

WHEN IS THE RIGHT TIME TO USE PERSONAL STORIES & VIVID EXAMPLES? HOW TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD

To help infant-toddler professionals successfully communicate with policymakers and the public about early childhood development, the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network publishes a series of articles in *The Baby Monitor* focused on effective communication about the early years. All of the articles in the series can be found at

http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_pub_framing.

Introduction

This article in the framing series takes a communications challenge head-on: Is it really effective to include the stories of specific children or families in our communications and advocacy efforts? The answer is not straightforward, and therefore we chose to focus attention on an analysis of personal stories and vivid examples in communications and advocacy. The FrameWorks Institute published two communications tools aimed at helping advocates understand the public policy consequences of using this communications strategy¹. In this article, the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network draws from FrameWorks' research to inform our advocacy and communications practice.

Personal Stories and Vivid Examples

At one time or another, most of us have used a child's personal story (or a family's story) to pull at the heartstrings of the public, potential donors, or policymakers in an effort to convince them to pay attention. It is a commonly used tactic, and we see it everywhere – in newspaper articles and TV news reports, advocacy materials, political campaigns, and fundraising. With so many industries using this strategy, it must be successful, right? Well, not always, and this is why we need to delve into the communications research to understand what is happening when we communicate using such vivid personal stories.

Stories and examples are helpful tools for making policy feel “real” by illustrating how programs and services solve social problems successfully. They allow us to demonstrate the ways in which macro-level decisions are making a positive impact at the micro-level; providing a model for understanding a bigger idea. When the examples are vivid and very personal, they have the ability to “grab attention, and provide memorable images.”² If we want to grab the attention of policymakers, then why should we avoid vivid examples?

The answer lies in “how people use vivid examples to make...judgments.”³ As the FrameWorks Institute points out, there are three primary reasons why personal, vivid storytelling does not work when advocating for policy solutions to social problems:⁴

- “Not all examples are good examples” and as such, the examples can become distorted. “People tend to generalize from the examples you present, and overestimate the extent to

which the specific situation portrayed occurs in the general population.”⁵ When it comes to advocacy and policymaking, vivid examples can create an unintended false perception of the problem. For instance, a story about a “child who is locked in the closet by a parent is a more salient example than the child who is left alone day after day without adult supervision. Yet, incidences of neglect far outweigh those for abuse.”⁶ FrameWorks Institute research on public perceptions about child abuse found distortion effects to be quite high. When presented with vivid examples, “Americans were far more likely to over-estimate the incidences of abuse and to under-estimate the incidences of neglect.”⁷

- *Focusing on one person or one family makes it hard for people to “see the forest for the trees.”*⁸ “If we are trying to get people to understand social issues, we generally want them to think in a thematic [or contextual] way. The more vivid the examples, the more likely they are to draw the audience into [events happening to specific people and their unique situation].”⁹ As researchers Iyengar and Kinder discovered in their study of vivid stories in news media, “Viewers may get so caught up in one family’s troubles that they fail to make the connection back to the national condition. Overwhelmed by concrete details, they miss the general point.”¹⁰
- *A phenomenon called the “Cosby Effect” can take place, invigorating global stereotypes that interfere with your policy goals.* “When people see a ...depiction counter to the prevailing stereotype (such as a successful, middle-class African-American family like the one shown in the popular 80’s television show about the Cosby family), it does not map onto their thinking about other members of the group. To the contrary, research shows that people are left wondering what’s wrong with those who do not live up to the example, and the existing stereotypes are actually reinforced.”¹¹

Let’s look at some personal stories and vivid examples in action. As you read the stories, think about the research described above and the consequences created by the vivid examples.

“When their daughter, Sanai, was diagnosed with autism last summer, Keesha and Terrence Tyler vowed to do whatever it took to get her the best possible help. After numerous tests and months of research, the...couple enrolled Sanai in a comprehensive program..., including sessions with up to five therapists a week. At about \$3,000 a month, the therapy costs more than the Tylers’ mortgage. The sessions are supposed to be covered by the family’s health insurance plan...But when the Tylers and doctors submitted receipts, dozens of sessions were denied. ‘Each time I’m getting different answers as to why they’re not paying,’ Keesha Tyler said. ‘No one has a clear answer.’ Under a law signed by [the former Governor], insurance companies are required to provide up to \$36,000 a year in coverage for people under the age of 21 who have been diagnosed with autism. Despite the new law, the Tylers continue to shell out their own money...[causing a significant] financial toll.”¹²

In this story, the moving plight of Sanai and her parents draws us in, so that all we can think about is how to help the Tyler family with their financial problems. With so much focus on this one family, it is difficult to see that the premise of the newspaper article is enforcement of a new law which requires health insurance companies to cover children and young adults with autism.

