

Framing Infant and Toddler Mental Health for Policy Impact



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

Overview

To better understand how messaging can drive policy change and increase investment in Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) services, ZERO TO THREE commissioned a multi-method research initiative with alignco in 2022. This included focus groups with policymakers – such as congressional staffers, executive agency officials, and policy influencers – as well as public message testing. It is important to note that this research focused specifically on messaging to increase support for treatment-focused policy solutions, particularly parent-child therapies for infants and toddlers. As such, the findings primarily reflect perceptions and reactions to treatment-related framing, rather than the full range of strategies across the IECMH continuum. The findings point to actionable strategies for effectively framing mental health treatment needs of young children to engage policymakers and the broader public.

To elevate and advance IECMH policy and drive support for IECMH services, policymakers and advocates should:



Use Lay-Friendly Language:

Replace technical or clinical terms (like “infant mental health”) with accessible terms like “healthy development,” “emotional well-being,” and “support for families.”



Lead with Values and Solutions:

Begin messages with shared values (e.g., opportunity, fairness) and follow with concrete, actionable solutions that illustrate how policies can help.



Tell Emotionally Resonant, Real-Life Stories:

Use personal narratives featuring real families and children to humanize IECMH. These stories are more persuasive than statistics and help policymakers connect emotionally with the issue.



Avoid Problem-Saturated Narratives:

While it is important to acknowledge challenges, messages should emphasize how support and interventions work, offering hope and agency.



Tailor for Policymaker Audiences:

Link IECMH to broader policy goals, such as reducing disparities, improving education, or lowering healthcare costs. Position IECMH as essential to long-term societal well-being.

Key Findings Across Audiences



Policymakers Are Receptive but Need Clear Framing

Focus groups with policymakers revealed that while they understand early childhood is a critical time for development, the term “Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health” is unfamiliar or confusing. They often interpret “mental health” through an adult-centric lens connecting it to issues like adult or adolescent anxiety, suicide, and depression, not young children.

- **Terminology Matters:** Simplified language that is approachable and accurate works. Lean on language that is technically sound without sounding overly academic or politicized. Avoid clinical terms.
- **Connect IECMH to More Immediate Priorities:** Prioritizing issues around infants and toddlers seems to pale in comparison to more immediate political priorities (jobs, prices, inflation). It is important to connect IECMH to those issues that voters tend to care more about.

“ With access to therapies, infants and toddlers can get back on track developmentally after they suffer from mental health conditions caused by trauma, neglect, biological factors, or environmental situations.

Return on Investment Alone is not What Moves Support for Funding IECMH Treatments

Return on investment (ROI) arguments, while frequently requested by policymakers, have shown limited effectiveness in shifting support for IECMH policies.

- Digital testing revealed that ROI-focused messages often failed to increase support and sometimes caused backlash, especially among more conservative audiences.
- Incorporating ROI into emotionally compelling stories also weakened their impact.

“ A 2-year-old was sexually abused by a family friend who would watch him while his parents were at work. His parents noticed their son would freeze around men and violently resist leaving the house. The family was given access to government-funded therapies. This allowed the child to begin to heal, helped his parents understand his distress, and restored the child’s trust in nurturing relationships.

Stories and Emotion Drive Engagement

Both policymakers and the public are moved by emotionally compelling stories and imagery of real families and young children. Personal narratives humanize the issue and make it feel urgent. Policymakers connect more with human stories than data.

- Stories that center a young child's experience and show how government-funded therapies can help the child recover are most effective in garnering support for investment.
- Stories about infants and toddlers who have suffered extreme trauma at the hands of an adult rise to the top. These stories have the highest rates of bipartisan consensus and are the least divisive.
- Starting a story with a commonsense message and ending with a more logical – and less emotional – conclusion works best. It also helps to highlight the role and value of nurturing relationships with a parent or caregiver.
- Among messages that did not move support toward government funding, the children in the examples often experienced symptoms that are more likely to be interpreted as “normal” (e.g., excessive crying) rather than “psychological” or “physical” (e.g., being undernourished, freezing around men, night terrors).



ZERO to THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

“ *Infants and toddlers need consistent and caring adults in their lives to support their development. When caregivers are experiencing extreme stress, illness, trauma, or realities like deployment, poverty, or incarceration, it can disrupt and destabilize their children's mental health. Professional support can heal and restore relationships, helping families stay on the path to healthy development.* ”

Conclusion

In today's polarized political climate, effective messaging around IECMH must be nonpartisan, emotionally resonant, and rooted in shared values, relationships, and outcomes. Avoiding overly academic or clinical language and instead centering stories of real families can broaden understanding of IECMH, strengthen support, and inspire action – helping to ensure all young children have the strong start in life they deserve.

Thank you to Perigee Fund for their generous support of this work, and to the teams at alignco, Perry Udem, and Blue Rose who collaborated on the project.

For more information, visit:

zerotothree.org