

## Ask the Expert

ANN PLESHETTE MURPHY

ZERO TO THREE Board Members answer your questions about best practices and provide practical information you can use in your work with infants, toddlers, and their families.

**MEET:** Ann Pleshette Murphy, parenting contributor, ABC TV's "Good Morning America," and host of "Parenting Perspectives" on ABC News Now. The former editor of *Parents* magazine, Ms. Murphy is the author of *The 7 Stages of Motherhood: Loving Your Life Without Losing Your Mind*.



### Getting Your Message Out

**Q: How can I get the media interested in my program in order to build community support for our services?**

**A:** If you're primarily interested in building awareness of your program within your community, focus your efforts on getting local coverage. Regional parenting publications have proliferated over the past few years, and they are often hungry for local stories. Cable networks, not to mention the Internet explosion, make it possible to generate support across multiple platforms. Although newspapers, radio, and local television stations are going to reach the largest audiences, a single high-impact event—a "family day" at your center, a "parent fair" held with the cooperation of local businesses, an all-day conference featuring a small group of like-minded advocates—can help draw attention to the work you're doing.

No matter what medium you think would serve your purposes best, do not approach a particular editor or producer before you've done your homework. If you're planning to pitch a consumer magazine, check out the masthead and try to find out who handles the articles on psychology, family, child development, and so forth. Is there a particular reporter who seems to cover the kinds of programs you're involved with? Is there a story or a series that generated a lot of reader mail? Go on the publication's Web site and check out which stories were the "most emailed." Are any of them synchronous with the kind of research you're doing?

I can't tell you the number of people in the child-advocacy world who have told me that they "never watch television." As busy (or as put off by popular media) as you may be, it's critical to be aware of what's going on in the arenas where most of your clients get their information. Tape the more popular programs and get to know the names of the key anchors or reporters you think might be interested in your work. And do some networking to see

whether anyone in your organization has a personal connection with a local producer or editor. Arranging a face-to-face (or a tour of your program) with, say, the ABC affiliate anchor is by far the best way to maximize your chances of getting coverage on one of the ABC network news shows.

**Q: Is it worth it to pay a publicity person?**

**A:** If you're operating on a very tight budget—and who within the world of family/child advocacy isn't?—you might want to start with someone on a part-time or even pro-bono basis. The advantage of hiring an experienced public relations person is that they have contacts, connections, and—in most cases—chutzpah. Presumably, they will also help you translate research jargon into a press release the average journalist might read. That said, before you hire a PR person, get references; then articulate your goals and set a timetable.

**Q: Are there any sure-fire ways to get the media's attention?**

**A:** No matter what media outlet you approach, you need a hook—a compelling story or surprising research finding that can be articulated concisely and with passion. If there's something you're doing that runs counter to expectations or has had a dramatic and demonstrable impact, make sure you "headline" what's surprising or new.

Look for elements of your program that are topical; if you're seeing a sudden surge of interest in an issue that's relevant to your work, seize the moment. The media are for the most part incredibly lazy. If a story generates good ratings on one network, chances are the others will rush to jump on the train. But once they're all riding that train, they want to find a new or different angle—which isn't always easy.

Most important, recognize that television is a visual medium, so the more you can do to help a producer obtain video footage or to reach families willing to be interviewed, the

better. I realize that issues of patient confidentiality can make videotaping very tricky, but your goal is to help a producer put a face on your findings, to grab viewers with an account of how your program has changed a child's life or inspired a significant shift in policy.

**Q: What are the most effective media outlets to use?**

**A:** Before you put together a publicity plan, decide your goals: Whom do you want to reach? How wide a geographical net are you hoping to cast? The demographic information about the audiences of various newspapers and magazines is readily available online or at your local library. For example, if you're eager to reach teens or young adults with information about a particular program, don't rule out the digital formats—podcasts, text messages, or blogs—that those of us who are seriously behind the curve (or over the hill!) tend to overlook. But if you're hoping to impress a local business executive, consider an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* about how much money your program has saved your community by preventing a problem that—if left untreated—would cost much more down the road.

ASK THE EXPERT for March 2008 will feature **Serena Wieder, PhD.** Dr. Wieder will respond to questions about autism spectrum disorders. Dr. Wieder is a well-known clinical psychologist who has pioneered important approaches to diagnosing and treating infants and toddlers with sensory processing difficulties and regulatory disorders. She specializes in infant mental health, early intervention and prevention services, staff training, and program development. Go to the ZERO TO THREE Web site to post your questions: [www.zerotothree.org/ask](http://www.zerotothree.org/ask)