“As a freshman at Northwest High School, [Elinda] Jones often found herself suspended from school, getting in spats with students and teachers, and earning bad grades. Her mother, Kironde Evans-Martin, knew her daughter was capable of more and even threatened to make her change schools or go live with family in California if she didn’t improve. But it took a relative’s arrest and jail sentence for Jones...to realize she was headed down the wrong path, too. ‘When my father got locked up, I realized I wanted to do better,’ she said. ‘He wanted me to work to finish high school and be more successful than him and my mother. That moment was when I decided I was ready for change.’ She agreed to attend Indianapolis Metropolitan High School, at the start of her sophomore year. Three years later, she has transformed herself into a B-average student, high school graduate, and Goodwill’s Youth Achiever of the Year, an award that honors a student who has overcome barriers to education or employment.”¹³ For many youth like Elinda, it is very easy to slip through the cracks and get off track. Many young people have medical issues, learning disabilities, and other challenges that make it difficult for them to succeed in school without special programs and supports. Although the state legislature is considering a bill to establish stronger links between community support services and area high schools, there has not been a rallying call of support for the measure. Without schools that have support services like IMHS, youth like Elinda Jones will be left on their own.¹⁴

Just as in the first example, it is hard to ignore the story of Elinda Jones and all that she has overcome. We feel good about Elinda’s achievements despite the odds, but then we begin to wonder why all other troubled youth could not achieve the same thing. Unfortunately, Elinda’s story is so vivid that her success does not map onto the circumstances of all her peers. When that happens, the story overpowers the bigger policy picture and makes policy change more difficult.

Rethinking How We Use Stories & Examples

If you are thinking about using personal stories in your communications and advocacy efforts, consider asking yourself the following questions¹⁵ first to determine whether it is the best course of action.

1. Is the personal story that I’m choosing likely to result in a distortion of my broader policy goals?
2. Is the personal story likely to turn the discussion away from themes and systems by focusing on individual characteristics of particular people? Is this story likely to set up a charity response?
3. Is the personal story connected in any way to global stereotypes associated with the issue, and thus likely to backfire?

Storytelling is a powerful tool in advocacy, but personal and vivid stories are not the only tools we can use to exemplify the effects of policy on people’s lives. Stories that show cause and effect, conditions in the environment (such as poverty), and policy solutions can illustrate the need for systems-level change and government action to address issues related to very young children.

As you get more involved in advocacy and practice communicating effectively about infants, toddlers, and their families, take some time to think about stories you can tell that connect the

dots between problems and solutions.¹⁶ In time, you will find a whole new cadre of stories that can bring attention to issues affecting very young children.

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¹ Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., Ph.D., “Vivid Examples: What They Mean and Why You Should Be Careful Using Them.” *FrameWorks Institute E-Zine #33*, October 2006, www.frameworksinstitute.org. Diane Benjamin, “The Problem With Telling Compelling Personal Anecdotes,” *FrameWorks Institute FrameByte*, June 2007, www.frameworksinstitute.org.

² Gilliam, “Vivid Examples.”

³ Ibid.

⁴ Benjamin, “The Problem With Telling Compelling Personal Anecdotes.”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gilliam, “Vivid Examples.”

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Benjamin, “The Problem With Telling Compelling Personal Anecdotes.”

¹⁰ Gilliam, “Vivid Examples.”

¹¹ Benjamin, “The Problem With Telling Compelling Personal Anecdotes.”

¹² Jon Yates, “Insurer adds hardship of caring for autistic child.” *Chicago Tribune*, May 19, 2009, www.chicagotribune.com.

¹³ Josh Duke, “Goodwill award winner overcomes challenges, defies odds.” *Indianapolis Star*, May 16, 2009, www.indystar.com.

¹⁴ The part of this example that is not in quotation marks is the creation of the author, and is not part of the newspaper article cited in endnote #13.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gilliam, “Vivid Examples.”