

WEEK OF THE YOUNG CHILD

Suggested Talking Points for Discussions during Tours and Mixers

OVERALL APPROACH

Below are suggested guidelines and language to use in your conversations with legislators. Don't worry about getting it exactly right. Use your own words so you are comfortable with what you are saying. The most important thing to remember is that legislators want to hear from you and you have a lot to share with them.

We know from our work with the FrameWorks Institute that the **order** in which we bring up points matters. While it is tempting to "cut to the chase," it is important to start off with the bigger picture of how children develop before getting into the nitty-gritty of an issue. Otherwise, policymakers tend to see each story as an isolated situation and don't always "connect the dots" to the larger policy problem we face.

POINT #1 (LEVEL 1)

Choose one of the **values** below to lead off with. (Research shows these are the values that work best for early childhood issues.) You don't have to use these exact words as long as you explain the basic concept.

- **Prosperity:** Vermont's future prosperity is very connected to how well our children are doing.
- **Stewardship:** The future of our society tomorrow depends on how well we raise our children today.
- **Reciprocity:** We give to children now so that they can give back to society as they grow.
- **Ingenuity:** When we invent and replicate high-quality programs for young children, we can solve problems in early childhood development and show significant long-term improvements for children.
- **Responsible Manager:** Addressing problems before they get worse is the responsible way to manage our society's future. Taking advantage of opportunities that arise as we understand the science of the brain better allows us to innovate.

POINT #2 (LEVEL 2)

Briefly explain exactly what is going on with children while they are in an early care and education program and why early experiences are so critical to children's future. It is obvious to all of us, but many policymakers do not understand why the early years matter so much and why it is important to invest in child development services.

- The **basic architecture of the brain** is constructed through an ongoing process that begins at birth and continues through adulthood.
- It is the combination of genes and experience that shapes the developing brain. **Relationships** are the active ingredient in this “serve and return” (back and forth) process. People interacting with children play a key role in children’s development.
- **Toxic stress** can come about from family tensions over a lost job, a death in the family, poverty, abuse, and other factors. Science tells us that this toxic stress damages the developing brain and leads to problems in learning, behavior and increased susceptibility to physical and mental illness over time.
- Brain elasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time so **getting it right early** is less costly to society and individuals than trying to fix it later.

POINT #3 (LEVEL 3)

Here is where you bring in **your specific concern**. Here’s an example: “When communities make early intervention services available for young children who have a delay in speech or gross motor skills, we help assure that they are getting the support they need to learn and grow in a healthy way. It is much more effective to give children this kind of support early on than try to make up for lost time later.” This would lead easily into a **story** to illustrate your point.

Don’t lead off with a story, however. Instead, use stories to illustrate a larger policy issue. Otherwise, policymakers will tend to personalize the story to one child or family rather than see how the child’s situation connects to the larger policy issue that you want the policymaker to address.

TALKING POINTS ON SPECIFIC ISSUES (LEVEL 3)

Here are some talking points on specific issues that you might want to discuss with legislators when you get to Point #3 (Level 3) above.

Building Bright Futures: Building a coordinated early childhood system in Vermont is the focus of this year’s Early Childhood Day at the Legislature. This theme is resonating with lawmakers who are looking everywhere for ways to increase the efficiency of service delivery. Key points to touch on include:

- Thank your Senator for voting for S. 268, which calls for the establishment of Building Bright Futures in state statute (to date, it has existed under a year-to-year Executive Order of the Governor). The bill passed the Senate on a unanimous voice vote.

- Encourage your Representative to vote for the bill (if the House of Representatives has not already voted on the bill).
 - The bill is currently in the House of Representatives' Human Services Committee (as of 3/15/10).
 - After that, it will be voted on by the full House of Representatives.
- Explain that we have great child development services in Vermont, but they are pieced together in a way that makes them hard for families to access and for early childhood service providers to coordinate among each other.
 - Building Bright Futures is working to address both these problems and to improve the quality of those services, particularly early care and education services.
 - By improving quality and making the delivery of services more efficient, we will be better able to ensure that all children get a good start.
 - Use an example from your local area to illustrate the problem and/or a solution that your community has identified and is working on.

Child Care Financial Assistance Program: The Kids Are Priority One Coalition's 2010 Policy Agenda calls for maintenance of current funding levels for this program. Despite the projected \$150 million budget deficit, Governor Douglas did *not* recommend any reduction in funding for this program although he did propose millions of dollars of cuts in many other areas. This is *not* the year to be asking for any increases.

However, there are several points you may want to bring up:

- Drive home the **link between this program and Vermont's economic recovery**.
 - Explain how the income eligibility limits are still so low (200% of the federal poverty level) that moderate-income families get little or no help paying for child care. This makes it very hard for many families to make ends meet. Give a specific example to bring home your point.
 - Emphasize how critical it is to support early care and education programs affected by the recession. There are not enough regulated slots as it is in Vermont. If we lose more programs, our early care and education system will not be able to serve parents who return to work when the economy improves.
- You may also want to discuss the importance of using public funds to support efforts to maintain and increase the **quality** of early care and education services. Tie the quality argument into your earlier points about brain development and the importance of nurturing relationships.

Act 62 (use of public education funds for early education): The Senate Education Committee has heard a lot of testimony this legislative session regarding use of public education funds to support high-quality early education. At the committee's request, the Department of Education and the Department for Children and Families has proposed changes to the Act 62 rules that address some of the implementation issues many of us have experienced.

If you choose to discuss Act 62, please be careful to first emphasize your **support** for continued use of public education dollars for high-quality early education.

- If you have any concerns about how Act 62 has been implemented, offer **solutions** to the problems you identify.
- It would also be helpful for legislators to hear about **successful early education partnerships** between school districts and community-based programs.

Overall Budget Situation: If you are concerned about the deep cuts being discussed by the legislature, you may want to ask your legislators to look more closely at the **revenue side**. This could include using "rainy day" funds, temporarily increasing the income tax on wealthier Vermonters and increasing corporate taxes. For more information on a balanced approach to Vermont's budget deficit, go the Public Assets Institute's web site at <http://publicassets.org/tag/budget/>.

For more information on issues affecting young children and how to talk about them with policymakers and other decision-makers, contact Kim Friedman, Organizing Director, Kids Are Priority One Coalition, at (802) 348-9879 or kfriedman@svcable.net.