



Infant and Toddler Messaging Guide

Written by Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC
with ZERO TO THREE



ADVOCACY &
COMMUNICATION
SOLUTIONS, LLC



ZERO TO THREE®
National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

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While educators, advocates, and policymakers pay considerable attention to preschool- and kindergarten-age children, the issues related to infants and toddlers are different and critical to creating a foundation for healthy development and a lifetime of learning. The infant and toddler years, therefore, need specific messaging, unique from those for older children. To help with this work, Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) with [ZERO TO THREE](#) developed this messaging guide to help stakeholders talk about the importance of the earliest years of a child's life and to make a stronger case for investment in infants and toddlers.

This guide is split into two sections:

- **Section 1** provides insight on national message trends for children from birth to 3 years old. This section includes:
 1. Examples of messages used across the country to describe a wide range of infant and toddler issues, including health and nutrition, mental health, maternal depression, home visitation, infant mortality, and more.
 2. Suggestions for how to improve those messages.
- **Section 2** offers guidance on how to develop infant and toddler messages that work effectively.

Several publicly available sources of information were used to identify infant and toddler messages from early childhood organizations and agencies across the country. A full list of these sources can be found beginning on page 24.

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SECTION 1:

National Message Trends for Children From Birth to 3 Years Old

In late 2014 and early 2015, ACS conducted one of the first ever national scans of message trends in infant and toddler advocacy¹. ACS examined messages used by state and national advocacy organizations, as well as state agencies, to determine which messages were currently and most often deployed in advocacy communication. It is important to note that, while the messages presented here may show up most frequently in advocacy communication, their actual effectiveness in helping to deliver outcomes has not been formally evaluated. Based on ACS's experience, which includes the development of multiple communication strategies and plans, as well as policy advocacy, at the local, regional, statewide, and national levels, we recommend ways to strengthen and highlight messages that we have seen work particularly well.

As with all communication and messaging, state and community context should help to inform final messaging strategies and can inevitably trump popular national message trends. As you consider the influence of national trends in your own message development, be sure to always consider your particular issues and audiences. A message that sounds great from another state or locality may not be effective in your community. Create a message that is specific to your local context by knowing how others are focusing efforts or where there is political will. For example, if today there is a strong emphasis on addressing autism or poverty in your state, use messages that will connect to those issues and still be relevant to infants and toddlers.

Remember that national message trends change, and your messaging should take that reality into account. Some messages are used in certain aspects of infant and toddler care because they have “always” been used. Although these messages may feel comfortable to industry insiders, it does not mean that they are effective for those outside of the early childhood sector or that they are successful advocacy messages. Those in the early childhood sector are not the likely target audience when it comes to message development, so what sounds good to those who are in the field likely may not resonate with those who don't do this work on a daily basis. Consequently, you will need to regularly evaluate national message trends to determine whether to stick with your current messaging framework. By knowing your target audiences and following the recommendations presented in this guide, you can produce powerful messages that will resonate with your audiences.



¹ACS searched for messages in the following areas: early childhood mental health, home visitation, developmental delays, infant mortality, well-child check-ups, brain science/brain development, child-parent interactions, maternal depression/mental health, and nutrition/health care. For a full list of sources, see p. 24.

ZERO TO THREE's [Policy Guide](#) connects specific infant and toddler programs to outcomes for children (good health, strong families, and positive early learning experiences). The Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University offers a summary of the brain science, which makes clear that the greatest opportunities for influencing a child's life begin on Day 1 and that policy choices should reflect this knowledge. Outcomes in the Policy Guide mirror the outcome-based national message trends given here. ZERO TO THREE and the Center on the Developing Child make the case for greater investment for infants and toddlers through six major points:

1. Early experiences, coupled with the influence of genes, literally shape the architecture of the brain.
2. Early experiences take place in relationships.
3. All domains of development are interdependent.
4. Development is cumulative, so early experiences lay the foundation for all that follows.
5. Because early experiences matter, we must intervene with young children who are at risk.
6. Early experiences are a proven investment in our future.

Analysis of a few of ZERO TO THREE's specific messages is included in the examples that follow. In addition, ZERO TO THREE's Policy Guide provides stakeholders with several data points and facts that work well when integrated into messages.

The national message trends presented here fall into two general categories: those focused on outcomes of infant and toddler investments and those focused on program or service provision. Examples are adapted from publicly available materials from a variety of early childhood organizations and agencies. Italicized language following each example reflects the experience of ACS. These messages are food for thought, based on your own context and needs, rather than "off-the-shelf" content to use at will. With messaging, there are very few "cut-and-paste" messages, and the balance between national message trends and local preferences must be considered and balanced to determine the best approach.



Early childhood advocates, especially pre-K advocates, often use messages that address the long-term outcomes and benefits of programs. Outcome-based messages are generally successful when they are clear, concise, and justifiable. In addition, context matters, especially when talking about outcomes or benefits for your state or community.

