



SOLUTIONS STORYTELLING:

MESSAGING TO MOBILIZE

SUPPORT **for** CHILDREN'S ISSUES

Message Development Research Report



Executive Summary
May 2010

By the Topos Partnership
For Douglas Gould & Co. and
Child Advocacy 360 Foundation



PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Child Advocacy 360 Foundation created the Communications Catalyst Initiative to persuade foundations, affinity groups, corporate benefactors, advocacy organizations and others to support more robust strategic communication programs using the most effective, persuasive messages. Done well, communications can stimulate greater citizen activism and support for programs to improve the lives of all children, and help level the playing field for underserved children.

Many advocacy and direct-service groups are having a positive impact on the lives of children at the local level, yet too many Americans still think “nothing works.” Many Americans assign blame for children’s problems to “bad” parents and ignore the role of our communities and institutions in creating better opportunities for kids’ success. This sense of hopelessness tamps down enthusiasm, and limits fundraising and organizing. The lack of understanding about community links keeps kids’ problems in the private realm and lets the public and policymakers off the hook.

The Communications Catalyst Initiative was inspired by the belief that stories about effective programs, or “solutions stories,” are an overlooked tool in advocates’ toolkit that can educate and mobilize needed support. To test this hypothesis, and to develop effective approaches for telling solutions stories, the Child Advocacy 360 Foundation commissioned Douglas Gould and Company and the Topos Partnership to:

- Interview key child advocacy experts and foundation allies and create an advisory panel for the project.
- Review existing research and gather input from experts about currently used messages and strategies.
- Undertake qualitative and quantitative research to test alternative messages, frames and stories.
- Create communications strategies and advise advocates about effective messages.
- Recruit, train, and deploy a wide range of spokespeople with the knowledge of children’s issues and skills to present the message effectively.

The summary is based on research conducted by the Topos Partnership. It was informed by the Communications Catalyst Initiative’s goals, and by input from in-depth interviews conducted among key advisors. A memo with strategic recommendation is also available at www.childadvocacy360.com.



INTRODUCTION

All across the country organizations are doing great work improving the lives of children and families. Yet too often their stories are not widely known. This research is designed to determine how to tell their stories in ways that expand the impact of their work and compel public interest and support.

Broadly, communications about programs and policies to benefit children can be clustered into two overarching categories. Those that highlight:

- 1. particular programs and efforts on behalf of kids, and*
- 2. the general idea of taking collective responsibility for children's wellbeing.*

Both are valuable and important areas of emphasis for communications, but each represents different challenges for storytelling. Importantly, our research suggests that the first category (telling stories of particular programs) does not automatically lead people to understanding the second (collective responsibility for children). Therefore, this research addresses ideas for achieving support for particular programs as well as the general idea of taking collective responsibility for kids.

Three central considerations at the heart of the Communications Catalyst Initiative shaped the research:

Change the emphasis from problem to solution.

Stories to promote action on behalf of children often emphasize the problems children face in the belief that awareness of the severity of the problem will compel people to rise up and act. While some do act, many others are overwhelmed by the problem and feel powerless to address the situation. If communicators tell more stories that emphasize solutions, will we see more public support for those solutions?

Make the role of community visible.

People tend to default to a view of children as existing solely in relation to their family – a perspective Topos refers to as the Family Bubble. The Family Bubble¹ perspective constrains people's view to the responsibility of the nuclear family in raising children, and obscures the important role of community and/or government in creating the conditions for healthy development. How do we tell stories that allow people to recognize the role of community and the importance of collective solutions?

¹ See "Promoting School Readiness and Early Child Development: Findings from Cognitive Elicitations," by Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady, Cultural Logic, March 2002.

Inspire action on behalf of children not one's own, particularly at-risk children.

In part due to the Family Bubble perspective, people are reluctant to intervene on behalf of children other than their own (unless the family dynamic is shockingly dysfunctional or damaging, in which case others have to intervene). They naturally default to thinking of their own children's needs, interests and abilities, even when evaluating their support for broad programs and policies. Strategists often recommend couching solutions in terms of "all children" to gain public support, but in an era of tightening state budgets, at-risk children need priority. Can we tell stories that make action on behalf of children not one's own a natural and expected role for all citizens?

The analysis that follows is based on a significant body of original research, including six focus groups and TalkBack testing among 240 engaged citizens, plus research to measure the effects of various messages on people's support for various policies and interventions to help children. The survey was comprised of a representative sample of 2,006 American voters.





BRIEF RECAP OF FINDINGS

Most news stories on most social issues focus on the problem to be solved, and news about children's issues is no different. On one level, this approach seems sensible. Don't problems spark the desire to find solutions?

This research finds that a focus on problems has some benefits, but can also backfire. Problem-focused stories increase support for government action, but at the same time increase cynicism about the ability of government and citizens to solve these problems. These stories undermine the solution even while raising the need for the solution and make tough problems seem even more intractable.

