

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR AND AN OPINION EDITORIAL

Writing a letter to the editor or an opinion editorial (op-ed) can be a useful way to share your knowledge about infant-toddler issues with the local community and policymakers. State legislators and federal lawmakers regularly read the opinion pages of newspapers for clues about issues of concern in their community. In addition, letters to the editor and op-eds are a way of reaching a much wider audience with your messages about the healthy development of infants and toddlers and how policy can positively impact babies, toddlers and their families. Writing opinion pieces are fairly simple and an effective way for you to **Be a Voice for Little Kids™** in your community!

This ZERO TO THREE Policy Network advocacy tool provides you with some suggestions for writing letters to the editor and op-eds and getting them printed. Then we offer a few examples of opinion pieces that were published, so you can get a sense for how to put these strategies into practice.

Letter to the Editor Strategies

- **Check the newspaper's print guidelines** – Most newspapers have a web site. Check the paper's web site or the editorial page of the print version for information about submitting a letter to the editor. Some newspapers have an online submission form which you can use.
- **Keep it brief and to the point** – Letters should be concise – typically newspapers have a word limit of about 250 words (about 3 paragraphs). Editors are less likely to print long letters.
- **Make your letter timely** – Tie the subject of your letter to a recent article, editorial or column. Use that article as a hook for communicating your message. Small-circulation newspapers usually print many of the letters they receive. It is more challenging to get a letter printed in a major metropolitan newspaper, so don't be disappointed if it doesn't get printed.
- **Localize your letter** – Explain how infants and toddlers in your community will be affected. Lend credibility to your letter by noting your professional experiences in the community that prompted you to write on this topic.
- **Use “levels of thought” as a method for organizing your letter** – The FrameWorks Institute, a non-profit communications research organization, “adopts the position...that

people reason on the basis of deeply-held moral values...”¹ Those moral values are part of a hierarchical process for how people think about ideas and issues, which they refer to as “levels of thought.” You can use levels of thought to structure your letter to the editor. Begin your letter with a big idea or value (level one) that provides a context for understanding the more specific details (levels two and three) of your communication.

For example,

The Early Head Start program has made it a priority to provide the best start in life for all its babies and toddlers, so that their children will grow up to be *good citizens of the community*. The Early Head Start program offers an array of services to pregnant women, infants, toddlers and their families, including home visitation, parent support, early learning and access to medical, mental health and early intervention services. But this community program cannot succeed without adequate federal support for Early Head Start. Reauthorization of Early Head Start is right around the corner. It’s time to remind our federal policymakers that babies in Fillmont, Indiana and across the country depend on them.

For more information about how to use levels of thought, read the article “[Effective Communication about the Early Years](#)” on ZERO TO THREE’s web site or go to the FrameWorks Institute web site:

<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/strategicanalysis/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf>.

- **Be mindful of the tone of your letter** – The tone of your letter can either support or overpower the substance of the message you are trying to communicate. Therefore, choosing and controlling tone² is an important element of your communication. For more information on tone, go to: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezone17.html>.
- **Write about good news, not just bad** – Thank the paper (when appropriate) for its positive and accurate coverage of an infant-toddler issue. Or thank a policymaker for being a champion for infants and toddlers in the state or community.
- **Include your name, title, address and daytime phone number** – Editors like to confirm that the letter was actually written by the person whose name is on it. Also be sure to provide your professional title and affiliation, as it lends credibility to your letter.
- **Consider other newspapers for publication** – Many metropolitan areas have free weekly community newspapers that go to thousands of homes. Many cities also have newspapers for specific ethnic groups. Consider sending your letter to the editors of these other widely-read publications.

¹ Bales, S.N. “A Five Minute Refresher Course in Framing.” *KIDS COUNT E-Zine*. Issue No. 8. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezone8.html> Retrieved October 23, 2008.

²Bales, S.N. (October 2002). “Taking Tone Seriously as a Frame Cue.” *KIDS COUNT E-Zine*. Issue No. 17. Washington, DC: The FrameWorks Institute. <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezone17.html> Retrieved October 23, 2008.

- **Mail a copy of your published letter to your state legislators and members of Congress** – Policymakers subscribe to local newspapers in their districts. You can continue to build your relationship with them by sending copies of your letter.

Opinion Editorial Strategies

- **Focus your message on one key point³** – Although there may be many elements to the infant-toddler issue you want to address, you will have more success if your editorial is focused and easy to understand.
- **Keep it short** – Typically newspapers will accept op-eds of 500-800 words. Magazines may accept slightly larger pieces, but check the publication’s requirements before you submit your column.
- **Tell the readers upfront why they should care⁴** - Give voice to the babies that aren’t often heard by telling readers why they should care.
- **Offer specific recommendations** - “An op-ed is not a news story that simply describes a situation; it is your opinion about how to improve matters.”⁵ Make your call to action something concrete and realistic.
- **Make your op-ed timely** – Editors will be looking for op-ed columns that are compelling and which engage readers in the public debate about a timely issue.
- **Review the opinion pages** – By reading the opinion pages, you can get a sense of what is being covered and what is not being addressed. You can also get an idea of the types of op-eds that the editor publishes.

Examples of Published Letters to the Editor

This letter was published in *Newsweek*, August 22, 2005.

To the Editor:

Your Aug. 15 cover story, "Your Baby's Brain," did a great job of bringing parents up to date on the latest research on early-childhood development. This information is critical to parents' ability to nurture their child's healthy development. However, the explosion of research in early development over the last decade or so has overwhelmed many parents and created a great deal of anxiety. Parents are getting so many mixed messages about what to do with all this information. Suggestions run the gamut from parents' signing up young children for countless organized, structured learning opportunities to simply trusting their instincts and loving their baby. What parents need is guidance on how to apply all this new knowledge to support their

³ McCormick, M. (November 1988). “7 Rules for Stating Your Opinion: Tip Sheet.” *Writer’s Digest*, p. 19.

