

OK Futures Statewide Messaging and Champion Building Messaging Analysis

June 17, 2019

The purpose of this review and analysis is to identify existing messaging, messaging, and outreach methods to inform recommendations for consistent statewide messaging on early childhood development. Based on recommendations from OK Futures' Family and Community Engagement Team and Oklahoma Partnerships for School Readiness (OPSR), Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) reviewed public documents and online resources from 27 agencies, coalitions, and initiatives that communicate about children and families to families and policymakers (a list of these organizations, coalitions, and initiatives, is included in the appendix on page 8). Additionally, ACS reviewed documents and videos produced by these organizations. This list does not include all entities that communicate about early childhood in Oklahoma, but it does provide a good cross-section of organizations. They represent state agencies, professional membership organizations, initiatives targeted toward families, and advocacy initiatives or organizations (both general early childhood and special interest).

A note about the analysis: Although some organizations have their own focus of early childhood (special needs, infant mental health, infant mortality, resources available for families, etc.), and ask their audiences for different things (e.g., use of available resources, become an advocate for children), this analysis focuses on the overall, broad frame and message about the importance for early childhood.

The following analysis identifies:

- ▶ Message frames
- ▶ Key messaging themes
- ▶ Messengers used
- ▶ Delivery and tactics used

Message Frames

Framing is a science that uses strategic communication to connect the narrative to a reference point(s) with the purpose of guiding an audience towards particular interpretations and responses. Framing is critical to deliver your message in the most impactful way, with credibility, by providing reference points and controlling how the message is sent, received, and repeated.

ACS identified the following message frames that are used in Oklahoma communication about early childhood (those **bolded** are ones used in three or more instances):

- ▶ **Ready for school, foundation for life**
- ▶ **Strong families**
- ▶ Children who start behind, stay behind
- ▶ Learning begins at birth
- ▶ **Early relationships matter**
- ▶ **Strong community**
- ▶ Return on investment/economic development
- ▶ Breaking the cycle of poverty
- ▶ Healthy development
- ▶ **Whole child**

Key Messaging Themes

ACS observed the following messaging themes:

- ▶ Most organizations that message to families provide detailed information about the resources available to families or what families can do to support early childhood development. These organizations emphasize the importance of and the role of families in healthy child development.
 - All organizations provide detailed concrete examples of what they can do to help their child's development.
 - A couple of organizations talk about supporting early childhood development as skill-building for families as well as for children.
 - Many of these messages also included WHY supporting early childhood development is important for families to do, such as language development and brain development.
- ▶ Some organizations include WHY ages 0-5 is a critical time for early childhood development (language development and brain development).
- ▶ Several organizations talk about the short-and long-term impacts early childhood development has for children in terms of school readiness and being prepared for life.
- ▶ Several organizations, but not all, talk about the social and emotional development of a child during early childhood.
- ▶ Some organizations talk in the negative (there are many children with risk factors) rather than the positive (children do better in school).
- ▶ Several organizations said early childhood was important for Oklahoma's future or for a stronger community, but did not provide data or examples to back up this framing message.
- ▶ Few organizations provided data about the needs of families (e.g., number of parents who work and gaps in child care).

Messengers:

ACS observed the following messengers used:

To parents

- ▶ Doctors
- ▶ Child advocates (lay or legal)
- ▶ Other health care providers (nurses, mental health workers)
- ▶ Social services providers
- ▶ Librarians (libraries)
- ▶ Educators (K-12 and pre-K)
- ▶ Peer families

To providers

- ▶ OK Association for the Education of Young Children
- ▶ Oklahoma Department of Human Services
- ▶ OK Department of Education: SoonerStart
- ▶ Mental health care professionals
- ▶ OK Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services
- ▶ OK-Alliance for Infant Mental Health (AIMH)

Delivery/Tactics

Based on the information collected to date about how families receive information (from the 2017 Community Assessment), few families receive information passively, through websites or social media. Most receive information and support through trusted messengers (family members, friends, health care provider, or child care providers) and nearly 15 percent look online for information.

