

Speaking of Children...



Message Memo

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The Context

The current time presents both opportunities and dangers for our country's commitment to children. On the one hand, Americans are becoming increasingly concerned about the deficit. This has led elected officials either to try to use the deficit (which skyrocketed during the last eight years without raising a peep from either side of the aisle) to bludgeon their political opponents, or to run scared from even maintaining basic services to children, senior citizens, and people with disabilities—let alone public safety. On the other hand, at no other time since the advent of modern polling have Americans ever believed that their children will have fewer opportunities than they did—that the American Dream has vanished. And at no other time in the last 150 years have Americans been so concerned about our nation's future place in the world—the place in which our children will live.

From the standpoint of motivating Americans to act on behalf of our children, it is the best of times, it is the worst of times. It all depends on how we talk with the American people.

The Challenge

The challenge for children's advocates in this context is to develop emotionally compelling, motivating messages on *putting children first* or *making our children a national priority* to guide the evolving political, legislative, and social environment. That requires developing brief *narratives* that will capture popular attention and concern, offer solutions, and inspire hope and action for prioritizing children's welfare in general, including disadvantaged children or children at risk (e.g., in foster care, in poverty).

Our focus on narratives is not accidental. Try telling a child a story that lacks the narrative structure that children's mind's in every culture gravitate toward by the time they are eight years old—replete with protagonists, antagonists, a conflict or hill to be climbed before an eventual resolution, and a moral to the story. They won't be interested.

And it isn't just children. Our species has been around for about 100,000 years, and this will be the first century in which most humans are literate. So how did our species transfer knowledge and values across the generations for millennia? Through stories—stories that were interesting, exciting, upsetting, surprising—in a word, emotionally engaging. (And it's no accident that the holy books of all the great monotheistic religions were written in parables—*stories that stick*.)

And just those characteristics of stories that stick happen to be the characteristics of good political rhetoric. In the words of that immortal political strategist Louis Armstrong, *it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing*. A message that doesn't engage people's emotions is functionally inert. If it isn't moving, it won't move anyone. It certainly won't move public opinion.

Our goal, then, as children's advocates, should be to learn from kids about the kinds of communications that capture the imagination: messages that tell a story, arouse emotion, and have a moral.

The Good News or the Bad News?

This memo reflects the results of research conducted online with a sample of 900 registered voters, weighted to match the demographics of the national voting population. We presented voters with a set of messages about making children a national priority—and putting our money where our mouth is. We first tested general messages, and then tested messages about some specific issues, such as early childhood education, the alarming rate of high school dropouts, and the equally alarming rate and rise of childhood poverty. Respondents heard each message in audio form, presented with the intonation of a passionate advocate, just as it would be presented by an advocate or opponent in a real campaign. Voters dial-tested the messages—moving their cursor one way if they liked what they heard, and the other if they didn't—and then rated the extent to which they found each message compelling.

For messaging research like this to be effective, you have to test your best messages against the best messages you can expect from your opponents. So before presenting messages making the case for increasing the piece of the pie for America's children, we first presented a tough message based in fiscal restraint. To see how tough it actually was, take a look:

These are tough times, and they call for tough measures. Spending is getting out of control, and we have to rein it in. The massive bailouts of the financial industry and the auto companies have already cost taxpayers billions of dollars. We have to make tough choices... All kinds of programs that benefit children are available, and we have charities for a reason, so the federal government doesn't have to pick up the tab for every worthwhile cause. The main effect of government interventions is only to exacerbate the problems we face, because you can count on government to be wasteful and inefficient. And every program we create for children just gives parents the wrong message, that they can shirk their parental responsibility and somebody else will pick it up. Government can't provide for everyone, and children are no exception. Given the country's economic crisis and the growing federal budget deficit, American taxpayers simply can't afford anymore.

So here's the bad news first. Over 50 percent of respondents found it compelling and over 35% found it *extremely* compelling, rating it 80-100 on a 0-100 scale.

But now the good news: We beat it with nine different messages, and beat it convincingly.

