

# Creating Strengths-based Messaging for Families and Communities

**Jim McKay**

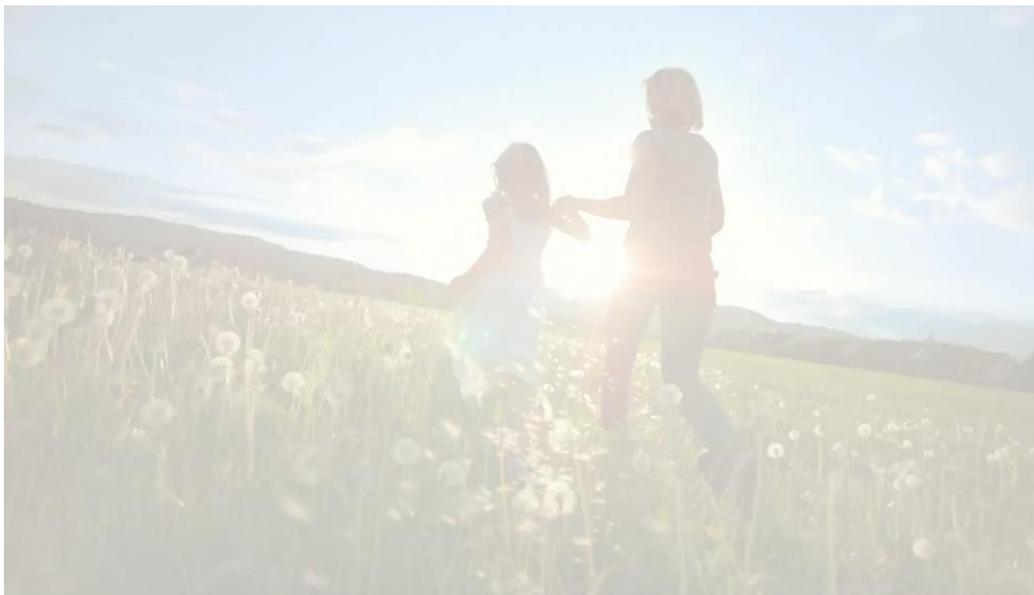
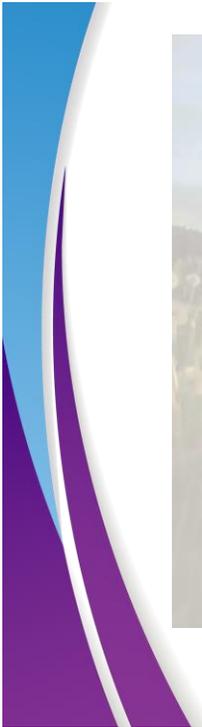
**Children's Trust Fund Alliance  
Birth Parent National Network Webinar  
Thursday, April 11, 2024**



## **Objectives**

- Review changes in messaging about prevention of child abuse and neglect
- Strategic messaging for different audiences
- Resources from the Children's Trust Fund Alliance and other national partners





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Prevent Child Abuse America  
Alliance for Strong Communities & Families  
Council on Accreditation

# Reframing Childhood Adversity

Promoting Upstream Approaches

Julie Sweetland, PhD  
Senior Advisor

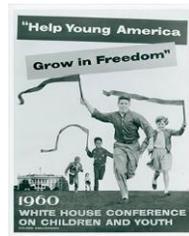
March 22, 2021



## Children’s advocates have long used strategic framing for change



*A moral issue*



*An American issue*



*A public health issue*

## Now is the time to reposition childhood adversity again

**Issue is seen as important, but intractable**



We need to shift from the problem to solutions

**Demand for strength-based, justice-oriented approaches**



We need effective ways to make the case for bold change

**Explosion of research has added new language, new lenses**



We need to coordinate language at some level - or we will undermine ourselves and each other

## Reframing goals

- Broaden the public’s mental model of childhood adversity and its effects
- Build understanding of big-picture causes of childhood adversity
- Shift attitudes toward collective responsibility and collective efficacy
- Cultivate more conversation around upstream solutions (promotion & prevention)
- Build support for big-picture, upstream approaches

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### public issue

Make the story one where we all have a stake and role in outcomes that matter.

Show how external conditions get “under the skin” to shape health, development, and outcomes.

### preventable problem

Emphasize the dynamism of child/youth development.

Talk about preventing an “overload of stress” on families.

Bring the concept of prevention to life.

### solvable problem

Don’t talk about the impact of adversity without also raising people’s capacity for resilience.