Examples of passive delivery

- ▶ Websites—most organizations and initiatives have web pages that can be used to share the importance of early childhood. Most of these sites are focused on service provision and bury messages about the importance of early childhood. State agencies that directly serve families have early childhood messages embedded in them.
- ▶ Social media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- ▶ Reports sent to the organizational listserv.

Examples of proactive delivery

- ▶ The Talking is Teaching campaign and Read, Sing, Play campaign meet parents where they are (churches, hospital or doctor offices, grocery stores, libraries, etc.) with posters. Other signage is also used through billboards and buses.
- ▶ The Oklahoma Policy Institute emphasizes an earned media approach aimed at policy makers.
- ▶ Several organizations have advocacy toolkits (Institute for Child Advocacy, OK Policy Institute).

- ▶ The Department of Human Services proactively engages with child care providers of all types to encourage and assist them in becoming star rated. They also proactively reach out the families to increase awareness.
- ▶ Some videos, toolkits, and brochures found on organizational and campaign websites were pushed out in some way through listservs and used as campaign materials.

ACS Recommendation

Based on Oklahoma’s communication landscape and the desire to create consistent messaging and a groundswell of support, ACS recommends the following:

1. Create broad core messages about early childhood.
2. Create guidelines or best practices for additional specific messaging.
3. Proactively put messages and information into the hands of trusted messengers.
4. Include core messaging in all advocacy toolkits regarding early childhood.
5. Have state agencies adopt and promote core messages through all proactive (e.g., paid media and outreach materials) and passive vehicles (e.g., websites). There is an opportunity for all state agency websites to include core messages about early childhood (e.g., Department of Commerce, which oversees the Head Start state collaboration office through the Community Action Agency Association does not have information on the website). This ensures that all state organizations are aligned regardless of which organizations families interact with.
6. Outreach to other organizations and coalitions to encourage the use of core messaging. Put particular emphasis on reaching associations that focus on primary caregivers and providers to spread core messaging through passive and proactive methods. Professional associations are trusted messengers for providers, while providers are trusted messengers for families. Associations for all types of providers (child care, medical professionals, infant mental health, etc.) will reach families in a variety of settings.
7. Use a paid internet strategy and optimization of online searchability to increase the chances that families find the resources they need when families do an online search.

Organizations that may be useful to cultivate champions to build public will

- ▶ Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy
- ▶ 25 for 25
- ▶ The Care Center
- ▶ Court Appointed Special Advocates
- ▶ Oklahoma Lawyers for Children
- ▶ OK Department of Health Project Launch
- ▶ OK-AIMH
- ▶ Oklahoma Alliance of YMCAs

Tips and Best Practices for Target Audiences

During the past 15 years, ACS has identified messaging best practices for general and targeted audiences based on experience and research across the country.

General Messaging Guidelines

Help make any audience smarter about the issue of early childhood and want to learn more by using these guidelines. These guidelines are particularly useful to help messaging resonate with stakeholders outside the early childhood community. In addition to these guidelines, ACS has found that messages related to strong communities and brain science tend to work in both urban and rural communities.

1. Mission is not message	2. Avoid industry jargon	3. Use positive language	4. Present the issue, problem, and solution
5. Use data and visuals to back up your points and help tell your story	6. Highlight benefits to society	7. Talk about outcomes to children and families, not just transactions	8. Embed a value or belief
9. Use concrete examples and language	10. Use a personal story	11. Meet people where they are	12. Piggyback on “popular” issues in your community
13. Use the right messengers and vehicles	14. Demonstrate impact of messaging	15. Use language about the whole child, not just Pre-K	16. Refresh

Messaging Practices for Target Audiences

ACS synthesized words, phrases, and concepts that resonate well with three target audiences: a) parents and caregivers, b) policymakers, and c) partners and stakeholders. Integrate these tips below when engaging these specific audiences.

