

MOVING THE INFANT-TODDLER POLICY AGENDA FORWARD TOGETHER: STRATEGIES TO BUILD SUCCESSFUL COALITIONS

At the local, state and federal levels, advocates are increasingly working together to bring the voice of infants, toddlers and their families to public policy. In many cases, they have formed coalitions or alliances of distinct partners who come together temporarily to take joint action in support of an infant-toddler policy agenda. Working in coalition can have many advantages for advocates, as it allows partners to have a larger impact with fewer resources. It is also a method by which diverse partners can come together around a common issue, and provide a united, clear message to policymakers about what is best for very young children.

The success of a coalition is largely influenced by its leadership, the internal structure and systems that have been put in place, the culture developed among partners, and the environment in which it exists. This article provides practical strategies and examples to help you navigate these four influential factors and build effective coalitions to improve policies for infants and toddlers in your state or community. The guidance presented here is based in part on the coalition experiences of the 2005-2007 Better Baby Care grantees: The Family & Workplace Connection (Delaware), Tennessee Family Child Care Alliance, Voices for Georgia's Children, and Wyoming Children's Action Alliance.¹

Leadership

Coalition leadership can take many forms, including having an established leader, rotating leadership positions, or shared leadership. Whatever the structure, effective leadership must bring together the perspectives of the varying coalition members to create a cooperative effort that is agreed upon by all members.² It is imperative that coalition leaders possess an understanding of the value of collaborative work and an ability to put the larger issue above individual concerns.³ Possible strategies for successful coalition leadership are:

- ***Ensure that all partners feel ownership.*** Coalitions are often voluntary working groups and all members may not be able to contribute equal amounts of time and resources to the shared work. In some cases, this can result in the coalition's agenda being dominated by a few members, which may alienate other partners. Effective coalition leadership should work to ensure that partners remain invested by devising processes through which there is space and opportunity for each member to participate in strategy and decision-making.
- ***Hold a retreat.*** Participating in a coalition has many benefits, but it also takes quite a bit of work that can be additional to each partner's job responsibilities. Holding a retreat during which all partners are present at the table and are focused solely on the coalition's issue may be helpful in devising a strategy to move the work forward. Additionally, it is an opportunity for the group to establish trust and to strengthen their working relationships with each other.
- ***Set long- and short-term goals.*** Policy change does not happen overnight. Consequently, it is useful for the coalition to set clear goals that can be achieved in the near future, as well as goals that will take many steps to accomplish. At the beginning, work toward a specific goal that is timely and can be realistically accomplished during

the first year of the coalition's work. Once that goal is achieved, continue to build upon the momentum created and work toward long-term goals incrementally. For example, Georgia CAN, a statewide children's advocacy network, found that a specific call to action around the reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program helped coalition members become active and coordinated as a group, as it presented something immediate and timely in which partners could become engaged.

- ***Hire an external facilitator when necessary.*** In most cases, coalition leaders will have a vested interest in the group's agenda, and may not always be able to take the objective stance needed to move the work forward. When situations arise where consensus cannot be built around an issue and the work is halted, an external facilitator may be helpful in working through differences and finding common ground on which to move forward.

Internal Structure and Systems

In many ways, coalitions are informal organizations and thus may need a defined structure and system of operation to perform well. While each partner has a defined role in his or her own organization, these roles may not always translate to the coalition work. Structure and systems will help to define the new coalition roles and ensure that they are well-understood by the group.⁴ Additionally, a structure and system of operation will help to clarify expectations for coalition partners, and consequently increase their comfort with the coalition's work. Possible methods to develop internal structures and systems within coalitions are:

- ***Become highly organized at certain points.*** The work of an infant-toddler coalition will increase and decrease depending on many external factors, such as the legislature's schedule, release of new research that impacts the field, or social and cultural events that affect the lives of infants, toddlers and their families in your community. During a time of intense advocacy activity, increased organization may reduce the burden of work. By developing structures, such as task forces and regularly scheduled meetings, partners may be able to better handle the increased level of work. For example, the Coalition for Wyoming's Children established ground rules for operation before the intensity of their work on child care quality issues increased. This allowed time for the rules to be implemented and for partners to become comfortable with the coalition's method of operation.
- ***Assign discrete tasks.*** The workload of a coalition and the pace at which it is done can be challenging. Sometimes it is hard to determine who is responsible for different pieces of the work. To remedy this, it is helpful to assign discrete tasks to individuals or small groups. In this way, you capitalize on the skill sets that are present and also create a system of accountability for the work.
- ***Ensure a robust and diverse membership.*** In order for policy change to occur, an issue must rise above many competitors to grab the attention of policymakers. A coalition can be especially effective at accomplishing this task. By showing that a diverse group of individuals and groups committed to the needs of infants and toddlers agree on a specific issue, a coalition can heighten the visibility and importance of the issue. Coalitions should develop a system for outreach to new constituencies to ensure that its membership consists not only of likely allies, such as professionals in the field or children's organizations, but also unlikely partners, such as local business leaders, chambers of commerce, law enforcement, and economists. The diversity of voices advocating

together will help the infant-toddler policy agenda rise above competing interests and ultimately advance.

