities” messages are more effective and resonate with audiences better than return on investment, because they align with the belief system and economic context. For ideas on how to use return on investment, see: <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/invest-in-early-childhood-development-reduce-deficits-strengthen-the-economy/>



Parents are the first teacher: Messages that integrate the phrase “parents are the first teacher” work well in areas of the country or with audiences that hold strong beliefs about parent responsibility. These are often audiences that do not trust or believe government information or programming should have a role in what is seen as responsibility exclusive to a parent. Integrating this phrase shows in the message acknowledges the important role that parents play in healthy development for infants and toddlers, and expresses support for parents to fulfill it. For an example of using this phrase see: <http://www.urbanchildinstitute.org/articles/research-to-policy/practice/parents-are-a-childs-first-teacher>

Free services: Behavioral science shows that individuals value a service less if it is free. Some early care and education organizations have addressed this issue by saying, “There is no out of pocket expense to you.” It is important to let parents and caregivers know they can access services, while maintaining the importance of those services.

Two-generational approaches: Two-generational approaches are a trend and concept that the early care and education field should be aware of and may partner on in their communities. Sometimes called multi-generational or three-generational approaches, these approaches support service provision for both a parent or caregiver and the child. Two-generational approaches recognize that multiple people in the family may need supports and services, and there is coordination to make sure the whole family is receiving what they need. This may include home visiting, or child care for the child, and maternal health care, safety net services such as food or housing, or workforce assistance or training for the parent and caregiver. These approaches are said to contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty by providing and supporting all family members. For more information about two-generational approaches see:

<http://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/pages/the-two-generation-approach> and

<http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/Two-Gen-Brief-FINAL.pdf>



Common Messaging Questions

Based on ACS' research and experiences across the country, this section includes common questions related to infant and toddler messages. Topics include: creating a message, addressing difficult concepts, overcoming common perceptions, and engaging target audiences.

Creating a message:

1. How much should I distinguish between audiences?

ACS recommends developing three to five core messages to use with all audiences, and developing one or two tailored messages per target audience. Research shows that the adult brain needs to hear the same message multiple times before it starts to sink in, so consistency in message is critical.

- **Everyone** wants to know why time, energy, and resources should be put toward infants and toddlers (versus something else). Why will investment benefit them?
- **Parents**, regardless of race, class, or income, want to know that they can trust that their children receive quality services from an experienced professional, familiar with working with infants and toddlers. In a child care environment, parents want to know that children are in safe, clean environments, with staff who have had background checks.
- **Policymakers and business** want to know that what little money there is will actually lead to a concrete change or improvement. They want to know that they are making a good investment.
- **Educators** want to know kids are learning how to interact with other children, building their social skills and self-esteem, and laying the foundation for learning.

2. Are there different messaging trends in urban and rural communities?

Although there are trends to draw upon, it is a good idea to understand the needs and perspective of specific target audiences in any community. Trends show audiences in rural communities may connect to a more conservative frame. Messages that support strong families often do well in rural areas. Urban communities may be more diverse and include larger numbers of people from different backgrounds (race/ethnicity, economic, education level, immigration status, etc.), which can affect which message to use. Messages related to strong communities and brain science tend to work in both urban and rural communities.



3. What should I do if my organization is not supportive of communicating about infants and toddlers?

ACS has seen many communication strategies fail because only one person in the organization “owns” it. The idea that communication is important needs to be embedded in an organization in order to have staying power. If no one in the organization is supportive or has time to think about communication, find other partner organizations or join a coalition of like-minded organizations. Often, communication can be done at scale in this way.



4. There are many people talking about early care and education issues in my community. Should I distinguish my message or blend into theirs?

The approach depends on the purpose of the communication, and there are times for both. To show policymakers a united front with multiple infant and toddler organizations, it is important to use one message and show how all the pieces fit together as a whole. But if the purpose is to seek funding or build new or specific partnerships, show the organization’s unique value and impact on infants and toddlers.

Addressing difficult concepts and overcoming common perceptions:

5. How should I talk about long-term outcomes for investments in infants and toddlers when it will take a long time before the benefit is realized?

Some audiences have a difficult time connecting outcomes that will take several years to realize to the infant and toddler in front of them. It may help to talk first about immediate outcomes for child and family (such as brain development and the number of words a child knows), then relate that to what happens when children arrive at school, and then talk about the long-term outcomes. Build a story around a child and family to tell your story so the outcomes seem less abstract.

6. How should I talk about the effect that poverty has on infants and toddlers?

According to ZERO TO THREE, nearly half of the babies in the U.S. are living in or near poverty. Infants and toddlers living in poverty are at a higher risk for chronic stress due to food insecurity, housing instability, parental stress and depression, poor childcare, or environmental toxins. Growing up in poverty and experiencing chronic stress at a young age has a tremendous effect on a young child’s brain development, and by age two, gaps can be seen in their cognitive, language, and social-emotional development. The vocabulary gap, or number of words these young children know can inhibit other learning. Use and share evidence-based research, and emphasize the role that strong, secure, supportive parent and caregiver relationships have to overcome the effects of poverty on early childhood development.

7. What are common stereotypes of infant and toddler programs, and how do I address them?

Stereotypes have the potential to derail your messages. They gain traction because of a lack of understanding, context, or implied values. Below are common stereotypes.