It is not surprising that many infant and toddler messengers also turn to outcomes to make their case. These messages focus on four main outcome areas for both society and the child:

1. Healthy development
2. Strong families
3. Long-term success
4. Return on investment (ROI)

Healthy Development

Communication that focuses on healthy child development is often used in support of services for early childhood mental health, maternal depression, nutrition, and other health issues. Examples of messages that highlight healthy development outcomes include the following:

The first 3 years of life are a critical period for language development: your child’s brain is developing rapidly and is at its most receptive to new information. This is reflected in the dramatic changes in language use, which can be observed during this period. Generally, a baby’s first spoken words occur at about 1 year old, although comprehension begins several months earlier. At first, vocabulary growth is slow, but between 18 months and 3 years, most children experience a vocabulary explosion, after which growth levels off until about the first grade. Because of the importance of this early stage of learning, your home is your baby’s first classroom, and you are the teacher.

Healthy Development MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message is clear and focused and does not use complicated academic language to describe brain development. Use this type of message strategically to explain the importance of development.

Early screening and identification of maternal depression has an 80% to 90% success rate and offers long-term health care cost savings. It also helps support healthy child development and addresses issues of early childhood mental health challenges.

Healthy Development MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

Using outcome data is a great way to show success of the program or activity and why it matters for children. For a stronger message, connect it to long-term outcomes for children who are supported by programs that promote healthy development. See the following section on long-term success for additional ideas.



Tooth decay is caused by a bacterial infection called “caries.” It is the most common chronic disease of early childhood. Early childhood caries (ECC), the bacteria that causes tooth decay, is a significant health problem for children. In fact, nearly half of all 5-year-olds have experienced tooth decay. Those “baby teeth” are important—a healthy mouth helps children eat, speak, learn, and play without pain. Because ECC is a chronic disease, it can also compromise the health of emerging permanent teeth. The good news is that nearly all tooth decay can be prevented. The foundation for good oral health is established early in childhood, and the role of the mother is significant, even before conception.

Healthy Development
MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message uses concrete examples to clearly explain the problem, why it is important, and the solution. Some of the information about caries and the bacteria that causes decay may be misinterpreted, however, which is why it is important to double check your facts, make sure the message includes important context, and ensure the messages are research-based. The message could also be shortened based on audience and the available time frame in which to communicate it.

Relationships are the building blocks of healthy development. If, as very young children, we have positive, predictable relationships with our parents or other caregivers, we will feel safe from harm and secure that our basic needs will be met. Therefore, our energy can be spent on exploring the world around us and having the positive early learning experiences that will nurture our developing brains and help us to achieve healthy growth and development.

Healthy Development
MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message does a good job of connecting healthy development to outcomes for children. It also provides concrete examples to allow the readers an opportunity to see themselves in the message.

Brains are built over time, from the bottom up. The basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that involves the reciprocal influences of both genetics and early experiences and begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Early experiences are much like the construction of a solid, stable building. The neural pathways and connections literally shape the physical architecture of the brain, forming the strong foundation on which everything else is built. When it comes to the healthy development of infants and toddlers, this means that the quality of that architecture directly results in either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the learning, health, and behavior that follow.

Healthy Development
MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

Although the message itself is lengthy, this is a strong message because it paints a picture (constructing a building) and puts brain science into language that many audiences can understand. It explains the importance of brain science and why it matters for child development. It can be even stronger if it describes societal benefits and is followed up by specific examples of the types of experiences that bolster healthy development.



Connecting your message to the outcome of strong families relates it to a core societal value. These messages are generally strong because they are tied to our core beliefs, giving us an emotional connection to the message. Examples of messages that use strong families as an outcome include the following:

Because children don't arrive with instruction manuals, participating parents are those who lack the extended family support, experience, and knowledge of basic parenting skills that are critical to success during pregnancy and through the first few years of a child's life. This voluntary program is for families who ask to be empowered with better knowledge to provide better health and better opportunities for their children.

Strong Families MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This is a strong message because it is tied to our belief system that strong parents and families benefit children. Instead of doing the work "for" families, this message offers to help families be the best they can be by providing them with the tools that will benefit children in the long term.

Parents play the most active and significant role in their baby's healthy development. Young children learn and grow in strong families where parents are able to successfully face the challenge of caring for their children while meeting their work and other responsibilities. We can nurture strong families that allow babies and toddlers to thrive by enacting policies that address the following issues: basic needs, family leave, child welfare, and home visiting.

Strong Families MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message is tied to our belief system about parents playing an active role in their child's development. It effectively uses the problem-solution framework while staying positive. It also provides context for those who are not familiar with early childhood by painting the picture of what a strong family looks like, allowing the message to resonate with a wider audience.



Long-Term Success

Many infant and toddler messages highlight long-term successful outcomes for young children, such as healthy relationships, ability to learn, or academic achievement. The best of these messages are those in which outcomes are tangible, believable, and reliable enough to be understood by individuals without an early childhood background. Examples of messages focusing on long-term success include the following:

Mental health disorders can be identified in a child's early years; when treated, children and youth with mental health problems are more successful at home, in schools, and in their communities.

Long-Term Success
MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message effectively connects children with the school and community. Highlighting how the success of the child will benefit the community would make this message resonate with a broader audience. Additionally, this message could be improved with concrete ways in which children are successful, even with such early challenges. For some audiences, it might also be useful to explain what mental health disorders look like and how they are overcome so that they can see themselves in that situation.

Infant mortality is often described as "the most important index of the health and well-being of a community and our society." Understanding the causes of fetal, infant, and maternal death sheds critical light on the gaps in resources, policies, and health care that compromise the safety and survival of our state's most vulnerable women and children.