The "Solutions Story" Alternative

Solutions stories, on the other hand, is an underused communications approach that:

- Lifts the public's desire for collective action without increasing cynicism about the effectiveness of action.
- Increases support for active government and a range of children's policies.
- Leads to support for higher taxes to get higher quality services.
- Lifts support for policies targeted to disadvantaged, at-risk kids.
- Research respondents rate as more interesting, unique, motivating and important – suggesting they will get more attention from the public.

There are times, of course, when a focus on problems is needed. Importantly, this research suggests:

- It is more effective to emphasize causes rather than outcomes.
- It is helpful to define and describe the problem in terms of inadequate systems and structures serving kids, rather than just focusing on the ways kids are suffering or falling behind. Bad outcomes can usually be blamed on parents, but inadequate systems require a public response.

Core Story Elements

Five core story elements rise to the top as being particularly important for telling effective solutions stories. Though presented as five distinct elements, to a large extent these elements overlap, and they all certainly complement each other as demonstrated by the exemplar stories developed by the qualitative research and tested further in the survey experiments.

CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY

People's default reasoning constrains their view of children to the family – parents are responsible for their child's wellbeing and no other actors are immediately visible. To inspire willingness to act on behalf of children not their own, we need to broaden people's view to include the community. That is, we need to remind audiences of how:

- **The whole community benefits** from kids who grow up to be contributing members.
- **The community can have important beneficial influences** on children and families.

BIG PICTURE THINKING

One reason the survey was able to record such strong shifts for the solutions-oriented approach was because the solutions stories focused on the "big picture" which allows people to see the broader generalizations about the value of intervention. This

research uncovered two effective approaches for keeping people focused on the big picture:

- **Listing a number of solutions:** When they hear about a particular kid, community or program, people naturally tend to focus on the narrow particulars of that story, missing broader implications. Briefly discussing a number of very different programs is one straightforward way of focusing less on a particular case study, and more on the general principle that we can and should be taking greater collective responsibility for kids' wellbeing.
- **Public Structures:** To promote an appreciation of policy's role in creating better outcomes for kids, it is helpful to talk about how we all rely on "public structures" (systems and institutions we build for our collective wellbeing, from libraries to court systems to publicly regulated utilities). This idea gives people a more concrete picture of how we create a better and stronger community.

NECESSARY, NOT JUST NICE

In the current economic climate, programs that are "nice to have" are not likely to garner widespread support. Therefore, communicators must position key programs as necessary. One way to communicate necessity is to remind people of kids' connection to community – the community benefits from kids who grow up to be productive adults. Another effective approach that is overlooked in most communications efforts is a focus on how a particular solution works. When people have a concrete picture of how a program helps, they are more likely to see it as important.

INSPIRING ACTION

Demonstrating quantifiable movement in behavior is a tough test for any communications effort, and this subject is no different. However, in the qualitative research participants often voiced strong interest in engaging in direct action after reading solutions-oriented stories.

While all the elements combine to spark interest, the qualitative research suggests that communicators should specifically incorporate model examples of the behavior we want to encourage. This includes not just individual, extraordinary "heroes", but the collective actions of responsible citizens as well. Modeling behavior helps people visualize the ways they could make a difference.

"PROVING" EFFECTIVENESS

While one might think that proving the effectiveness of a particular solution is the most essential and difficult story element, it turns out that people's standard of "proof" usually isn't particularly high, as long as they have a sense of how an intervention helps. Two parallel solutions tracks in the survey, one with "hard" statistical evidence of success, and the other with anecdotal support, had generally the same positive effects. If hard statistical proof is available, it can be used, but communicators shouldn't hold back on telling solutions stories for lack of statistically significant evidence.

Summing Up

The three Topos founders – Meg Bostrom, Joe Grady and Axel Aubrun – have been researching public understanding of children's issues for two decades. Their earlier research into specific children's topics such as early childhood development, child

abuse and perceptions of teenagers, informed the research questions on this topic. This research is unique, however, in two fundamental ways. First, it refines a systemic set of principles to apply to stories *across children's issues*. Furthermore, it employed a unique form of survey research that quantified the *influence of these principles of storytelling* on public understanding, action and support, rather than simply rely on respondents' self-reports of a message's ability to persuade.

The analysis that follows is based on a significant body of original research, including six focus groups, TalkBack testing among 240 engaged citizens and survey research with a representative sample of 2,006 American registered voters. The research was designed to establish the effects of various stories and story elements on people's support for policies and interventions to help children.

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Founded by veteran communications strategists Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge, and Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady of Cultural Logic, Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately transform the landscape of public understanding where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is possible to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, real change depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support. For more information: www.topospartnership.com





NOTES



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