Always include a promising or proven collective solution.

## Why is framing important?



When communication is inadequate, people default to the “pictures in their heads.”



When communication is effective, people can see an issue from a different perspective.



CHILD ABUSE

# GUJ I D APLISF



**What is causing these cattle to get sick?**



## What is causing these cattle to get sick?



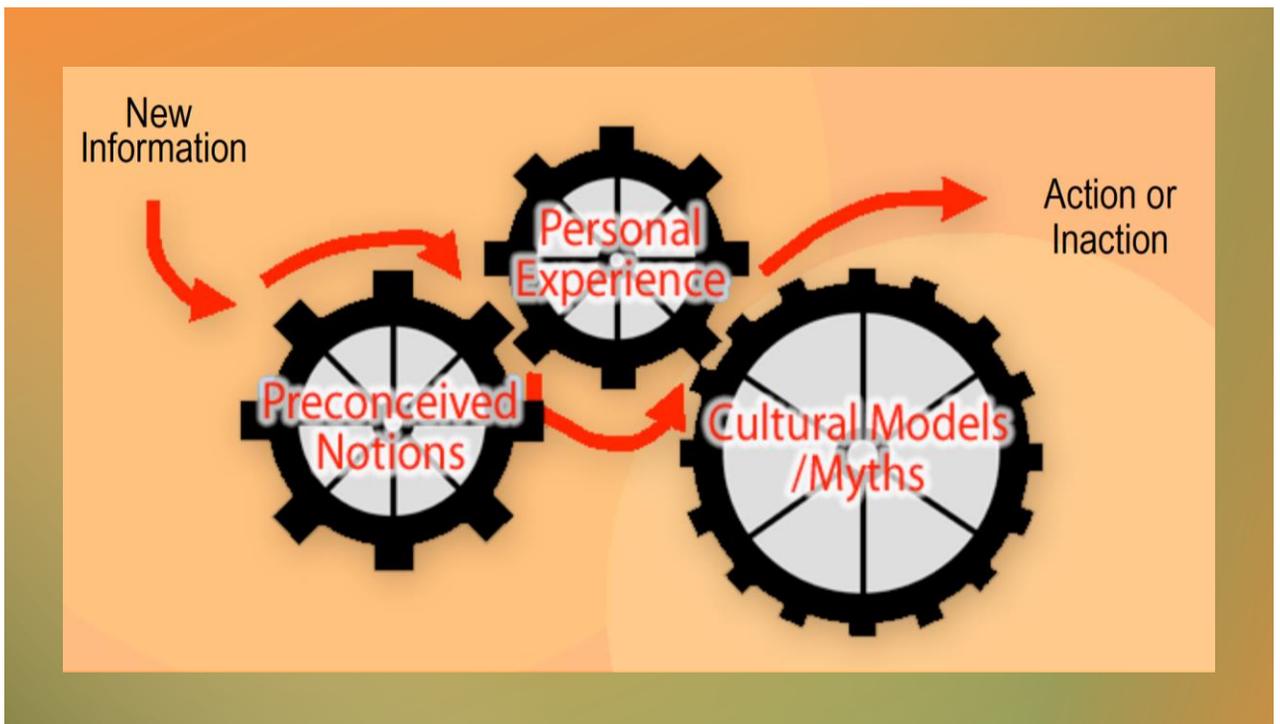
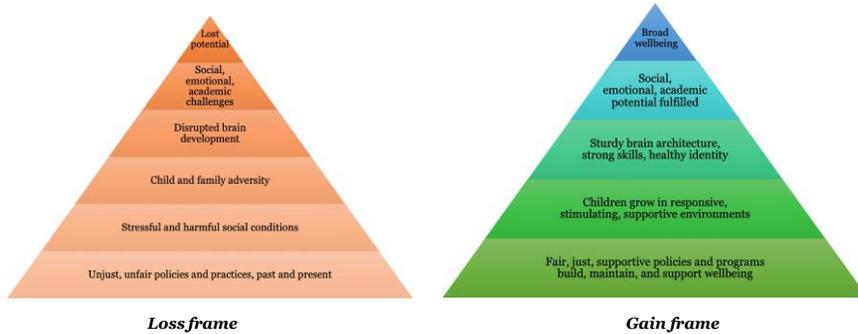
### Let's carefully choose the links in our explanatory chains