Parents and Caregivers

Parents and caregivers are often a target audience for messages about services or for increasing knowledge about young children. Parents and caregivers always want to provide their children with the best care but may not have the information or resources to access this care. The messages should be approachable and assume parents and caregivers have the best interest of the child at heart. For

example, beware of messages that create additional anxieties for parents and caregivers or guilt them into doing something different. Remember, clear and concise is best. Parents and caregivers who can repeat the knowledge will pass this knowledge on to others, and word of mouth is sometimes the best messenger.

Use these words and phrases	Because...
Concepts such as “family support and coaching” are better received than programs such as “home visiting.”	Pew research found that both voters and prospective parents respond negatively to the widely used name for these services.
Instead of saying “free services,” say “at no out-of-pocket cost to you.”	Using the term “free” may devalue the service.
Parents are the first and most important teacher.	This is an effective way to show that the bond should not be broken between parents and caregivers and their children.

Policymakers—Legislators and State and Local Agency Officials

Policymakers, which include elected officials and state and local agency officials, are often a critical audience to engage to increase support and investments early childhood. This audience wants to hear local data and information, and how the program or service will benefit their constituents. State and local agency officials may not understand how early care and education issues impact their department and/or their constituents. Often, aside from having children of their own, they may not have worked closely with young children and do not know about the science behind healthy development and how to support it. It is worth finding out background information on the policymaker before you communicate with and to them. It could reveal information that could provide a “hook” and help you create a connection.

Emphasize these concepts	Because...
Long-term impact, or return on investment (ROI) for communities, or the future of the country.	Good impact messages present powerful evidence of why the issue should matter to a broader audience than parents/families.
Connect to child development: Explain why the first years of life are so important (e.g., “It’s never too early”).	Evidence and research provide a rationale and explain why investments in early care and education can mean the difference for healthy child development, and therefore long-term outcomes to prepare children for school and for life.
Connect child care supports and early care and education to family economic stability.	Making this connection supports a poverty reduction strategy and aligns young children with a “hot topic” for many communities.
Emphasize high quality and lack of access using local data.	Both the quality and access of early care and education services are often well documented. Using data to support your messages helps policymakers understand how children are being served or not served in their community.
Gaps in development and opportunities can be seen as early as nine months—before a child’s first birthday.	This takes a complex issue related to readiness and learning and puts a concrete timeframe on it that is easy to grasp.

Partners and Stakeholders

The chart below offers tips when inviting partners and stakeholders, such as doctors, child care providers, or mental health specialists to become supporters of an effort.

Keep in mind	Because...
Allow room for partners to customize the message for specific geographic regions, topic areas, or constituents.	Partners know their local context, nuances of the field, culture, and values, which should take priority over national trends. For example, words such as grit and resilience may work in different regions of a state depending on the context.
Provide guidance on where emphasis can be placed and effective words and phrases.	You are the expert in your field, and if there is a word or phrase that is effective, partners should use it consistently.
Be cautious when talking about toxic stress or trauma in babies and young children, and ways to mitigate it.	It is important to incorporate hope into the message, to ensure stakeholders continue efforts to prioritize early care and education and support parents and caregivers.

APPENDIX

AGENCIES, COALITIONS, INITIATIVES REVIEWED BY ACS

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)	Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth
Early Childhood Integrated Data System Communications Toolkit	Oklahoma Department of Commerce
The Oklahoma Family Network	Oklahoma Department of Education-SoonerStart
The Care Center	Oklahoma Department of Human Services
Latino Community Development Agency (LCDA)	Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services
LENA Home program	Oklahoma 25 by 25 initiative
The Oklahoma Parents Center	Oklahoma State Department of Health Relationships Matter campaign
The Oklahoma Association for Infant Mental Health	Oklahoma State Department of Health Project Launch
The Oklahoma Alliance of YMCAs	Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness
Oklahoma Association for the Education of Young Children (OKAEYC)	Project HOPE
Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy (OICA)	Read, Sing, Play campaign
Oklahoma Lawyers for Children	Sunbeam Family Services
Oklahoma Policy Institute	Smart Start Initiative
	Talking is Teaching campaign