⁴ Ibid. and Jarmul, D. (May 1994). “Writing Op-Eds.” *Writer’s Digest*, p. 32-33.

⁵ Ibid.

child's development through everyday interactions. It's not about cramming a child's day with classes, or, at the other extreme, simply following parental instincts. The complex process of parenting requires being a careful observer and listener to understand what a child is communicating about her needs, and making thoughtful decisions based on all this information.

Matthew E. Melmed, Executive Director
ZERO TO THREE, Washington, D.C.

Published in the *New York Times Money & Business* section, April 11, 2000.

To the Editor:

Re: "New Dads Feel Work's Pull, Even on Leave" (Personal Business, April 9), which looked at the demands on male executives who take paternity leave:

I am halfway through my paternity leave and am pleased that people like Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, who has been under pressure to take such time off, are making the issue au courant. During my paid leave, which lasts three months, I have had the joy of watching our daughter grow in a way that one can only with a lot of time. I realize what a priceless gift paternity leave is. I wish that more fathers could experience the delight of taking care of a baby on their own, in an unhurried way that is difficult to do on weekends alone, or shoe-horned around busy workdays.

I never appreciated the demands and rewards of child care until I started doing it solo -- and not just for two-hour stretches on a weekend while my wife was running errands. Taking care of our baby is making me a more competent parent who doesn't feel the need to take a back seat to my wife -- something that happens by default in practically all families where the mother is the de facto primary caregiver, particularly when it comes to babies.

I hope that more companies will offer paternity leave as a way to retain valuable employees in this robust economy. The results will surely be a boon to dads, moms, children and, yes, employers, who will see a more satisfied and loyal work force.

THOMAS E. SALYERS
Takoma Park, MD

The writer is communications manager at ZERO TO THREE, a nonprofit organization in Washington that deals with issues of early childhood.

As seen in

The Boston Globe

Thursday,
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Connecting the dots for poor children

By Jack P. Shonkoff

NEW RESEARCH findings raise concerns about biological markers of elevated stress and behavioral measures of increased aggression in young children who spend long hours in child care. Meanwhile, in Congress, the reauthorization of the federal welfare law is moving forward with a significant number of lawmakers pushing for increased work requirements for mothers of very young children. What is wrong with this picture?

The science of human development tells us that poverty increases the probability of poor health and developmental and behavioral problems in young children and raises the odds of failure in school. It also tells us that a secure relationship with a loving parent beginning in early childhood is a powerful predictor of better child outcomes and an important factor in breaking the cycle of intergenerational dependence.

A recent report from the National Academy of Sciences concluded that early life experiences affect brain development and that parents and other regular caregivers are the "active ingredients" of environmental influence in the early childhood years.

The report recommended that policies increase the choices available to all parents about whether and when they return to work after the birth or adoption of a child and that exemption periods be lengthened before states require parents of infants to work as a condition of receiving public assistance.

Common sense supports the conclusions of the scientists. How young children learn to solve problems, deal with conflict, control their temper, read a book, and tell the difference between right and wrong are all influenced by what they are taught and how they are treated. And no influence is more important than that of a parent.

Welfare reform has taken a different route. It tells us that the best way to move families toward economic independence is through mandated maternal employment and time limits on public assistance. It also tells us that the care and education of young children living in poverty whose mothers are forced to work can be provided by people with limited skills who are willing to work for low or no pay.

Under the existing federal welfare law, mothers are required to work 30 hours per week, but states are permitted to allow those with children under age 6 to work only 20 hours weekly and to exempt completely those with children less than 1 year old. The bill in the House of Representatives would change all this. It could require all mothers who are on welfare - even those with young babies - to work 40 hours per week. The Senate is debating its version of the reauthorization this week.

About 20 percent of families on welfare have a child under age 2. More than one in eight have a child less than one year of age, yet fewer than half of the states exempt their parents from work requirements. As of June 2001, 14 states mandated employment for mothers of children beginning as early as age 3 months, and four states allowed work requirements for mothers of newborns on a case-by-case basis.

Mandates clearly work if the objective is moving mothers from welfare to work. However, at some point the question must be asked: What about the babies?

If the ultimate goal of welfare reform is to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, it must be guided by two complementary strategies. The first must focus on moving adults from chronic unemployment to stable work that generates a livable wage. This requires education, skills, and job opportunities.

The second strategy must focus on promoting the healthy development of young children. This requires good parenting, which can be taught, and reliable and competent care from other adults when parents are at work, which can be assured through a child care and early education system that has strong quality standards.

A nation that does not promote the parenting skills of its young families, particularly in the face of economic hardship and limited education, undermines its own future.

A welfare system that forces mothers of babies to work and does not provide high-quality child care for their children (including staff who are qualified to manage challenging behaviors) raises concerns about both its moral compass and its understanding of the concept of human capital development.

The message for the reauthorization of welfare reform is clear. Independent of whether we believe that poor mothers should be helped or chastised, it is absolutely critical that our policies be designed to increase the odds that their children will succeed in school and in life. We can take an important step in that direction by encouraging states to exempt single parents of children under 1 year old from work requirements and time limits and by investing in the development of their parenting and work force skills.

In 1996, the end of welfare as we used to know it was driven by a short-term focus on maternal employment. In 2003, the reauthorization process should be driven by a long-term investment in the healthy development and behavior of our nation's most vulnerable young children.

Dr. Jack P. Shonkoff is dean of the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University. He chaired the National Academies' Committee on Integrating the Sciences.