Long-Term Success
MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This is a strong message because many audiences, including policymakers, are currently focusing on infant mortality. It is tangible, and people can understand it. This message also uses a problem-solution frame, which makes it more powerful.

The fact that children are affected by their surroundings is too obvious to bear repeating. Child development specialists have produced decades of research showing that the environment of a child's earliest years can have effects that last a lifetime.

Long-Term Success
MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message uses research to make the case for a healthy environment. This message could be more powerful if it used the problem-solution frame, as well as concrete examples to make the argument more tangible and relatable.



Your child's first 3 years are a window of opportunity for you to make sure he has the strongest possible foundation for success. This is especially true in the first 3 years of life, when children are at their most sensitive to positive and negative influences. A great deal of brain development occurs during this period, as the brain adapts itself to the child's needs. Experiences during these early years help determine the way the brain wires itself; therefore, they have important and long-lasting consequences. For example, many of the causes of achievement gaps among high school students originate in early childhood and are already present when children begin school.

Long-Term Success
MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message is effectively tied to a "popular" issue: achievement gaps. The message could be shortened to increase understanding and have an even greater effect.

Your child deserves quality education from the start! The quality of child care has a direct effect on a child's ability to learn, to build healthy relationships, and to become the best he can be.

Long-Term Success
MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This is a strong message because it connects to concrete examples and short-term outcomes for children and why child care is important. It could be improved by connecting the issue to broader societal outcomes so that others who may not have children can appreciate the benefits.

By 3 years old, low-income children have heard 30 million fewer words than their middle-income peers. This low level of parent-child verbal interaction is one of the key reasons why so many of the 5 million children in the United States living in low-income families are unprepared for pre-K or kindergarten and enter school significantly behind their middle- and higher-income peers. This lack of a language- and learning-rich home environment not only limits the development of children's language and literacy skills, but it also affects their numeracy and social-emotional skills as well, inhibiting all aspects of successful school readiness.

Long-Term Success
MESSAGE

Although this is a good use of data to illustrate a problem, it could be strengthened by offering a tangible solution and using a more positive tone. An improved message might look like this:

WHY IT WORKS

- *Problem: By the age of 3, low-income children have heard 30 million fewer words than their middle-income peers.*
- *Why it matters: A learning-rich home environment encourages development of children's language and literacy skills, affecting their numeracy and social-emotional skills—all aspects of successful school readiness.*
- *Solution: Supporting all families with knowledge and skills to increase parent-child verbal interaction and interactive experiences to encourage problem-solving, numeracy, and appropriate social-emotional skills will ensure that all children are prepared to succeed in school.*



Return on Investment (ROI)

Messages that address ROI often come from programs and services that have been evaluated (e.g., home visiting and WIC [Women, Infants, and Children] programs). These messages can present powerful evidence of why the issue should matter to a broader audience (e.g., policymakers and business leaders) than to just parents and families. Examples of ROI messages (with a general assessment of all at the end) include the following:

Children who are healthy and successful socially and emotionally have a greater chance of becoming economically productive and engaged citizens. In addition to the important benefit to children, making investments in the well-being of the next generation ultimately translates into both benefits to and savings for taxpayers.

Return on Investment
MESSAGE

Decades of research show that family support programs are effective and ultimately save money for taxpayers. When quality programs, carried out in local communities, are properly implemented, they lead to increased family self-sufficiency, lower health care costs, and reduced need for remedial education. For every dollar spent on these efforts, at least \$2 in future spending is saved.

Return on Investment
MESSAGE

Even the most capable and well-equipped parent can need a hand now and again. Now imagine the challenges facing low-income families with limited time and less access to services and resources. Quality home visiting gives parents the insights and tools they need to raise healthier, happier kids. Home visiting has been proven to reduce problems including low-weight births; emergency room visits; and the rates of children in the social welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice corrections systems. Beyond the obvious quality-of-life benefits for the participants, the effect on the community and the taxpayer is equally powerful, yielding considerable cost savings for states that implement and invest in such programs.

Return on Investment
MESSAGE

High-quality, research-based interventions for at-risk infants and toddlers not only benefit individual children but also benefit society in ways that far exceed program costs. Cost-benefit analyses conducted by numerous economists demonstrate the importance of the earliest experiences and interventions for at-risk children. Economic analysis demonstrates that for every dollar invested in early childhood programs, savings of \$3.78 to \$17.07 can be expected. This is because early interventions for young at-risk children promote school retention, improve the quality of the workforce, help schools to be more productive, raise earnings, strengthen social attachments, and reduce crime, teenage pregnancy, and welfare dependency.

Return on Investment
MESSAGE



The federal WIC program, even in times of funding cuts, continues to have strong local and federal support across the political spectrum. This is due, in part, to advocates' use of several ROI messages. These include the following:

One WIC dollar spent on a pregnant woman saves \$1.92 to \$4.21 in Medicaid for the newborn and mother.

Return on Investment MESSAGE

It costs more than \$27,000 per pound to raise a low- or very low-birth-weight baby to normal weight.

Return on Investment MESSAGE

Improved birth weight reduces Medicaid cost by an average of \$12,000 to \$15,000 per infant.

