

Effective Communication about the Early Years Strategies for Becoming a Better Communicator

To help infant-toddler professionals successfully communicate with policymakers and the public about early childhood development, the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network publishes a series of articles in *The Baby Monitor* focused on effective communication about the early years. In our previous articles in the framing series, we focused on the building blocks of how people reason about information, the elements that comprise a frame, and recommendations for communications about early childhood development. All of the articles in the series can be found on ZERO TO THREE's web site at:

http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_pub_framing.

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to building relationships with young children, we all know that effective communication is vitally important. The same is true for the relationships we build when advocating on behalf of infants, toddlers and their families. Effective communication can make the difference between a successful advocacy effort and one that never reaches the people making policy decisions. This article in the framing series addresses strategies that infant-toddler professionals can use to become better communicators about the early years. Changing the way we talk about our work is difficult, and it takes a good deal of practice to “get the hang” of these strategies. But we encourage you to stick with it, practice whenever an opportunity presents itself, and let us know how your new communications about babies are impacting policy change in your state.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Don't talk about elephants

You are probably wondering what elephants have to do with effective communication, but yes, this first strategy can have a significant impact on the success of your communications efforts. In school and in life, we are taught that a conversation should go in a particular order: start with what the audience is familiar with about the topic, and then introduce the new idea you would like them to consider. As advocates, we also tend to start our conversations about infants and toddlers with what we think will draw in our audience. We typically start with examples about young children from the news media or what people might think about young children from their own personal experiences. Unfortunately, “research from the cognitive sciences suggests that this tactic is a trap, and is likely to result in reinforcing old frames, not helping your audience appreciate new ones.”¹

So what does all of this have to do with elephants? Let's turn to the following example:

SPEAKER SAYS: Today I'm going to talk to you about the animals of Africa.

AUDIENCE THINKS: Animals of Africa? What do I know about animals of Africa? Not much. Any cues here for how to think about this?

SPEAKER SAYS: But I don't want you to think only of elephants.

AUDIENCE THINKS: Oh, yeah. They have elephants in Africa. Lots of elephants. I can now see elephants in Africa in my mind.

SPEAKER SAYS: Because it's really not about elephants. They are far less numerous than other species.

AUDIENCE THINKS: OK, there are lots of elephants. But also lots of something else.

SPEAKER SAYS: The animals that dominate Africa are really giraffes, not elephants.

AUDIENCE THINKS: Giraffes, huh? Yeah, I know what a giraffe looks like. Smaller than an elephant. I've had several minutes to think about elephants. And I've now got three elephants in my head (count them above), and only one giraffe. It's elephants I see when I close my eyes, not giraffes.

MORAL OF THE STORY: When you give people immediate cues to help them conceptualize and categorize, you are then working uphill to displace that frame. That is especially true when you first reinforce what they already believe or are familiar with, then attempt to contest it.

WHAT THE SPEAKER SHOULD HAVE SAID: I want to talk to you about the animals of Africa, especially the giraffe, the most populous species on the continent. Giraffes abound in all parts of Africa, stretching their giant necks from South Africa to Chad, and from Guinea to Somalia. There are more giraffes per person in Africa than there are cars in California. And while other animals also abound - elephants, lions, tigers, zebras - there are four giraffes for all of these animals combined. Giraffes rule.

MORAL OF THIS STORY: You have first conjured the image of the giraffe and made it highly visual before bringing in other animals. You have given people cues about "how many" giraffes there are and have given them two "[social math](#)" comparisons to bring it home. While you have acknowledged other animals, as you first set out to do in the original example, you have contextualized these animals so that we can dismiss them. And you have summed up your introduction with a clear statement that this is about giraffes.

FrameWorks Institute, "KIDS COUNT E-Zine 7: Don't think about elephants: Avoid this trap in your communications," Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. Retrieved September 23, 2008 from <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezine7.html>.

As a good communicator, watch out for situations in which you tend to fall into the elephant trap. Practice reframing your messages in ways which focus on your new ideas and new frames.

Bridging

Sometimes you will initiate your communications, but sometimes your communications will be in response to someone else's questions. It is important to be prepared to communicate effectively in all situations, regardless of the initiator. This is obviously true of interviews or question and answer sessions, during which a journalist or audience member has questions he/she wants to ask you about a topic in which you are an expert. When someone asks you questions about infants and toddlers, it can be easy to fall into the trap of answering the question asked of you, even if it takes you off message. Bridging is a strategy you can use in these situations to ensure that you are communicating your message about babies and toddlers consistently and effectively.

“Bridging, commonly referred to as answering a question by not answering the question, is a way to segue from a reporter's stated question to the information you want to communicate to the audience.”ⁱⁱ

Here's an example:

REPORTER: “Isn't it true that safety is the first thing a mom looks for in a daycare setting?”

SPOKESPERSON: “While safety is important, it needs to be balanced with other considerations, like the quality of the environment and the qualifications of the staff. Let me tell you what happens in the mind of a child at the age of 3...”

