

Narrative approach can change minds on child care spending

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How do you capture hearts and minds when it comes to increasing public support for policies and programs related to early childhood education?

According to new multi-institution research led by Jeff Niederdeppe, professor in the Department of Communication in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, that all depends on whose hearts and minds are in the audience.

For turning resisters into supporters, a more subtle narrative approach is most effective, while "inoculation"—messages aimed at keeping opposing viewpoints at bay—was seen as the best approach for those already in favor of such policies and programs.

"A deep understanding of how strategic messages can inform the public about the benefits of investments in early childhood education is really timely," Niederdeppe said. "It's critical as we think about what a [social safety net](#) looks like in the post-COVID world."

His group's paper, "Evidence-Based Message Strategies to Increase Public Support for State Investment in Early Childhood Education," was published Aug. 17 in *The Milbank Quarterly*. Co-authors include Yiwei Xu, a doctoral student in the field of communication.

Multiple studies have shown that birth to age 5 is a critical time for social, emotional and physical development, with far-reaching consequences over the life course.

"We have a pretty robust evidence base showing that investments in early childhood education are really important," Niederdeppe said, "not only for social and educational well-being but also for long-term health. Those benefits tend to accumulate over time."

For this work, the researchers randomly assigned more than 5,300 members of an online research panel to read one of four messages promoting state investment in child care policies and programs; a [control group](#) did not read any messaging.

The team tested four different kinds of messaging:

- An argument-based advocacy message ("simple pro-policy");
- A forewarning that others might try to persuade them with refutations of common oppositional arguments ("inoculation");
- A story incorporating characters, setting and other elements of narrative to illustrate the structural nature of the problem and solution ("narrative"); and
- Inoculation and narrative messages ("combined").

Respondents were assigned to one of seven conditions based on the type of message they received. After the messages were read, respondents were asked a series of questions about their preexisting support for child care policies.

Two weeks later, respondents read either an anti-policy message or an additional pro-policy message, followed by an anti-policy message. Respondents were then asked the same set of policy support questions as after the first portion of the study.

Niederdeppe's group found that the narrative messaging worked best among those who identified as initially being opposed to increased investment in child care policies, while the inoculation messaging strengthened existing positive feelings.

The results weren't surprising to Niederdeppe and his group, he said, in part because child care is generally not a partisan issue among the public.

"It's not like abortion, or gun control versus gun rights," he said, "those clear issues where people just have been exposed to lots of messages, they have their arguments for or against whatever position they take, and it's really hard to crack that nut on either side."

The key takeaway for Niederdeppe: As previous research has suggested, a narrative, storytelling approach—"showing rather than telling, in a sense," he said—is the best way to appeal to folks who might initially be resistant to increased spending on [early childhood education](#). Crafting stories with characters who are relatable to most people, he said, is also critical.

"If I come to you and say, 'I'm going to try to convince you about x, y and z,' you might immediately have your guard up," he said. "You don't want to be told what to think. But if I can reveal, through another character, these issues in a concrete way, that puts you in a more receptive mindset."

More information: Jeff Niederdeppe et al, Evidence-Based Message Strategies to Increase Public Support for State Investment in Early Childhood Education: Results from a Longitudinal Panel Experiment, *The Milbank Quarterly* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/1468-0009.12534](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12534)

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