Return on Investment MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

Messages from established home visitation programs or WIC are often adept at weaving in outcome-based messages. Data from studies and evaluations of those programs are drawn upon to help provide outcome messages. These ROI examples are strong messages because they provide evidence to back them up and are able to address a societal belief (e.g., we all need help sometimes) without becoming academic. They make the information accessible to the general public and to policymakers. They also help people see what's in it for them—better neighbors, a better community, and a better economy.



Often, messages are developed to build public awareness for particular programs or services for young children. The way services are described provides important insights into how services are delivered and who needs them. Infant and toddler messages that relay information about programs or services often cover issues important to families and caregivers, such as infant mortality, developmental delays, or well-child exams. These messages may touch on early childhood risk factors (child, family, or community), service provision (who is affected by the issue and/or gaps in services), and/or family involvement and parent–child interactions. Although these messages often convey specific programmatic information, they are most effective when they present compelling information on why those services matter to children and families, and why others should care, so that a wide audience can see themselves in the messages.

Program or service messages can be categorized into the following areas:

- Risk factors;
- Service provision; and
- Family involvement and parent–child interaction.

Risk Factors

Messages in this category address the problem. Stronger messages connect the risk factors back to long-term outcomes and why they matter for infants and toddlers. It is important that these messages stay focused on one issue, do not get too detailed with data and examples, and pivot to a positive solution. Examples of messages focused on risk factors include the following:

Although the early years are a time of great opportunity for babies, they are also a time of great vulnerability. A child’s development can be seriously compromised by a disability or developmental delay or by environmental influences such as exposure to toxins, extreme poverty, malnutrition, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, community or family violence, or poor quality child care. Early and sustained exposure to such risks can influence the physical architecture of the developing brain, preventing infants and toddlers from fully developing the neural pathways and connections that facilitate later learning. Fortunately, program evaluation research demonstrates that quality, research-based early intervention programs that begin early can improve the odds of positive outcomes for the nation’s youngest and most vulnerable children well into the adult years.

**Risk Factors
MESSAGE**

WHY IT WORKS

This message is strong because it connects early childhood risk factors to research and long-term outcomes. It appeals to a broad audience because it uses concrete examples that avoid jargon.



Most mental health problems begin with early signs or identifiable risks. Even infants and toddlers in the first 2 years of life can experience risks or more serious conditions.

Risk Factors MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message effectively grabs attention by identifying a challenge for infants and toddlers. An enhanced message would give a reader hope that the situation can improve for the child through intervention. Most people turn away from messages that are depressing. Including a solution to the problem and concrete, positive examples of how it will help the child would make this message more powerful and relatable to a broader audience.

Neighborhood characteristics and family income can be risk factors that affect young children's social-emotional health and development. Parents and caregivers play an important role in supporting children's healthy development.

Risk Factors MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message highlights the parent/caregiver role in healthy development. Including more detail on what parents and caregivers can do to support development and why that matters for long-term outcomes would allow for better understanding from a wider audience. Additionally, offering a solution and giving the audience enough information to draw conclusions without too much data would make the message more relatable. For example, a helpful addition might be: "Giving families the tools they need to support their children's development improves a child's ability to develop relationships, communicate, and solve problems."

Infant death is a critical indicator of the health of a population. It reflects the overall state of maternal health as well as the quality and accessibility of primary health care available to pregnant women and infants.

Risk Factors MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message clearly states long-term outcomes or community benefits and ensures that the message resonates with all target audiences, not only those in the maternal and child health field.

Early brain development is the foundation of human adaptability and resilience, but these qualities come at a price. Because experiences have such a great potential to affect brain development, children are especially vulnerable to persistent negative influences during this period. On the other hand, these early years are a window of opportunity for parents, caregivers, and communities. Positive early experiences have a huge effect on children's chances for achievement, success, and happiness.

Risk Factors MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This is a strong message because it is focused on the issue and does not get caught up in details. Instead of going into scientific detail about brain development, which could be confusing, the message focuses on the importance of positive experiences during the early years and connects them to outcomes for children and the community.

Service Provision

Section 1

Some messages about service provision address gaps that affect particular populations, pointing out a problem. Other messages provide information to the public about services available through their organizations or agencies. Service provision messages often state a problem but may not offer a solution or explain why it matters, how it affects a child's future, or why anyone should care. Examples of messages in this category include the following:

Young children in child welfare settings have greater needs and are less likely to receive services. Thirty-eight percent of children in foster care are younger than 6 years old. Children ages 2–5 in child welfare (including those in foster care) have a greater proportion of social, emotional, and behavioral problems than children in the general population; and within child welfare, compared to older children, young children are less likely to receive mental health services.

**Service Provision
MESSAGE**

WHY IT WORKS

This message effectively uses data to show a need. Connecting the information to why mental health services matter to young children and expected short- and long-term outcomes will make the message more powerful and resonate with a broader audience.

It's important to keep in mind that all children develop differently and each at his own pace; however, if your concerns about your child's development persist, call your health care provider, community health clinic, or public health nurse to inquire about an evaluation for your child.