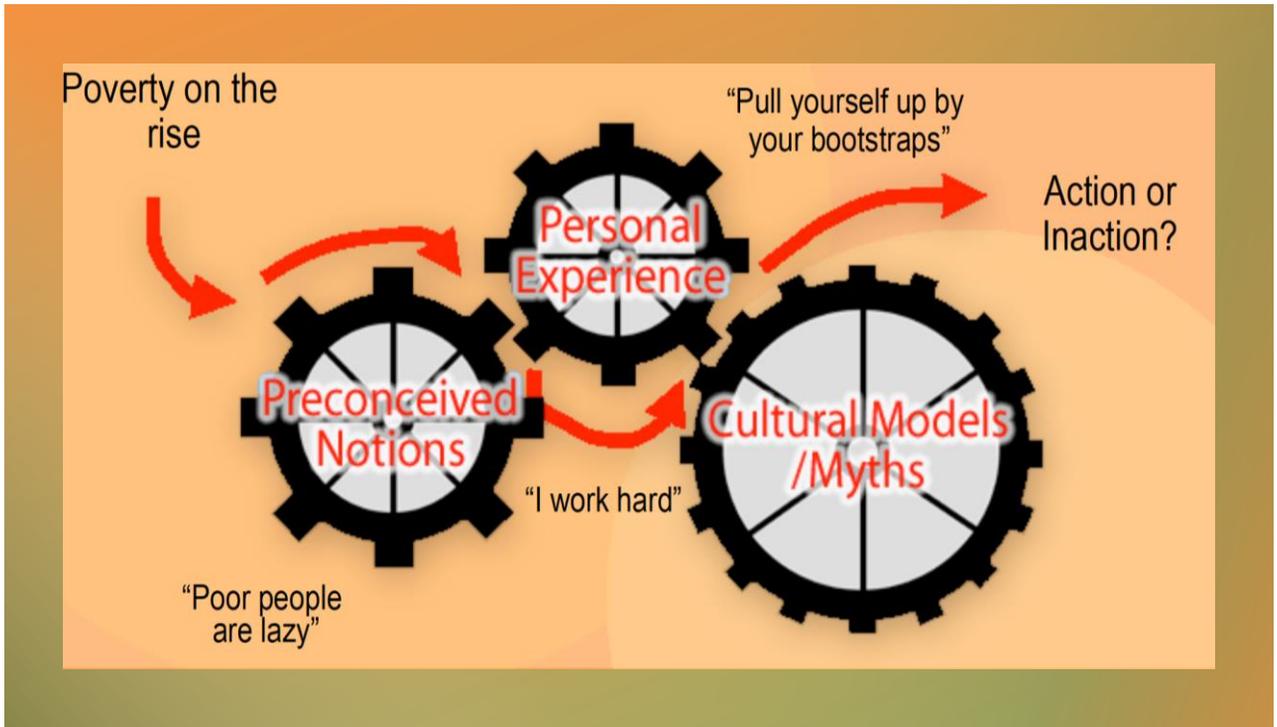


Two versions of the “ACE Pyramid” graphic, originally titled “Mechanism by which Adverse Childhood Experiences influence health and wellbeing across the lifespan”  
Source: Centers for Disease Control.

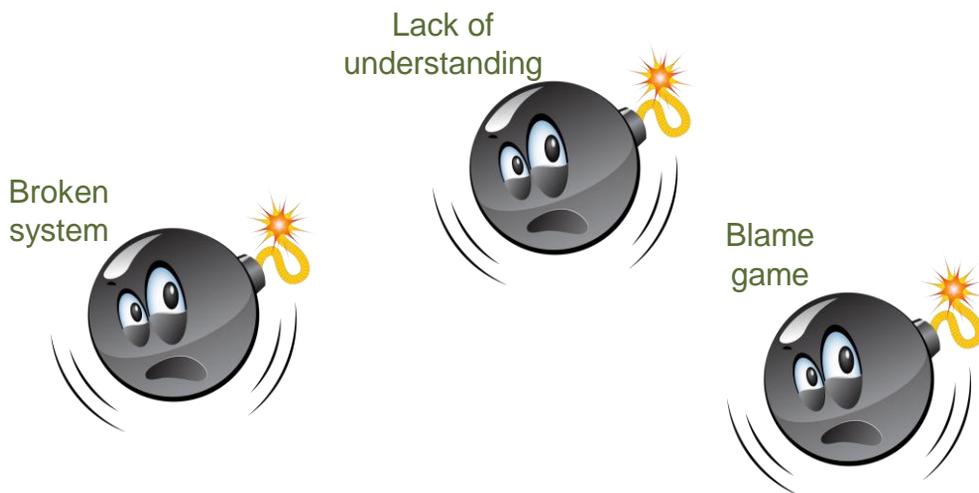
## Sharing the science in ways that drive policy thinking

Two suggested "framing pyramids" for public education, advocacy, and outreach





When the message is wrong, we can trigger a **MINEFIELD** of perceptions that **HURT** our cause.