- a. **“Babies on the couch” stereotype:** The stereotype and visual of “babies on the couch” receiving infant mental health services is due the lack of knowledge and understanding about early childhood mental or behavioral health services. Use descriptive language and concrete examples to talk about the problem, why it matters, and the early care and education services that address them.
- b. **“Babies taking tests” stereotype:** The issue of “babies in desks taking tests” is tied to fear that children are pushed too quickly into traditional classroom learning. From birth to age 3, children seek security, are eager to explore, and are working on their identity. Use examples to show how a young child learns and why learning those things during that timeframe is critical. Early learning does not mean drilling and testing in the classroom. It is about learning to get along with others; preparing to read by recognizing letters, numbers, and shapes; improving coordination; and interacting through play. Use messages that highlight why this type of learning is important to child development in the earliest years. For background and more ideas, use the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) resources about developmentally appropriate play, found here: <http://www.naeyc.org/dap/infants-and-toddlers>
- c. **“It is the family’s job to take care of young children, not society’s responsibility” stereotype:** Similar to the stereotype about a mother’s responsibility to stay at home with a very young child, family responsibility, especially for very young children is still prevalent. Use messages that highlight family involvement and interaction, which is a core societal value. Highlight the benefits of providing families with the tools and supports to best care for their young children. Include messages with long-term outcomes for the children, family, and community.



8. Investments in infants and toddlers often benefit the family directly rather than the child. How do I talk about infant and toddler benefits?

Infant and toddler messages highlight strong families or giving parents the tools they need to raise healthy children resonate with many audiences, but they do not directly address the impact on children. To integrate benefits to the child, try to pivot your message to include benefits for the child. For example: *“Parents who participate in the program are those who may lack the extended family support, experience, and knowledge of basic parenting skills that are critical to success during pregnancy and through the first few years of a child’s life. This voluntary program is for families who want to be empowered with better knowledge so they can provide better opportunities for their children.”*

9. What should I do if the conversation becomes pre-k versus infants and toddlers?

It should never be an either/or that positions pre-k against infants and toddler issues. Shift the frame! Remind the audience that children are born learning, and healthy development such as a healthy weight, oral health, and literacy, should “start as early as possible.” Children do well in kindergarten because they have had quality infant and toddler experiences. When infants and toddlers grow up, they need high-quality early care and education through kindergarten and beyond. Help pre-k, k-12, and higher education partners include talking points that emphasize the continuum of development, starting at or before birth.

Engaging target audiences:

10. How should I engage the media?

Many organizations use the media as a communication vehicle. If and how the media is used depends on the target audience and how they will best receive the message. Use ACS’ media guide for helpful tips on working with the media: http://www.advocacyandcommunication.org/wp-content/themes/acs/docs/resources/tool_and_resources_2015/ACS_Media_Guide-1.pdf

- a. Paid media, such as billboards or advertisements on TV, radio, print is expensive, but can be useful in reaching a mass audience, including parents and caregivers.
- b. Earned media requires a proactive approach to build relationships and to build understanding about the issue with reporters and editorial boards. Be strategic about which media outlet to engage by first researching their media market. One strategy might be to have partners write letters to the editor.
- c. Social media can be useful for a sustained effort if it makes sense for your target audience. Have an intentional focus to your messages and tailor it for the target audience. For example, the resources and information that will be most useful to providers will be different than for parents and caregivers. Consider using messengers on social media that will resonate with the audience. For example, parents and caregivers want to hear advice based on real experiences from real people or from professionals who are valued in their community (e.g., doctors).

11. As soon as I help my legislator understand the importance of investments in birth to age 3, they are term limited and I have to start the process over again with someone new. How do I overcome these short election cycles?

Term limits can shorten the impact of a legislator who understands infant and toddler issues. One strategy to overcome this is to build relationships with legislative staff and state agency personnel, who are influential and often make public policy their career. Another strategy is to engage elected officials before they are in office, while they are running campaigns. Help them understand the issues and make them their own. Think about events that will help the candidate and will show their support for infant and toddler issues. A third strategy is to conduct outreach and build champions at the local and regional levels where term limits might not be as short. They can be effective messengers for legislators.

Additional Resources

Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC:

- Dirty Dozen of Strategic Communication: http://www.advocacyandcommunication.org/wp-content/themes/acs/docs/resources/tools_and_resources_2016/ACS_Dirty_Dozen_Strategic_Communication-2.pdf
- Giving Jargon the Boot: http://www.advocacyandcommunication.org/wp-content/themes/acs/docs/resources/tools_and_resources_2016/ACS_Giving_Jargon_the_Boot_2-1.pdf
- Tips for an Effective Communication Approach: http://www.advocacyandcommunication.org/wp-content/themes/acs/docs/resources/tools_and_resources_2016/ACS_Ten_Tips_for_an_Effective_Communication_Approach.pdf
- Network Mapping Tool: http://www.advocacyandcommunication.org/wp-content/themes/acs/docs/resources/tools_and_resources_2016/ACS_Network_Mapping-designed-2.pdf

Frameworks Institute:

- http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/NationalAssembly_MessageBrief_March2015.pdf

March of Dimes

- Words to Know:
<https://www.marchofdimes.org/catalog/product.aspx?productid=4950&>

Center for Local and State Policy (CLASP):

- <http://www.clasp.org/issues/temporary-assistance/in-focus/making-a-difference-for-poor-babies-using-tanf-a-framework-for-states>

WIC:

- <https://s3.amazonaws.com/aws.upl/nwica.org/key-messages-2016.pdf>

ZERO TO THREE:

- Policy Guide:
<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/the-early-experiences-matter-policy-guide>
- Communication Resources:
<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/effective-communication-about-the-early-years>