Here are **keys to effective messaging on children**, particularly with voters in the political center:

Keys to Effective Messaging on Children

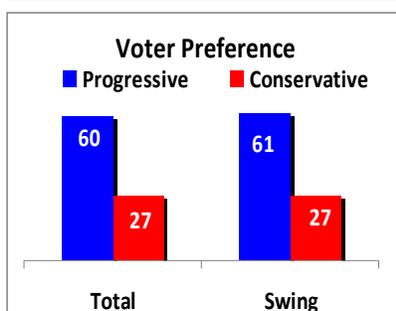
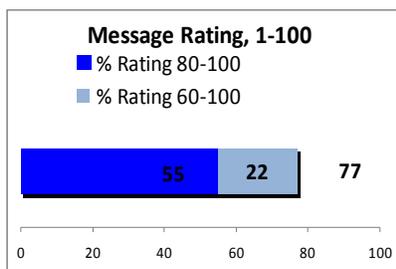
- ***Messages that move* have a particular structure:**
 - They first *connect with voters* with an aspirational statement.
 - They then *describe the problem* in a way that is *concrete, visual, and evocative*, typically eliciting concern, anger, or both.
 - Finally, they *end with a solution that evokes hope* that something could actually change and returns to the theme with which the narrative began.
- **Messages that move speak to a range of values—and not just values traditionally associated with children**, such as America's place in the world, the American Dream, back to basics, investment, personal responsibility, populism, and partnership.
- **Persuadable voters on this issue—who are the vast majority in the center—hear with both their right and left ears.** Thus, the messages that move them the most tend to invoke values from both the right and left, such as hard work, small business, our intergenerational legacy and obligations, community, and opportunity.
- **Messages about disadvantage either address unconscious prejudices directly or weave together the interests and values of Americans regardless of their color or class without using terms like “shared fate” that are “liberal code” to many in the political center.** Americans in the center are ambivalent toward people who are disadvantaged. On the one hand, they want to help. On the other, they believe in personal responsibility. Messages about disadvantaged kids and families are most effective when they turn a “them” into an “us.”
- **Messaging that move wed reason and emotion—concern about what is with hope for what could be—and suggest solutions that possible.**
- **Messages that move focus on values, not policies.** When they do speak of policies, they do not “get in the weeds.” Let your opponents get in the weeds. The best place to win a victory for children is from the high ground.
- **Messages that move evoke the face of a child, not statistics.** Statistics can be useful, but only when they create an emotional reaction that makes people want to do something.

A Tale of Two Messages

We cannot report here all of the 9 messages we tested against the fiscal restraint messages, or the various messages we tested on five specific children's issues, although those are available from First Focus. We will, however, illustrate the messaging approach and the points above with two examples.

Below is a general message on prioritizing the needs of children that "sang" to voters:

It's time to restore American leadership, and the place to start is by investing in our future: our kids... In the 1960s, John F. Kennedy challenged us to put a man on the moon in a decade, and we did it. But you can't reach for the stars, let alone balance your checkbook, if you can't do basic math. The math scores of American children are now 27th in the world, not number 1. Why? Because we don't invest in education. We have the lowest rates of preschool education of any modern nation. Our children won't be able to compete in the global economy in adulthood if they don't start school ready to learn in kindergarten. *We lead the world in science, technology, and innovation. But there's no excuse for leading the Western world in teen pregnancy, infant mortality, and child poverty. It's time to recommit ourselves to the kind of America JFK inspired us to imagine, a nation that sets high standards for the physical fitness and academic achievement of all its children and demands accountability. We won't solve this problem just by throwing money at it. It takes a partnership of parents, schools, and communities to grow strong minds and bodies. But you can't expect returns on investments you don't make, and it's time we starting investing in our children again.*



The data to the left provide four measures of how well this message resonates with the American people. The first, the percent who found it compelling (60 or above on a 0-100 scale), is an extraordinary 77%. Of those, 55% rated it 80-100, which is a measure of emotional intensity that translates to strong motivation to support it. The bottom figure shows how the message fairs relative to the opposition message with both the general electorate and with swing voters (voters who self-identify as weak Republicans, Independents, and weak Democrats). As can be seen from the figure, this message wins by over 30 points with both the general electorate and swing voters, as it does with virtually every demographic of voter in every region of the country. Even the less than 20% of voters who identified themselves as "strong Republicans" rated this message virtually as high as the strongest opposition message we could write.

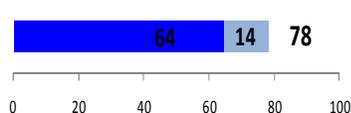
Why is this message so effective? First, it begins in two places where many Americans begin today: with a desire to see their country return to a position of global leadership, and with a desire to see their children have a chance at a better life. Interestingly, nationalistic themes were as effective as

themes seemingly “closer to home” regarding children. **Second, it draws on multiple values, not just one.** This is a central take-home point. Messages that are most effective speak to multiple values—in this case, ranging from leadership, to the American Dream, to investment, to innovation, to achievement, to partnership. **Third, it begins and ends aspirational, and packs its punch in the middle.** This is a characteristic of virtually all good political messaging as well. Voters generally respond to messages that launch into the problem immediately with a “smelling salts” response, turning their heads away. Effective messages typically speak to our aspirations, tell us where we’ve gone off the rail (in this case, in very blunt terms), and return to the possibility of doing something that restores our hope. Note that this message is not particularly specific about what we need to do, although it does include what advertisers would call a very specific “ask”: put our money where our mouth is and invest.