**Service Provision
MESSAGE**

WHY IT WORKS

This is a common public awareness message to provide information to families about where to go for assistance. The reader may not come away with a clear understanding of how developmental delays could affect a child's future. A helpful addition might be: "Catching developmental delays early can ensure that children receive the support they need to learn to read, write, and interact with others."

Well-child care is one of the hallmarks of a family-centered medical home. Despite what some might think when hearing "medical home" for the first time, a medical home is not a physical place. Rather, it is an approach to providing primary care in a way that looks at the entire picture incorporating all the things that are important to the health and well-being of a child, such as immunizations, safety, and nutrition.

**Service Provision
MESSAGE**

WHY IT WORKS

This message defines the issue well. Explaining why others besides health providers should care could enhance this message. Consider adding this statement: "Supporting the healthy development of young children provides the foundation needed for them to grow into thriving adults."



Because very young children spend so much time in the home with their family, many messages highlight the importance of family involvement and interaction. These messages are focused on process (e.g., the importance of relationships) rather than outcomes (e.g., strong families). Process-focused messages need additional context, solutions, or outcomes to better resonate with a broad audience. These statements can be used to bolster other messages, provide concrete examples, and integrate beliefs or core values. Examples of messages about family interaction include the following:

Quality infant care is centered on relationships. Young children learn and grow in the context of secure, trusting relationships with caring adults.

Family Involvement and Parent–Child Interaction MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message defines quality infant care, which is important to audiences who may not work in the field. Adding additional information on outcomes for children and society will explain why it matters to a broader audience and make it more significant.

Attachment is an important marker for social and emotional development. Poor attachment, especially maternal attachment, can negatively affect children’s social–emotional health and development.

Family Involvement and Parent–Child Interaction MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message defines a critical component of healthy development. Integrating concrete examples and adding a solution to the message will provide important context for an audience that is not familiar with infant and toddler care.

Whether the child is 2 years old or 15 years old, family involvement is a proven practice.

Family Involvement and Parent–Child Interaction MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

Family involvement is a core value in our society and can be integrated to connect to our belief systems. Providing the problem–solution context or concrete examples will convey a more powerful message that will resonate with a wider audience.

Stable, secure, and nurturing relationships are a core component of healthy development. Parents who have effective parenting skills, are literate, and have the capacity to provide for their children’s physical and emotional needs, combined with connections to supportive networks and services, are the foundation for healthy and prepared children.

Family Involvement and Parent–Child Interaction MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message effectively connects relationships to long-term outcomes for children. It could be improved by adding in a statement that conveys why relationships matter, especially for people who may not have children.

Pediatricians are experts in child health, but parents are experts on their child. A team approach can best develop top physical, emotional, and developmental health for the child.

Family Involvement
and Parent–Child
Interaction MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message is effectively tied to a core societal value (parent expertise) but should not be used without additional context, such as definitions of healthy development and how pediatricians and parents can work together to ensure that infants and toddlers meet developmental milestones. This message could be improved by adding concrete examples of how a team approach could be used to address challenges and potential long-term outcomes so people can see themselves in the message.

Those first 3 years are truly golden years for strengthening each child's brain. They are golden years for each individual child. We need to help children exercise their brains to help their brains grow. We know what needs to be done to exercise the brain. Exercising the brain includes reading to the child, talking to the child, and playing directly in a gentle and learning way with each child. Reading to each child is a major tool for exercising each child's brain.

Family Involvement
and Parent–Child
Interaction MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message provides effective examples of what can be done to bolster healthy development. Shortening the message and integrating concrete examples will make it easier for the audience to remember it. Adding an explanation of why exercising the brain matters, along with outcomes that can be expected, will also make it resonate with a wider audience.

Evidence highlights that the quality of experiences and relationships in the first 3 years of life has a deep and lasting effect on how the brain develops. The richer the environment, the greater the number of brain cell interconnections that are made. The larger the number of interconnections, the faster and more meaningful learning will be. Interactions or relationships shape children's brains. The more loving and responsive the caregiver is, the greater the foundation for later social interaction.

Family Involvement
and Parent–Child
Interaction MESSAGE

WHY IT WORKS

This message uses brain research to show why early experiences and relationships matter. This is an effective message because it gives enough information to make the point without becoming difficult to understand. Although the last sentence starts to mention outcomes (later social interaction), the audience may not make the connection to why that has larger societal benefits. This message could be further improved by linking quality experiences and relationships to societal benefits.



SECTION 2: Developing Messages That Work

There have been few communication studies on the effectiveness of messages designed for infants and toddlers. Many people make the mistake of confusing frequency with effectiveness. Just because a message is used often, that does not necessarily mean that it works or that it resonates with the target audience.

Based on ACS experience, to create messages that resonate with a broad audience, follow these six basic rules:

1 → Present the issue, problem, and solution.

Increase your effort's credibility by being solution driven. Anticipate and answer the questions "What now?" and "So what?"

2 → Highlight outcomes for children and the broader effect on society.

Stating child outcomes or community benefits ensures that the message resonates with all target audiences, not just those in the infant and toddler field.

3 → Have data to back up claims and help tell the story.

Be strategic about using numbers and data. You don't want the problem to seem insurmountable, but use them to convey cost-effectiveness or the cost of ignoring the problem. Provide evidence or examples without becoming academic. Remember to make the information accessible to the general public and policymakers.

