

TELLING THE SOLUTIONS STORY

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. All of the articles in the series can be found at http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_pub_framing.

Introduction

Learning to communicate begins at birth, and yet, it is one of those skills which we continue to master throughout our lives. As we grow, our communications needs change, and we must develop new skills to become effective communicators. This article in the framing series focuses on developing a communications skill that can take your advocacy to a new level: solutions storytelling. As the FrameWorks Institute notes, “it is remarkable how much of our communication is spent describing every aspect of a problem in great detail, trotting out statistic after statistic accompanied by memorable case stories, without discussing solutions in detail [or at all].”¹ Talking about solutions, on the other hand, has the potential to change the way people reason about infant-toddler development and how they can support it. In this article, the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network draws from the research of the FrameWorks Institute, as well as the Topos Partnership (for Douglas Gould & Co. and Child Advocacy 360 Foundation), to inform our advocacy and communications practice.

What are Solutions Stories?

Many of us may remember learning in English class that the proper order of a paper should be to state the problem first, and then support it with an explanation of why the problem is worthy of attention. The conclusion, we are instructed, should provide the reader with next steps by illustrating what actions the reader can take to help solve the problem. On some level, “this approach seems sensible. [After all,] don’t problems spark the desire to find solutions?”² On the other hand, communications research shows that first impressions matter. When a story gives the bad news first and then the good news, the public is often left “feeling that social problems are overwhelming and unsolvable.”³ Furthermore, “the media and issue advocates have been quite successful at convincing people that children face dire problems.”⁴ While the public may not be as informed as we are about infant-toddler development and well-being, we should ask ourselves whether “we need to continue to expend large amounts of time and energy continuing to make [our] case.”⁵

The question remains, how do we effectively communicate our story in a way that does not focus initially on the problem, but still motivates the public and policymakers to enact policy change? The answer: telling solutions stories. Solutions stories begin with an effective solution or intervention and then follow with a definition of the problem. This kind of story shows that we know how to fix problems, and that no problem is too severe that we, as a nation, cannot work together to solve it. As research by the Topos Partnership suggests,⁶ solutions stories:

- Lift the public’s desire for collective action;
- Increase support for active government (including a range of children’s policies);
- Lead to support for higher taxes to get higher quality services;

- Lift support for policies targeted at at-risk children; and,
- Receive more attention for being unique, interesting, and motivating.

The FrameWorks Institute describes it this way:

Most of us remember the story of *Chicken Little*, who one too many times told the other animals, “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” Of course, eventually, they ceased to listen to yet another prediction of crisis. This is the story that we tell too often in our publications, speeches and media interviews, and it fails to help the public understand the source of the problem[, who is responsible,] and it’s possible solutions. There are so many better stories to tell. For example, an excellent and under-told story is found in the children’s book *Stone Soup*. In this story, a community works together to create a delicious soup, everyone making a small contribution to create something wonderful together. This is the story that Americans desperately need to hear, and the store that we can learn how to tell.⁷

Rethinking How We Tell the Early Childhood Story

Recent research by the Topos Partnership helped to identify five core story elements⁸ you can use to create your solutions stories. These story elements complement and overlap with one another, providing a roadmap for advocates to use in rethinking how to tell the early childhood story.

1. **Connection to Community:** Broaden your story to include the community, not just parents, children and caregivers. Be sure to remind people that the **whole community benefits from children who grow up to be contributing members**. Also, it is not just a one-way street. Point out how **the community can have important beneficial influences on children and families**.
2. **Big Picture Thinking:** Tell your story about effective interventions in terms of the broader context, not just how a program helps one particular child or family. To do that, **list a number of solutions or programs and talk about how we all rely on “public structures”** (institutions, such as libraries, that are created for common use and benefit) to give a more concrete picture of how we create and build a stronger community.
3. **Necessary, Not Just Nice:** Children’s issues, particularly those focused on infants and toddlers, are often seen as nice to do, but not necessary. In our solutions stories, we must position successful programs as a necessity in order to make our communications stronger. In doing so, “it is helpful to **focus on how a particular solution works**. When people have a concrete picture of how a program helps, they are more likely to see it as important”⁹ and necessary.
4. **Inspiring Action:** Motivating people to act is one of the most challenging aspects of any advocacy effort. Solutions stories have the potential to inspire people to engage in direct action, particularly if the stories include **examples of the behavior we want to encourage**. Be sure to **focus on the collective actions that mobilize change**, not just the individual actions of leaders and “heros.”

5. **“Proving” Effectiveness:** Depending on your audience, your solutions stories can tell varying levels of information about the effectiveness of the program or intervention. If **hard statistical proof** is available, it can and should be used (particularly with policymakers and funders). However, Topos Partnership research found that if rigorous data is not available, you can tell solutions stories that provide **anecdotal support** and still get positive results.

How to Define the Problem in a Solutions Story

Solutions stories should begin with a focus on the effective intervention, but it is necessary to mention the problem. The question is, if the public and policymakers are so overwhelmed when they hear about social problems, how do we talk about it without derailing our communication? The key lies in **how** we define the problem in our solutions narrative. When talking about problems, it is important to show cause and effect: What gaps in services and systems are causing this problem? What effect does it have on our community when we do not have the services that families need? A problem that is defined by outcomes is one which leaves little room for solutions. “Bad outcomes can usually be blamed on parents, but inadequate systems require a public response.”¹⁰

Solutions stories have the potential to change the conversation about infant-toddler issues and affect changes in policy that otherwise were not possible. As you continue your efforts to hone your communications skills, we hope you will practice using solutions at the forefront of your advocacy story.

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¹ Diane Benjamin, “Sharing Solutions,” *FrameWorks Institute FrameByte*, June 2007, www.frameworksinstitute.org.

² Topos Partnership., *Solutions Storytelling: Messaging to Mobilize Support for Children’s Issues*, Message Development Research Report, Douglas Gould & Co. and Child Advocacy 360 Foundation, May 2010, <http://www.childadvocacy360.com/>.

³ Benjamin, “Sharing Solutions.”

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Topos Partnership, *Solutions Storytelling: Messaging to Mobilize Support for Children’s Issues*.

⁷ Benjamin, “Sharing Solutions.”

⁸ Topos Partnership, *Solutions Storytelling: Messaging to Mobilize Support for Children’s Issues*. Descriptions of the elements are paraphrased from this report.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.