

## Messaging on Childcare



With Trump having thrown out some promises on childcare, advocates who have spent decades trying to make great care affordable for all families with fair compensation for providers have an opening to convey what you want about this critical issue. However, it can be challenging to know how to get your own message across, especially in a frenetic environment with all things Trump dominating every news cycle.

Given these real challenges, we offer the following advice first on pitfalls to avoid and then on approaches to embrace. These are based upon a body of empirical evidence on how to make the best case for economic justice issues and social welfare policy as well as research into perception and persuasion on political issues.

### Current Messaging Pitfalls

#### 1. Centering on Trump

Trump's childcare plan is a thinly veiled pro-family ruse for dismantling what families need; it's not surprising that it's sent advocates into reactive mode.

As such, we see a tendency to introduce the topic of childcare by referencing Trump:

Even the **child care tax breaks that Trump proposed** do little for low- and moderate-income families.

While he campaigned on a promise to **help working families, President Donald Trump and his allies in Congress** are now plotting to destroy many of the programs that enable families to maintain basic living standards and get ahead.

During the presidential campaign, Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka helped craft a **childcare tax credit proposal** for her father's run, and now she's pressing Republican lawmakers to make it reality.

While it may seem necessary to lead with and repeat the content of Trump's plans, it isn't. Not only is this unintentionally reinforcing the very ideas we seek to dispel, it robs us of precious airtime to say what we actually want.

Further, for many people, yours may be the very first mention of a childcare policy actively up for consideration. In the something is better than nothing reality of

today's dismal politics, the existence of any kind of new plan – despite its abysmal content – can sound appealing.

When we are afforded the rare moment of media attention to our issue, we must inject our true, courageous, values-based messaging and our policy solutions. But that's only possible if we do not spend our available time addressing the inadequacy of our opponent's ideas.

## 2. Negation

Negation is closely related to repeating your opposition's claims. Phrases like “**this is not** an adequate child care plan” and “**this plan won't** do much good” unwittingly reinforce the claims they refute.

As much as we wish otherwise, negating a claim actually brings it top of mind. People latch onto the most tangible element of a sentence – usually the noun. In contrast, words like “won't” and “not” are intangible.

In fact, decades of research demonstrate that attempts to refute false information can actually strengthen people's belief in the claims. Testing shows that people remember the assertion and forget that it's a lie.

In order to negate your opponents' claims you must repeat them. Yet, people accept arguments that reinforce what they already believe and reject those that don't. This is known as “confirmation bias.” And, in fact, there can be a “backfire effect,” where people become more convinced of their position if it's challenged

People are more likely to believe refutations if they are presented unemotionally, such as in graphs. Experiments in different domains reveal that factual presentation is even more effective when accompanied by “affirmation” that has people recall an experience that made them feel good about themselves. (Note that this is in a one-on-one conversation, not broadcast messaging, setting.)

## 3. Putting forth a “no” without a “yes”

Unlike with most other issues, childcare is (to the layperson) one where Trump seems to be offering up something new. This stands in contrast to the rest of his social and economic agenda, which is, almost without exception, dismantling something existing. This puts advocates for childcare in a precarious position, from a cognitive perspective. Namely, they must denounce something that appears at first blush like their desired goal – federal childcare policy.

Due to the aforementioned tendency to lead by tearing into Trump's plan, you place yourselves in the position of looking like naysayers without purpose. In other words, that you oppose whatever the Administration puts forth simply due to the

author not on the merits of the plan. While this is untrue, public attention is limited and issues are complex. First impressions count.

Opposing something the public likes – childcare (never mind the details) – isn't easy. Doing so without offering up a preferable alternative is arguably impossible. In short, putting forth a “no” without a “yes” is detrimental both to the efficacy of your critique and to engaging support for your alternative proposal.

Further, with childcare, your messaging challenge is one of intensity, not persuasion. Unlike more polarizing issues like abortion or the death penalty, providing more affordable childcare options at higher quality is quite popular among a range of voters. However, it doesn't rise top of mind nor does it induce desire to go march in the streets or rush to the airports.

Where Trump's plans to cause real, sustained and deliberate harm to immigrants and people who are Muslim draws appropriate attention and backlash, creating a (crappy) childcare plan doesn't merit much notice, let alone ire. Thus, to rise to the notice of your target audiences, you must give them something desirable to promote and endorse. Fear and anger aren't the triggers for you – hope and love of kids are.

### **Better Messaging Options**

The following short narratives are all rooted in empirically tested approaches. They share in common best practices on ordering effects. Namely, they lead with a shared value, move next toward highlighting a problem with a clear source and, finally, present a desired solution in service of the shared value first named. In addition, these narratives resolve the aforementioned concerns specific to this issue in naming setting the policy you desire as an anchor to which you then contrast Trump's proposal.

#### *People Who Work*

People who work hard deserve to make more than a decent living; we deserve to have a decent life. That means ensuring all children are cared for in a great place that doesn't break the bank. That's why we support X plan that makes childcare affordable so any working parent can have their kid in great care. Trump's childcare plan is a tax cut for his wealthy friends with the chance to set up a savings account for care. If Americans had savings, we wouldn't be choosing between the care our kids need and the rent. All of us need quality, affordable childcare – that is what the X Plan delivers. Everyone means everyone, no exceptions.

#### *All Children Have Rights*

Parents want the very best for their kids – and our leaders ought to want the very same. And that means childcare you can trust, no matter your income level and the right to care for your loved ones while still making ends meet. That's why we're endorsing the X childcare plan, which provides support to make great care affordable no matter your income. Meanwhile, Trump's plan is another kickback for

the already wealthy, while people who work for a living are left scrambling. All children have rights, not just those whose parents happen to be wealthy and well connected.

*Family Comes First*

Most of us believe that family comes first. That's why we support the X childcare plan. Every parent wants to know their kids are in great hands without having to fear they can't make rent. And that's what the X plan does – makes quality care affordable to working parents. The scheme Trump proposes is a tax break for his fellow millionaires without real support for parents struggling to make ends meet. If politicians want to talk family values, it's time they start valuing families and that starts with support the X childcare plan.