4 → Embed a value or belief.

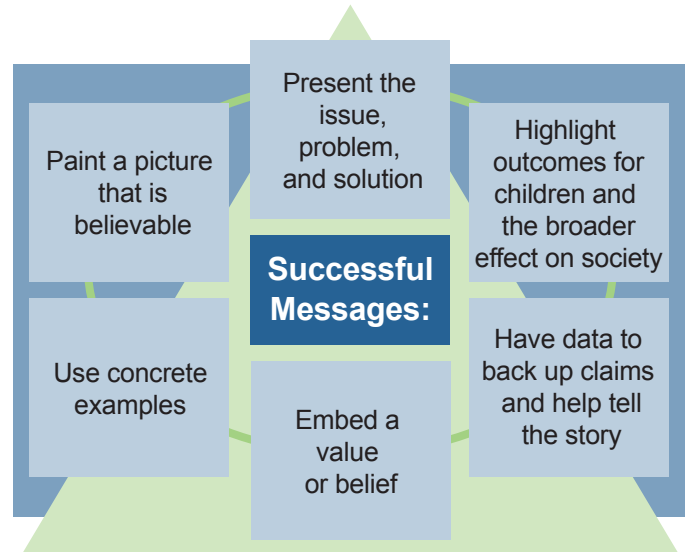
Messages that integrate core beliefs such as strong families or family engagement resonate with a wide variety of audiences.

5 → Use concrete examples.

Try to avoid industry jargon. Using industry jargon allows individuals, particularly those outside of the field, to "check out" or ignore communication. Simple, precise language is best for getting the message across to all audiences. Language, length, and relevance of a message must resonate with those who don't do this work daily. Inevitably, this will influence the way you communicate and determine what you choose to say.

6 → Paint a picture that is believable.

Numbers alone do not help paint a picture. To be fully understood, they must be accompanied by narrative. Provide context and examples that are accessible to your audience. This allows people to think about your issue as one that affects the entire community, and it helps them see that community solutions are needed. Use examples of outcomes or benefits to society that are not too far in the future.



ZERO TO THREE provides several [resources](#)² to help develop and communicate infant and toddler messages. These resources provide tips, guides, strategies, and examples of how to communicate effectively with the local community, policymakers, and the media. How you deliver your messages is also important. ZERO TO THREE resources highlight several important research findings that can help shape how your infant and toddler messages are received. Remember:

- Who delivers your message can be as important as the message itself. Choose messengers who lend credibility or are third-party validators.
- Pictures and visuals can provide powerful models and frames. Choose the right visual so that it will not undermine your verbal frame. Use pictures of public or community settings to suggest the public nature of the problem, and include families and caregivers, not just children alone.
- Sequence pictures and content to demonstrate cause and effect or problem and solution. Show the big picture. Zeroing in on a child may offer too narrow a frame and provide less opportunity for systems-level thinking.
- Stay away from rhetorical statements and partisan or political language. Instead, ensure that your tone reflects a problem-solving attitude.



ZERO TO THREE RESOURCES TO HELP FRAME YOUR MESSAGE

1. [Effective Communication about the Early Years: The Elements of the Frame – Part One \[Context, Numbers, and Messengers\]](#)

This article begins to break down the process of framing by examining the strategic elements that constitute a frame.

2. [Effective Communication about the Early Years: The Elements of the Frame – Part Two \[Visuals, Tone, and Metaphors and Simplifying Models\]](#)

This article examines three additional elements of the frame: the research that supports each element, how to use it effectively in your communication, and examples that relate each element directly to communicating infant–toddler issues.

3. [Framing Early Childhood Development: Recommendations for Infant–Toddler Professionals & Advocates](#)

This article explores some specific early childhood frames, the effect of those frames on how people reason about infant–toddler development, and the consequences of these messages for public policy.

²<http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/action-center/communication-tools.html>.

Once you have draft messages and a plan for sharing them, use this quick checklist to double check that you are on target and using the most effective approach.

Do your messages...	If not...
✓ Avoid industry jargon?	Simplify! How would you explain it to a fourth grader?
✓ Use positive language?	Find the upside and make that your approach.
✓ State a problem AND a solution, never one or the other?	Always use both. If you don't have a solution to recommend, find another problem to address.
✓ Use data to back up points without being overly academic?	Choose one or two compelling points and simplify the way you present them.
✓ Address benefits to society (ALL children), not just affected children?	Think about what's in it for those with older children or no children. Why should they care?
✓ Address results or outcomes for children?	What's the end result you envision?
✓ Address supporting parents or strengthening families?	How do parents and families become more effective when your target issue is addressed?
✓ Address "popular" issues in your community (e.g., autism, developmental delays, and infant mortality)?	How does your issue relate to the issues that are topmost on the minds of your audiences? Using these issues can allow messages such as the long-used brain development argument to be "refreshed."
✓ Meet people where they are? Acknowledge and address where the audience is coming from and their values?	Put yourself in the place of your audience member. What's most important from his or her perspective?
✓ Use a personal story to get the point across?	Find a story from your network and use it to bring your issue to life.
✓ Relay a simple and clear idea?	Remember that less is more. One compelling sentence always trumps a "ho-hum" paragraph. Get to the point, and do not try to over-explain the issue.
✓ Use the right messengers?	Identify the people most respected in your community and incorporate them in your messaging strategy.



