



PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

Advocates for early childhood have been forced onto defense to protect resources for kids. Yet we ought to be the ones setting the terms of debate on how to care for our kids. Toward this end, **Bay Area Early Childhood Funders** partnered with ASO Communications to explore the narrative about what we do and why. The recommendations here are based on analysis of current language and available quantitative opinion research. Findings are informed by research in perception of and persuasion for policy issues.

METHODOLOGY

Using a variety of techniques from *cognitive linguistics*, a field dedicated to how people process information and communicate, we examine here how people formulate judgements and come to conclusions about resources for young children's development.

These conclusions emerge from noting patterns in the ways advocates and opponents make their case. These patterns reveal how people automatically and unconsciously make sense of complex issues like care and early learning, child development and parenting.

One of the most powerful forms of linguistic expression that shapes thinking and policy preferences is

conceptual metaphor. For example, researchers at Stanford showed that groups primed with a metaphor of CRIME AS DISEASE (*plaguing* our communities, *spreading* around) came up with entirely preventative solutions for crime such as after school programs and preschool for all. Conversely, subjects exposed to the metaphor of CRIME AS OPPONENT (*fight* crime, *beat back* homicide) thought harsher punishments were the answer. If you're working for prevention, it's clear you should liken crime to DISEASE and avoid OPPONENT evocations. A 3-strikes advocate would want to do the opposite.

You know wording matters: the terminology for the issue you address — childcare, early learning, early childhood education — is up for debate. Individual words, especially labels, matter immensely as researchers on voting behavior discovered.

In another study, investigators asked respondents whether they'd *vote* in an upcoming election and others whether they'd *be a voter*.

The difference is stunning. Where just over half of those asked about voting intended to do so, 87.5% of those asked about being a voter desired to get to the polls. Post-election, voting records showed 96% of those surveyed about being a voter actually pulled the lever.

A simple word difference, from "will you vote" to "will you be a voter" is also a conceptual shift from action to identity, from what you do to who you are. The words we use shape what's true for our audiences. This is as true in ideas about handling crime as it is for voting behavior. If theory holds, it should prove effective to unpack and then alter perceptions of economic justice broadly, including childcare.

WHAT THIS ISN'T

Applying the findings of these methods of analysis to assess and, hopefully, shape advocacy discourse can ensure you're saying what you actually think. It helps you say today what you'll still believe and mean tomorrow.

However, this assumes a focus on the long-term: an attempt to shape how the public understands and comes to judgements about your issues over time. This is not traditional political research designed to win the next election.

As such the analysis and recommendations here may challenge conventional wisdom about what the public is ready to hear. The premise here is to find the range of ways people *can*, if supported by our messaging, come to support your advocacy efforts -- in other words where they are capable of going and how to lead them there.

articulating the ask

Tread with caution in the ECONOMY frame

Advocates often default to “selling” solutions as the means to financial gains or staving off future losses or expenditures. While practical and reasonable sounding, these arguments reinforce the notion that what matters most is GDP — not people.

Embrace: insisting people’s needs hold primacy
do right by [California’s] children
all children/people have rights
doing [X] will improve people’s health and wellbeing

Use sparingly: referencing *only* children’s future potential

Fine: “improve their chances for better life outcomes”

Better: improve their experiences today for better outcomes tomorrow

Fine: “early ed boosts school readiness”

Better: early ed nurtures children today and sets them up for a better future

Avoid: focusing solely on the economy, implying kids are products

“invest in children”

“doing [X] will grow/help the economy”

“this is best for the economy”

Avoid: implying the value a person contributes is the same as the amount they’re paid

No: “childcare providers earn minimum wage”

Yes: childcare providers are paid minimum wage

What’s implied about “childcare?”

Advocacy for quality childcare requires conveying what it is and why it matters.

◆ Take care not to assert what you most need people to believe: childcare is educational and essential.

Assume this is true and proceed accordingly.

◆ Be cautious about implying childcare is a *product*, when in fact it’s a highly nuanced and specialized *process*

No: “getting childcare”

No: “out of reach”

No: “have/don’t have childcare”

Yes: having your child educated in care

Yes: providing stellar care for all children

Yes: ensuring children are cared for

UNNECESSARY HEDGING

You often sell yourselves short in describing what you do or what you’ve accomplished! **Avoid** extraneous phrases like — *seek to, work to, strive to, dedicated to, fighting to, whose mission is to*

These diminish your achievements and, with this, decrease desire to affiliate with your organizations and campaigns. Although it will feel like bragging or claiming singular credit for group effort or something still underway, it’s critical to call yourselves the winning team if you want to recruit new players. Thus an organization that “works to invest” would now simply “invest,” another that “seeks to educate” would just “educate.”

