

Tips for Effective Messaging to Support Public Policy Change

1 Connect with supporters.

When communicating to gain support for policy, systems, and environmental changes that help kids grow up at a healthy weight, it is important to use language that will move people to take action. By framing your message in a way that paints a picture of how the current environment makes it difficult, if not impossible, to make healthy choices, you can create a sense of urgency and the need to take action. Make sure to clarify that the change and action you're calling for is about transforming environments to make it easy for people to eat healthy and be physically active and less about creating personal behavior change.

2 Use the right messenger.

Messages are only as strong as the person delivering them. Is the person delivering the message credible? Are they representative of the community most affected? Do they have personal experience related to the issue? Are they respected by the audience? The best messenger needs to be determined for each situation and location and varies by situation. For example, when messaging on health issues, the best messenger could be a doctor, a nurse, or a patient. When messaging about school food or PE, students and youth can make good messengers. Be sure to make informed decisions about the most culturally appropriate messenger on an issue.

3 Avoid discussions about tradeoffs.

When discussing a proposed policy, it is very easy to get caught up in the process, how the policy will be implemented, who stands to gain and who stands to lose, and the cost. Stay focused on what stands to be gained, rather than what is at risk of being lost. For example, show how time spent in physical activity can help drive academic achievement, not detract from it.

4 Emphasize choice.

People are most supportive of healthy changes if they don't fear their choices will be limited. When talking about adding healthy options, stress the array of overall choices offered to people, especially parents who we are here to support, so the focus is not on the removal of unhealthy options.

5 Use the right words.

While obesity is a chronic disease, most people still think of it as a personal problem with a personal solution. They believe if someone is obese or overweight, that person just needs to eat less and be more physically active. They don't immediately see the need for public policy solutions. However, when talking about people facing obesity-related diseases like diabetes and heart disease, most people agree that we need to work together to find a solution to the problem. Avoid using "obesity" and instead emphasize the health threats posed by heart disease and/or diabetes. It is also easy to get caught up in imagery that invokes wars, battles, and game playing when discussing this issue. Instead try to focus on cooperation and partnership using phrases like "all hands on deck," "everyone has a role to play," and "many pieces to the puzzle."

6 Focus on what the issue is.

Always start the discussion with what the issue is about - not what it isn't about. By invoking the opposition's frame, you are raising a new hurdle that may have never been raised. Do not give voice to issues you do not want to talk about - focus on the issues you want to talk about. For example, rather than saying, "this is not about banning cupcakes from schools, but making sure that the food our kids are served at school will help them grow up healthy" you should instead simply say, "this is about ensuring that the food our kids are served at school will help them grow up healthy."

Tips for Effective Messaging to Support Public Policy Change (continued)

7 Stress consumer education as ONE piece of the puzzle.

People believe education is the best way to encourage behavior change. But helping all children grow up at a healthy weight is a complex challenge and education is only one part of the solution. Reinforce consumer education as key to awareness building about the problem and solutions, but emphasize other initiatives that drive system-wide policy change. For example with tobacco use, warning labels did a great deal to educate consumers but the change in norms and dramatic drops in smoking rates happen when environmental changes happened like prohibiting the sale to minors and making workplaces smoke-free.

8 Alleviate skepticism and build trust.

People are very skeptical of government and framing our solutions only from that lens can prevent us from getting our message through to key audiences. Introduce policy, systems, and environmental change efforts to the public with words like “services,” “resources,” “partnerships,” as people are more inclined to embrace this terminology instead of “regulations,” “mandates,” “bans,” “funding,” and “government.”

Language to Emphasize/Language to Avoid

Messages that resonate best are clear and simple. They use everyday language free of jargon and communicate shared values and emotion. Below you’ll find a list of words/phrases Voices for Healthy Kids encourages you to use (left-hand column) when talking about healthy weight. Language in the right-hand column includes terms and phrases not as easily understood or impactful when looking to engage your audience.

<i>Use This Language</i>	<i>Instead of This Language</i>
✓ Describe the environment that makes it difficult to eat healthy and be active	✗ Describing personal behavior
✓ Clear facts about the magnitude of the problem	✗ “Bombard” “Avalanche” or other words that trigger trauma
✓ Invokes a sense of cooperation and partnership	✗ Imagery that invokes wars, battles, and game playing
✓ People living in the United States	✗ Americans, citizens
✓ Underserved	✗ Poor
✓ Helping children grow up at a healthy weight	✗ Preventing childhood obesity
✓ Focus on the positive outcomes of the change you want to see	✗ Focus on directly challenging the opposition arguments
✓ Eating healthy and being physically active helps prevent diabetes and heart disease.	✗ Eating healthy and being physically active helps prevent childhood obesity.
✓ Clear examples of what comprises neighborhood (school, church, family)	✗ General “community” which means something different to each person
✓ Standards, choices, and options	✗ Restrictions, mandates, bans, and regulations
✓ Focus on what stands to be gained	✗ Focus on what is at risk for being lost
✓ People/kids being physically active, active play	✗ Exercise