APPENDIX: Common Messaging Questions for Infants and Toddlers

Even when following the recommended framework for infant and toddler messages, you might have messaging questions that are specifically related to children in this age group. The following are common questions (and answers).

1. How much should we distinguish between audiences?

Stakeholders should develop three to five core messages to use with everyone and then develop one or two tailored ones, depending on the target audience. Research shows that the adult brain needs to hear the same message multiple times before it starts to sink in,³ so consistency in messaging is critical. Examples of how to start thinking about core and tailored messages are shown here:

- **Everyone** wants to know why time, energy, and resources should be put toward infants and toddlers (versus something else). Why will this investment benefit them?
- **Parents**, regardless of race, class, or income, want to know that their children are getting the best possible start in life. They want to make sure their young children are receiving quality services from qualified professionals who enjoy working with infants and toddlers.
- **Policymakers and business leaders** want to know that what little money there is will actually lead to a concrete change or improvement. They want to know that they are making a good investment.
- **Educators** want to know that children are learning how to interact with others, building their self-esteem, and laying the foundation for success in school.



³Tellis, Gerard J., Effective Frequency: One Exposure or Three Factors? *Journal of Advertising Research*, pp. 75–80, July–August 1997. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=906019>



2. What are common stereotypes of infant and toddler programs, and how do we address them?

Stereotypes have the potential to derail your messages. They gain traction because of a lack of understanding, lack of context, or implied values (e.g., it's a family's job to take care of young children, not society's). Here are three common stereotypes and suggestions for how you can change the conversation around them.

“Babies on the Couch” Stereotype—Although infant and toddler mental health services and supports are better understood now, a common argument voiced against them is the perception that babies will be put “on the couch” for therapy. To take that issue off the table, talk about specific components of early childhood mental health and healthy development (e.g., interactive play, building self-esteem, developing behavioral skills, parent–child interaction), or describe the services that promote social–emotional well-being (e.g., voluntary home visiting, parent support groups, infant and toddler child care). This helps provide context and specific concrete examples about what you mean by infant and toddler mental health.

Messages that help move the conversation beyond the stereotype include the following:

- Social, emotional, and behavioral development challenges can be identified in a child's early years. When treated, children and youth are more successful at home, in schools, and in their communities.
- Kids don't come with an instruction manual, so sometimes families need help. Providing information to parents can give them the tools to identify and support social, emotional, and behavioral development so young children get along better with their family and peers.
- For children to meet developmental milestones, learn, grow, and lead productive lives, it is critical that they be healthy. Identifying and treating a mental health concern early makes a world of difference to children and their families, as well as schools and taxpayers.

“Babies Taking Tests” Stereotype—The issue of “babies at desks taking tests” is tied to a fear that children are pushed too quickly into traditional classroom learning. From birth to 3 years old, children seek security, are eager to explore, and are working on their identity⁴. Use specific components of **how** a young child learns and why learning those things during that time frame is critical. Early learning doesn't mean drilling and testing in the classroom. It's about learning to get along with others, improving coordination, and interacting through play. Use messages that highlight why this type of learning is important to child development in the earliest years.



⁴The National Association for the Education of Young Children, <http://www.naeyc.org/dap/infants-and-toddlers>.

Messages that help move the conversation beyond the stereotype include the following:

- Evidence shows that the quality of experiences and relationships in the first 3 years of life matters because it affects how the brain develops. Stable, nurturing relationships with close daily contact between parents and children through feeding, bathing, and changing diapers is critical in forming attachments and directly related to healthy social and emotional development. Talking and reading to a young child improves literacy and language skills. Children exposed to play and interactive experiences that encourage problem-solving and numeracy skills have a direct effect on social–emotional development and increased cognitive understanding.
- The first 3 years of life are a critical period for language development. Your child’s brain is developing rapidly and is at its most receptive to new information. Your child’s earliest experiences affect her brain development and lay the foundation for her future success. The most important of these experiences are provided by parenting and a nurturing home environment, but other kinds of experiences, such as child care, can also influence development.

“A Family’s Responsibility to Take Care of Young Children, Not Society’s” Stereotype—Similar to the stereotype about a mother’s responsibility to stay at home with a very young child, the belief that it is solely a family duty to take care of their young children is still prevalent. To combat that argument, use messages that highlight family involvement and interaction, which is a core societal value. Highlight the benefits of providing families with the tools and supports to best care for their young children. Include messages with long-term outcomes for the children, families, and the community.

Messages that help move the conversation beyond the stereotype include the following:

- Parents are a child’s first and best teachers, but with 60% of households having all parents working⁵, the need for high-quality infant and toddler care is critical. As a society, we have a shared responsibility on behalf of all children in the community to ensure that infants and toddlers have access to and experience high-quality and enriching care as their parents work.
- Decades of research show that family support programs are effective and ultimately save money for taxpayers. When quality programs, carried out in local communities, are properly implemented, they lead to increased family self-sufficiency, lower health care costs, and reduced need for remedial education. For every dollar spent on these efforts, at least \$2 in future spending is saved.