## Example: Anti-Smoking Movement

Smoking as personal vice	Smoking as defective, harmful product
Bad behavior of individuals	Bad behavior of companies
Issue of individualism and freedom of choice	Issue of manipulation of free will through intentional addiction
Vital industry	Corrupt industry
Fix the Person: Individual responsibility	Fix the Condition: Societal responsibility to protect consumers

## Dominant Frame for Child Abuse Prevention

The Frame We've Had	The Frame We Need
Values of Safety and Protection of Children	Values of Stewardship/Responsibility for next generation; Innovation in solving tough problems
Causes are personal / private	Causes are contextual / systemic
Solution is to fix the person	Solutions are developmental: reduction of toxic stress
Violence is inevitable	Communities can collaborate/provide resources in ways that reduce risk
Crisis framing/criminal atrocities dominate news stories	Translation of developmental science via causal stories
Not my problem	Collective problem with solutions



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“

### Overload

“Just as a vehicle can only bear so much weight before it stops moving forward, challenging life circumstances can overburden parents, making it hard for them to provide the best kinds of care and support. To prevent a breakdown in care, we can keep the heaviest loads from weighing families down.”

”

## Multiple Material & Economic Hardships Overload Families and Increase Risk for Child Welfare Involvement



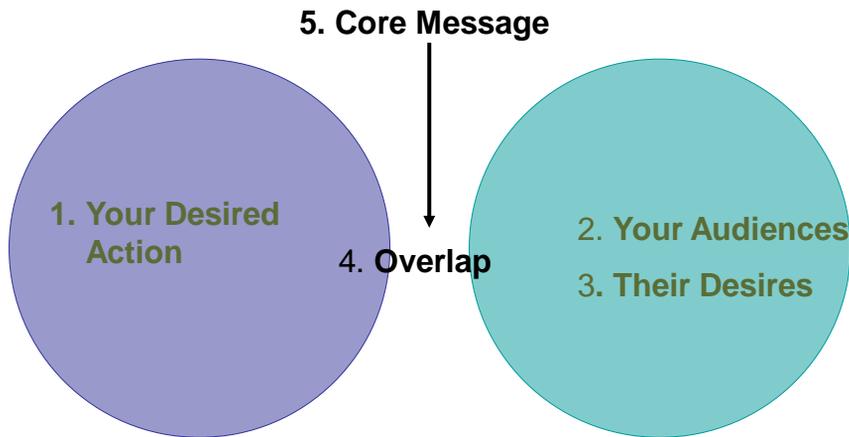
Visual created by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago  
Adapted from: (Conrad-Hiebner, 2020) (Slack, 2011) (Sweetland, 2021)

## Close your eyes:

Think of something you read recently  
that spoke to you and motivated you to act?

## Strategic Messaging: The Action Connection

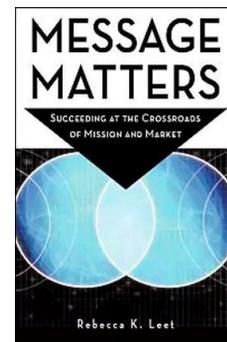
Self-interest drives action – to move people, speak to their self-interest, not yours.



## Five Steps to Strategic Messaging

*Put the right information into the hands of the right people to prompt an action we desire.*

- 1: Identify the action desired
- 2: Identify the target audiences
- 3: Identify target audience desires
- 4: Find the mutuality
- 5: Write the message



## Core Principles of Strategic Messages

- Less is more – fewer words, fewer audiences, fewer points equals more success
- Common desire is the secret to success – without overlap between your and the audience’s desires, an effective strategic message is impossible



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## Strategic Messaging Core Message Example

*“Early Childhood Home Visiting programs partner with families so children grow up healthy, strong and ready to learn.”*

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## Alliance Message in Support of State Children's Trust Funds

We can't allow our children to pay the price as families and communities struggle in these perilous times. We must support the CTF, (STATE)'s leader in promoting proven strategies for preventing child abuse and neglect.

