

HOW TO PLAN A SITE VISIT: INVITING POLICYMAKERS TO SEE YOUR WORK WITH INFANTS, TODDLERS & THEIR FAMILIES

Some say that a picture is worth a thousand words, but showing someone your work firsthand can be worth many more. One of the most effective ways to *Be a Big Voice for Little Kids™* is to invite policymakers to experience your work with infants and toddlers for themselves. A site visit gives policymakers the opportunity to connect the decisions they make to the faces of infants, toddlers, and families in their community, and is a great strategy that can create a lasting impression. Use the guidance below to plan and implement a site visit with your local, state and federal policymakers.

INVITING YOUR POLICYMAKERS

Whether policymakers work in Washington, D.C., your state capitol, or in your hometown, they all make decisions that impact the young children you serve. Consider organizing site visits with policymakers such as your Members of Congress, state legislators, mayor, city council members or state and local agency administrators. When you invite them to visit your program, your organization, or your research project, you are giving policymakers a valuable opportunity to get to know your work with infants and toddlers.

To help you invite the policymaker to visit your site, here are a few tips:

- **Find out when your policymaker will be in your home state or district.**
 - To find out the times **federal** lawmakers are on recess, visit www.house.gov or www.senate.gov and click on the calendar feature. In addition to Congressional recesses, Members of Congress are often home on Fridays and weekends.
 - To find out the session calendar for your **state legislators**, visit the National Conference of State Legislatures website at <http://www.ncsl.org/?tabid=18630>.
 - To find out the schedules of your **local policymakers**, visit your city or town's website.
- **Schedule the visit.** Call your policymaker's office at least 4-6 weeks in advance and ask to set up a time for the visit. Contact information for policymakers is often readily available on their websites.
 - If you are calling a Member of Congress' office, ask to speak with the scheduler when you call. They may request that you send a written request for the site visit. If so, feel free to use our sample as a guide: http://www.zerotothree.org/site/DocServer/SampleInvitation_BM_5_29_07.pdf?docID=3481.
 - To find contact information for your **state legislators** and **state agency administrators**, visit your state's website. Most state websites follow the same

format: www.STATENAME.gov or www.STATEABBREVIATION.gov. For example, you would visit www.maine.gov or www.ny.gov. To learn more about your state legislature, read ZERO TO THREE's article entitled "State Policy Processes" at http://www.zerotothree.org/site/DocServer/StatePolicyProcesses_BM_5_29_07.pdf?docID=3461.

- To find contact information for your local policymakers, visit your city or town's website.
- **Be specific, yet flexible.** When you call, identify yourself as a constituent, and be specific about the dates and times you would like to schedule the visit. Policymakers often have very full schedules, and at the state and community levels, they might even have other part-time careers. Be as flexible as you can when scheduling the visit. If possible, have multiple dates to suggest.
- **Invite staff.** If you cannot arrange a time to have your policymaker visit your site, consider hosting their staff. They serve as advisors to policymakers, and it is equally important that they understand your work with infants and toddlers in the communities they represent.
- **Confirm.** Call your policymaker's office one week before the scheduled visit to confirm. Ask who will be attending along with the policymaker, so that you know how many to expect. Fax them a copy of the schedule for their visit, and be sure to let them know if the media will be in attendance.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Planning a site visit does not need to be an overwhelming task that creates a large amount of extra work for you and your staff. The point of a site visit is for your policymakers to see your work *in action*, so schedule the visit for a typical day or during an activity that you would already be planning. While hosting a site visit will take some preparation, your daily work will also speak for itself!

- **Prepare a brief introduction or welcome for your policymaker.** This is a great time to let your policymaker know what issues are important to infants and toddlers in his or her community. Include details about how many infants and toddlers you serve, the impact your program has on the community, and the challenges you face. Remember, early childhood development can be a complicated subject for someone outside the field. Be sure to frame your messages so that policymakers and the public can understand the needs of babies and the solutions that best support families raising young children. Think about which people from your organization could best convey these messages. For more information on how to frame your communications with policymakers, read ZERO TO THREE's articles on framing at: http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_pub_framing.
- **Plan an activity.** Try to schedule the site visit on a day or during an activity that really showcases your work with infants, toddlers and their families. Consider having the

policymaker sit-in during an early learning activity with the children or observe a group meeting with parents. Think about an activity that your program organizes which involves a lot of interaction between the staff, the children, and the parents or one that would help him/her understand the impact your program has on infants and toddlers. Use this activity as the basis for your site visit, and strategize about how a visitor could participate.

- **Prepare your staff and families.** It is important to ensure that your staff and parents are comfortable with a policymaker visiting and observing your program. Give advance notice to anyone who will be involved in the site visit, so they have time to plan accordingly, and allow time for them to ask questions before the visit. Let them know that the purpose of the policymaker's visit is to learn more about your work, not to judge or watch, and that it could result in increased support for your program or project. Remind them that they do not need to prepare for the visit – they can dress and act as they would any other day.
- **Give the policymaker something to take home.** Your policymaker will learn a lot about your work on the day of the site visit, and they should have materials to reinforce your message when they leave. Provide them with a brochure or fact sheet about your program to refer to after the visit. Make sure they know that they can contact you as a resource on infant-toddler issues.
- **Invite Program Supporters.** Consider inviting your supporters, such as your Board of Directors, local funders, and parents to participate in the day's activities. Having them present will send an effective message to the policymaker that your work impacts upon, and is supported by, the larger community.
- **Consider Inviting the Media.** A visit from a policymaker is a great way to garner media attention for your program or site. Send a press release or call to let them know the details of the policymaker's visit, and follow up before the visit to ensure a better media turnout. Work with the policymaker's office on any media activities that you plan. They may have requests or press contacts they would like present. Finally, if press will be attending your site visit, make sure that the children and their parents know that they might be part of a news story and photographed. Check with your program administrator to learn more about your organization's policy about the media and interviewing families.

WAYS TO MAKE THE SITE VISIT A MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE

- **Make it interactive.** Encourage your policymaker to take part in the day's activity and interact with the children and families. Allow time for questions or an informal "meet and greet" when people can introduce themselves to the policymaker and talk about the impact of your program for them personally.
- **Take photos.** Remember your camera to document the day! Photos of the visit will be a great complement to a press release or your program's newsletter. You will need to

obtain a written photo release from each person who is photographed. For children under the age of 18, the release must be signed by the parent or guardian.

- **Follow-up.** Continue the momentum built during the site visit and follow-up with a thank you note to the policymaker immediately after the visit. Recap your main messages in the note, mention specific ways that the policymaker could support infants and toddlers in your community, and share the photographs from the visit! If you have a mailing list, be sure to add them to it so they begin to regularly receive updates from your program. You have established a great foundation with the site visit, and now you can build on this relationship throughout the year.