“Access to” is also frequently in your language. With this, you’re hedging about your desired outcomes. When possible, cut right to your goal or program want to deliver. For example, instead of “we seek access to quality early learning for every child” you would say “we seek quality early learning for every child.”

profiling the people

Passive versus active constructions

Unless you convince your audiences that **people making intentional and at times nefarious decisions** are behind outcomes witnessed, you can't make the case that other outcomes are possible. If we do not insist that current problems are person-made we can't expect to prove our case that men and women, if so moved, could fix them.

◆ Signal that people created current conditions and could alter them; things don't just come to be:

No: "children do not have access to [X]"

Yes: lawmakers denied children access; wealthy Californians refuse to provide resources for [X]

No: "[place] faces a critical shortage of [X]"

Yes: leaders decided to limit [X]; officials chose to allocate tax funds to [Y] and cut [X]

No: "disparities in learning emerge"

Yes: we choose to hold certain kids back from their full potential

◆ Don't leave open the interpretation that parents struggling to make ends meet are to blame for outcomes you decry.

No: "low income children arrive at school behind more affluent kids"

Yes: lawmakers deny low income children the advantages of more affluent kids

◆ Make your demands clear and with consequences for lawmakers

No: We must do more; we must ensure all children have access; much more can be done

Yes: Lawmakers must ensure [X]; all California's children must have [x] by [year]

HOW TO HANDLE "NAMING NAMES"

Of course, it's often hard to pinpoint exactly who is behind some bad deed. Or it will damage your outreach to the lawmakers you need on your side to do so. There are ways you can *convey* a problem is person made and therefore remediable, without necessarily spelling out who did what to whom. And, with government, take caution before pointing the finger too directly.

◆ Words like "manufacture" "create" "place" and "bring", as in "tax dodgers create hardships for California's kids", tell audiences bad things didn't come from nowhere.

◆ Be especially careful about characterizing government writ large as the source of the problem. Instances of government inaction and even complicity in unacceptable wages and conditions for care providers and lack of access to childcare abound -- and must be stopped. However, because you need people to see government as the solution, it's problematic to fan the very present anti-government sentiment in our society. Emphasize *lost opportunities*, *bad choices*, *historic wrongs*, rather than blanket condemnations.

◆ Another approach is to name particular politicians. For example, *Assemblymember X decided to*, *Lawmakers in X chose to deny*, *Corporations pushed the X Administration to*, and so on.

Advocates say...	Say Instead...	Because...
Invest in children	Do right by children, all children have rights	Monetizing children reifies the economy over human needs.
Campaign seeks to/works to/strives to/is dedicated to [X]	Campaign does/gets/obtains/wins [X]	Unnecessary hedging dilutes your efficacy.
Childcare worker	Childcare provider, person who provides care	Helps establish professionalism and human needs of care givers
Good for the economy	Good for the California/ Californians	Personifying the economy reinforces opposition's paradigm.
Conditions persist; children lack access	Lawmakers choose, politicians deny	People do things, things don't just happen.
Boost school readiness; improve future well-being/ earnings	Improve experiences today for better outcomes tomorrow	Solely referencing future potential fails to activate intense emotion kids engender.
Childcare subsidy	Childcare support; support care for all kids; ensure child development	"Subsidy" implies a special extra for some calls to mind the "deservingness" issue.
Access to childcare/early learning/X program	Childcare/early learning/X program	"Access to" dilutes the efficacy of your demand.
Poverty, child poverty; poor; low income; people living in poverty	Struggling to make ends meet; working to provide for family	People do not self-identify as poor and poverty casts them as passive. "Struggling" and "working" brings attention to people's efforts.
Achievement gap(s); health disparities; school readiness gap/disparity	Barriers to achievement/school readiness; intentional obstacles to health/well-being.	"Gap" casts attention on difference without explaining how it came to be. "Barriers" and "obstacle" make clear the deliberate impediments to achieving the same outcome.
Workers	Working people, people who [i.e. teach our kids, care for babies]	Move out of "worker" frame in order to activate human frame.
Choose between work and family	Family comes first	Most people work <i>for</i> family, reassert primacy of human frame.
Getting/having/obtaining childcare, childcare out of reach	providing stellar care for all children ensuring children are cared for	Problematic to imply childcare is a static object, not continuous process.
Providers earn [X]	Providers are paid [X]	Earn suggests the value a person creates; pay is amount given to them.

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