ANALYSIS: Many would say this is an effective bridge, but knowing what we know about framing, this accepts the frame of the question and repeats it before reframing. This is a mistake, because once you acknowledge a bad frame, you can't work your way out of it.

The better way to bridge from that question would have been: “There are several considerations for parents seeking early childhood education...”

ANALYSIS: The answer does not repeat the negative frame, seems responsive to the question, and allows the spokesperson to steer the conversation where they want it to go.

FrameWorks Institute, “KIDS COUNT E-Zine Issue 1: Bridging,” Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. Retrieved September 23, 2008 from <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezine1.html>.

Here are some rules developed by The FrameWorks Institute to help you become expert at bridging.

Rule 1:
Never repeat a negative frame.

Rule 2:
Know how your interview will be used.

Rule 3:
Frame the data or “don’t fight narrative with numbers.”

Rule 4:
Use metaphors to bridge.

Rule 5:
Contextualize.

Solutions-based storytelling

When we learn how to write in school, we are told to lead with the problem and then conclude with the solution. Whenever we read things about young children in the media or in advocacy materials, the problem is front and center. Most communications about young children describe every aspect of the problem in detail, using as many statistics as possible, accompanied by memorable personal stories.ⁱⁱⁱ Often, solutions are not discussed at all, or they are buried so deep in the text that they get lost. Whether intending to or not, when communications are crafted to focus on the problem, it tends to convince people that young children face dire problems that are unsolvable. If we want to change the conversation about young children and demonstrate that problems **can** be solved through policy changes, we must begin using the strategy of *solutions-based storytelling*.

As advocates, one of our jobs is to help the public and policymakers understand that we have the ability to solve many pressing social problems. It is a challenging task, but it is important to explain the factors that contribute to these problems and what policy solutions are available.

How do we do this? Tell the solution first, then back into the definition of the problem.

Here is another way to think about this strategy: “Don’t be *Chicken Little*. If we are always telling people the sky is falling, eventually they are going to stop listening. Instead, tell the story of the *Stone Soup*. In this under-told story, we demonstrate that a community works together to create a delicious soup, and everyone is making a small contribution to create something wonderful together. That is the kind of story we should tell about early childhood policy solutions.”^{iv}

Read the news to understand how frames are being used and interpreted

The news media is filled with examples of framing in action. In order to become a practiced framer, we encourage you to read, watch and listen to the news, and try to identify the frames and framing elements present in the stories. It can be particularly helpful to examine stories about issues with which you have little experience or knowledge. In those cases, sometimes the frames become more obvious than when you are reading about children's issues. In the stories you read or watch, examine how the frames are being used and think about how you are reasoning about the information based on the frame. Use these lessons as you craft frames and messages for your communications about infants and toddlers.

Test new frames

In the [fourth article in our framing series](#) we introduced the *message box* as a method for developing your messages about infants and toddlers. But once you develop these messages, how do you know if they are going to resonate with your audiences? How do you know if they are effectively changing the conversation about babies and toddlers?

As an advocate, it is important to test new frames and the messages that accompany them. One cost-effective way to do that is through informal focus group testing. Once you have some frames and messages you would like to test, put together an informal focus group to give you feedback on your communications. Try to select people for your focus group that are not working in the early childhood field, and select as diverse a group as possible. You can get them together in person or just email them examples of messages and ask for written feedback. The feedback they provide will help you understand the consequences of the frame you selected and determine whether your message is guiding people toward the policy solutions you are proposing.

No matter how you decide to test your new frames, here are some tips for your consideration:

- *Test how your messages work with different types of messengers* – As we discussed in the [second article in the framing series](#), your message can be either strengthened or undermined by your choice of messenger. Once you have developed some sample messages, assign different spokespeople to them and test out which messenger strengthens your frame the most.
- *Test how your messages work with different visuals* – The [third article in the framing series](#) discussed the power of visuals as an element of the frame. Pictures are visual shorthands and can trump even the most carefully constructed verbal or written frame.^v Select a variety of visuals to test with your message. See which one(s) support your frame in the best way.

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ⁱ FrameWorks Institute, “KIDS COUNT E-Zine Issue 7: Don’t think about elephants: Avoid this trap in your communications,” Washington, DC: The FrameWorks Institute. Retrieved September 23, 2008 from <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezine7.html>.

ⁱⁱ FrameWorks Institute, “KIDS COUNT E-Zine Issue 1: Bridging,” Washington, DC: The FrameWorks Institute. Retrieved September 23, 2008 from <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezine1.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ FrameWorks Institute, “FrameByte: Sharing Solutions,” (June 2007), Washington, DC: The FrameWorks Institute. Retrieved September 23, 2008 from http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/framebyte_solutions.pdf.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Bales, S.N. *Framing Public Issues*. (June 2004). Washington, DC: The FrameWorks Institute.