The dial-testing did, however, point to one element of this message that was not particularly strong. The dials went up virtually from start to finish, except in one place: the historical analogy to JFK at the beginning. In research with over 35,000 voters, I have found that this is almost always the case. Americans neither know nor like history. For younger Americans, JFK is a prehistoric figure. In general, messages that call on voters’ historical memory beyond 30 years routinely suffer for it. Perhaps that is, itself, a call for greater investment in education. But it is what it is.

Now consider a second message, this one about childhood poverty:

No child in the United States of America should ever feel the pangs of hunger. Yet today, a million American kids will go hungry. No child in America should be forced to live on the street. Yet with the economic downturn, millions of families have had their mortgages foreclosed and lost their homes, through no fault of their own. And no child in the America should go without health care. Yet 1 in 5 American children never see the doctor every year, denying them the preventive care, vaccinations, and dental care that growing children need. It’s just not right that a child can go hungry because her parent lost a job, while the Wall Street banker who gambled with their lives pockets another 25 million dollar bonus. And it’s not right that for the first time in our history the middle class is shrinking, as people who work or want to work can’t find a job or earn enough to take care of their families, and as CEO’s salaries and bonuses have skyrocketed while the rest of our income has stagnated. It’s time we start growing the economy and stop shrinking the middle class. It’s just not fair that you can work full time and still not have enough money to put food on the table for your family. A fifth of our kids shouldn’t live in poverty. That’s the bottom line.



The data to the left similarly show the percent of voters who gave this message an 80-100 (64% high emotional intensity) and 60-100 (78% agreement with the message). These are extraordinarily high rates of both intensity and agreement, particularly for a message that is fundamentally about disadvantaged youth. The vast majority of conservatives found this message compelling—as did virtually every other demographic group.

What made this message so compelling? First, it begins with a simple statement of values, written in a way that is very sensory and draws on an experience everyone has had, regardless of their socioeconomic status: *No child in the United States of American should ever feel the pangs of hunger.* Note that this statement of the value also draws on nationalistic feelings—namely that this is something we, as Americans, should not tolerate—in a way that transcends ethnicity or prejudice. **Second, it uses a powerful rhetorical technique**, repeating a statement of value followed by a contrary statement of fact that makes the moral emotion build over time. **Third, it connects the experience of those who could be seen as “other”—families that are poor—with those who cannot—any of us who could have lost a job in this recession**, and it ties that job loss to its origins—the fact that a banker on Wall Street gambled away someone else’s job. In so doing, **it connects the experience of poverty of children who have long been disadvantaged with the experience of families everyone knows today**, regardless of their station in life, whose breadwinners have lost a job. In so doing, it seamlessly connects “the poor” (a term we should retire from our vocabularies, because it turns concrete, feeling human beings into nameless abstractions) and the rest of us. **Fourth, it makes the issue an issue for the middle class**, pointing to the reality, all too familiar to most Americans today, that the middle class is shrinking, as people who once considered themselves solidly middle class are finding themselves falling out of it. **Finally, it concludes with value statements—that people shouldn’t have to work multiple jobs just to get by, and that one-fifth of our children shouldn’t live in poverty—that are incontrovertible**, especially having been tied to the concerns of the middle class and to populist themes that resonate across the political spectrum.

Conclusions

These are just two examples, but they illustrate the importance of value-laden, emotionally compelling narratives in speaking about children’s issues. As children’s advocates, we should never turn real children or families into abstractions; we should turn abstractions into examples of real children and families. We should never cite statistics as if we are trying to win a debate contest. We should speak to people’s values, aspirations, and concerns, and if a good statistic helps us do that, it’s a good statistic. If it draws people away from the emotional reactions that motivate action, it is counterproductive. And we should illustrate our values with our policies, rather than offering voters 12-point plans that they neither remember nor can reasonably be expected to evaluate. Voters want to know the “gist.” If they know your heart’s in the right place, they’ll presume your policies are, too.

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