Culture

The culture of a coalition can be thought of as the glue that holds the group together and guides how the coalition members act towards each other and their work.⁵ While the components of a culture can be difficult to formally identify, it undoubtedly impacts the progress of a coalition's activities. For example, if a coalition's culture is one that promotes closed-door dealing and unequal sharing of information, it can hinder the group's ability to reach consensus on an issue and present a united voice. Conversely, if the culture is one of open communication and respect for the diversity of partners' values, it can aid the group in setting mutually agreed upon goals and a plan for implementation. Possible strategies that can be conducive to creating a productive culture within a coalition are:

- ***Be willing to think outside your comfort zone.*** Given the diverse perspectives and missions within any coalition, partners must be able to think beyond their own values and advocacy focus to understand the values of the other groups at the table. A willingness to stretch beyond your own approach to the coalition's issue will allow you to learn about fresh perspectives, reach new constituencies and ultimately build a stronger support base for your issue.
- ***Have a common focus.*** Putting aside individual interests to pursue a common goal is a difficult, but necessary task in coalition work. It often requires members to make a paradigm shift from working intensely in their own niche to a focus on what all members have in common – improving policy for infants, toddlers and their families. Members of the Tennessee Family Child Care Alliance experienced this paradigm shift as their focus moved from caring for the needs of the children directly in their care to working together to advocate for all of Tennessee's infants and toddlers. Once these shifts took place, the coalition was able to truly cohere around their issue and begin to move their collective agenda forward.
- ***Create a shared language to ensure consistent communication.*** If a coalition is to present a unified voice on infant-toddler issues, they also must have a consistent language with which to share their message. This requires that the coalition partners develop a common language with which to talk about their issue to both each other and to the outside world, so that communication is clear and misunderstandings are minimized.

Environment

The environment in which coalitions form and operate can be an important factor in their functionality and success. External environmental factors, such as the political climate and the existing relationships and history among coalition partners, can have significant effects on a coalition's success in moving an infant-toddler agenda. Internal environment factors also come into play, such as the values, beliefs, knowledge and interests of the various coalition partners.⁶ Methods for using environmental factors to strengthen your coalition include:

- ***Find an external champion.*** A supporter who is influential within your political arena can help a coalition get the infant-toddler message heard and also give credence to the issue beyond each partner's individual interest. Having the support of someone external to the coalition may also help to navigate the differences between partners and make their

common goal much clearer. The Tennessee Family Child Care Alliance works closely with a champion within state government to move forward the infant-toddler policy agenda. By developing this relationship, the advocates have ensured that the voice of infants and toddlers is represented in the policymaking process. Tennessee's champion serves as a conduit between the state's advocates and the decision-making process and has been instrumental in advocating for additional funding for infants and toddlers in the state and increased training and technical assistance for child care providers.

- ***Understand varying points of external stakeholders.*** Gaining support from various stakeholders external to your coalition that are needed to move your agenda forward will require employing diverse strategies. One size may not fit all. Depending on their interest and perspective, a stakeholder may have very different reasons to support or oppose your issue. Be sure to understand a certain group or individual's position about infant-toddler issues and devise a strategy that specifically targets their concern in a manner that is respectful to their position. While you may not be in agreement on this specific issue, it is quite possible that you may need to work together on a different issue in the future.
- ***Let go of the "nay-sayers."*** No matter how successful your coalition's campaign is, you may not be able to gain the support of each and every stakeholder in your state or community. Concentrate on those individuals or groups that are possible allies and place less focus on those you know will not work toward the common goal of the coalition.
- ***All partners must fully participate.*** Due to their overlap in interest in early childhood issues, some coalition partners may receive support from the same funders or have relationships with the same political allies. Consequently, partners may be hesitant to fully share their knowledge or resources. However, to function as a cohesive voice for infants and toddlers, all coalition partners must be willing to share some of their resources, although not all groups may be able to share equally.

Conclusion

Working in coalition can be an effective strategy to further the infant-toddler policy agenda, both by combining resources with other organizations and advocates to lessen the burden on individual organizations, and also by creating cohesion and support around an issue from groups with diverse interests. Based on the strategies and experiences of other infant-toddler advocates, ZERO TO THREE Policy Network members can strive to participate in successful coalitions that effectively improve policy for infants, toddlers and their families.

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¹ The Better Baby Care Campaign worked to encourage and support states, tribes, and local communities to promote the healthy development of babies, toddlers, and their families. From 2003-2007, the ZERO TO THREE Policy Center facilitated Better Baby Care pass-through grants to state and community organizations to support advocacy activities which expand the scope of services for infants, toddlers and their families.

² Ibid.

³ Stephen, Lynn; Lanier, Jan; Ramirez, Ramon; and Westerling, Marcy. 2006. *Building Alliances: Collaboration Between CAUSA and the Rural Organizing Project (ROP) in Oregon*. New York, NY: New York University, Research Center for Leadership in Action.

⁴ Bolman, Lee and Deal, Terrence. 2003. *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Bolman, Lee and Deal, Terrence. 2003. *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.