⁵The White House Council of Economic Advisers analysis of Current Population Survey, including biological, step-, and adoptive parents. You can find additional, localized data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics on the share of married families with children with both parents working here: www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.nr0.htm.

3. How should we talk about long-term outcomes for investments in infants and toddlers when it will take a long time before the benefit is realized?

It is always valuable to highlight long-term outcomes for children and the community, but be careful not to oversell those outcomes. Keep in mind:

- It is easy for people to believe that an infant or toddler with healthy supports is more likely to do better in school.
- Longer term benefits, such as higher earnings and a community's recuperation of tax dollars, may be too long a time frame for audiences to grasp.
- Meet people where they are, not where you want them to be, and provide them with outcome information that is important to them.
- Messages should address providing all children with the tools and foundation for success.

Consider using a message such as this to talk about infant and toddler outcomes:

- During the first 12 months of your baby's life, you are getting to know your baby and your baby is getting to learn about his body, his family, and a little of the world around him. Your baby is changing weekly as the foundation for language skills, emotional and social development, and motor skills is being laid.

4. Investments in infants and toddlers often benefit the family directly rather than the child. How do we talk about infant and toddler benefits?

Infant and toddler messages that address strengthening families or giving parents the tools they need to raise healthy children have resonated with many audiences. Try to pivot your message to include benefits for the child.

Consider using a message such as this one to talk about infant and toddler benefits:

- Parents who participate in the program are those who may lack the extended family support, experience, and knowledge of basic parenting skills that are critical to success during pregnancy and through the first few years of a child's life. This voluntary program is for families who want to be empowered with more knowledge and skills so they can provide better opportunities for their children.



SOURCES

The following sources were used to scan messages targeting services and programs for children from birth to age 3:

- American Academy of Pediatrics—www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/health-management/Pages/Well-Child-Care-A-Check-Up-for-Success.aspx
- Arkansas Better Beginnings—www.arbetterbeginnings.com/parents-families/preparing-my-child-life/infant
- Arkansas Home Visiting Network—www.arhomevisiting.org/
- Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)—www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/Maternal-Depression-and-Poverty-Brief-1.pdf
- Center for the Study of Social Policy—www.cssp.org/policy/papers/Promote-Childrens-Social-Emotional-and-Behavioral-Health.pdf
- Center on the Developing Child.
http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/resources/briefs/inbrief_series/inbrief_the_science_of_ecd/
- Children's Defense Fund Minnesota—www.cdf-mn.org/programs-campaigns/children-ages-0-3-research-to-policy/ and www.cdf-mn.org/research-library/maternal-depression-report.pdf
- Children's Dental Health Project—www.cdhp.org/resources/329-pediatric-dental-coverage-in-state-and-federally-facilitated-exchanges-the-2014-plan-year-experience
- Early Childhood Mental Health Program—<http://ecmhp.org/>
- Frameworks Institute—www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/ecd/index.html
- Georgia Department of Public Health—http://dph.georgia.gov/sites/dph.georgia.gov/files/WIC_Resources/Publications/2013_WIC_Fact_Sheet.pdf
- Georgia Program for Infant and Toddler Care—<http://dec.al.ga.gov/QualityInitiatives/InfantToddlerCare.aspx>
- Indiana Perinatal Network—www.indianaperinatal.org/
- Indiana State Department of Public Health, Maternal & Child Health—www.in.gov/isdh/26283.htm
- National Alliance for Breastfeeding Advocacy (NABA)—www.naba-breastfeeding.org/
- National Center for Children in Poverty—http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_882.html
- National Healthy Start Association—www.nationalhealthystart.org/



- National WIC Association—https://s3.amazonaws.com/aws.upl/nwica.org/NWA_Key_Messages.pdf
- Parent–Child Home Program—www.parent-child.org/
- Parents Helping Parents—www.php.com/
- The Pew Charitable Trusts Home Visiting Project—www.pewtrusts.org/en/projects/home-visiting-campaign
- State of New York—<http://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-signs-legislation-provide-support-new-mothers-and-families>
- State of Oklahoma—http://www.ok.gov/health/Child_and_Family_Health/Improving_Infant_Outcomes/Before_and_Between_Pregnancy/Frequently_Asked_Questions/index.html
- Texas Association for Infant Mental Health—<http://taimh.org/news/kindergarten-is-too-late-we-need-to-strengthen-brains-earlier-than-that>
- Thrive 5 Washington—<http://thrivebyfivewa.org/>
- United Way of Lackawanna and Wayne Counties Success by 6—www.uwlc.net/pdf/SB6_First_Steps_Book_WEB.pdf
- Urban Child Institute—www.urbanchildinstitute.org/about-us/our-story
- ZERO TO THREE—www.zerotothree.org/

About Us

Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) is a nimble, responsive and highly connected communication, advocacy, and strategy development consulting firm that helps nonprofits, government agencies, membership organizations and other groups successfully share their messages about target issues with key audiences and position themselves as leaders in their respective fields. For more information about ACS and our resources, visit us at: <http://www.advocacyandcommunication.org>.

The ZERO TO THREE Policy Center is a nonpartisan, research-based, nonprofit organization committed to promoting the healthy development of our nation’s infants and toddlers. To learn more about this topic or about the ZERO TO THREE Policy Center, please visit our website at www.zerotothree.org/public-policy.

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