Governors and State Legislators	Influentials [e.g. business & community leaders, national experts in brain research or economics]	Partners and Programs [e.g. child advocacy groups, funded or potentially funded programs]
Our work is <b>part of the core safety net</b> and is the <b>first response to families under stress</b> . Prevention reduces the chance that families will require <b>more costly</b> government services.	We're asking for your help because (STATE) is at risk of <b>losing a generation of progress in developing and delivering effective means</b> of preventing child abuse and neglect.	The CTF is <b>seriously threatened</b> with being <i>[insert threat specific to state]</i> . <sup>4</sup> We need <b>your help</b> – your <b>immediate action</b> – to help prevent this.
Our work leverages public and private resources and is a <b>cost-effective way</b> <sup>1</sup> to <b>reduce abuse and neglect</b> , lighten social service caseloads, and improve school success.	What's at risk is your work and ours to... <sup>2</sup> <i>[insert reference to specific orientation of the "Influential"]</i>	What's at stake is the work you've done and we've done together to help <b>build strong families and communities</b> , which are fundamental to preventing abuse and neglect.
CTF is the <b>only [adjective] entity</b> <sup>3</sup> solely focused on prevention. Preserving it demonstrates your commitment to protecting children from harm, not just helping them after it's happened.	If CTF is abandoned, (STATE) loses the linchpin of our prevention infrastructure and loses the <b>only [adjective] entity</b> <sup>3</sup> solely focused on prevention. Your voice makes a difference, and we ask you to speak out <b>now</b> .	You can have a powerful effect on policy makers by bringing alive the difference this work makes for children, families, and communities. Telling your story and sharing your successes – and urging others to share theirs – is <b>critically important now</b> .

<sup>1</sup> persuasive examples may vary by state

<sup>2</sup> modify specifically to state situation

<sup>3</sup> speak to "Influentials" specific concern (e.g. strong communities, lifelong impact of early abuse, etc.)

<sup>4</sup> insert specific threat (e.g. defunding, elimination, dismantling)



## 27-9-3 Rule

27 words - 9 seconds - 3 messages

- Average length of a sound bite in print media is 27 words
- Average duration of a sound bite in broadcast media is 9 seconds
- Average number of messages reported in both print and broadcast media is 3
- 140-character tweet takes about 9 seconds to say



## Before crafting your message, answer the questions below:

1. Who is the audience for this particular message?
  2. What might appeal to their direct self-interest? (What's in it for them? Why should they care?)
  3. What do you want your audience to think or understand about your issue?
  4. How do you want them to feel about what you have said?
  5. What do you want your listener to do after they hear your message?
- Write out your 27-9-3 message
  - Practice reading it out loud and ask for feedback



## Message Example

*“Parenting can be hard and imperfect. People want to help, but don’t always know how. Through LEAN on ME WV, we’re educating how to support families through Listening, Empathy, Affirmation and Non-Judgment and decreasing unnecessary, inaccurate reports to CPS.”*



Less this



More this



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## Media Bites Examples

*Smoking a “safer” cigarette is like jumping out of a 10th floor window rather than a 12th floor window.*

*Having a no-smoking section in a restaurant is like having a no-peeing section in a swimming pool.*

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**ARE YOU A DAD?** 

You're invited to join us for 24/7 Dad—a FREE program for fathers!

You'll learn about how kids grow, how to communicate with kids, discipline, and other strategies for being a dad.

**REGISTRATION IS NOW OPEN!**

Priority is given to fathers in Ohio County.

- 304-905-0205
- familysupport@ocfrn.com
- facebook.com/OCFamilySupport



 Ohio County Family Support Center  
141 Key Avenue  
Wheeling, WV

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 **SIGN UP TODAY!**

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## OVERVIEW

# Narrative Change Working Group

The Narrative Change work group is a coalition of child welfare stakeholders aligning for a 21st century child and family well-being system that strengthens families and keeps children safe.





# NARRATIVE CHANGE WORKING GROUP

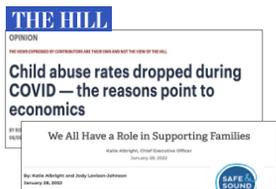
**GOAL:** Shift the narrative from “child welfare” to “child and family wellbeing”

- Information Sharing
- Reporter Education
- Messaging
- Uplifting Voices

casey family programs | casey.org

## WINS

A selection of what the Narrative Change Workgroup has accomplished together



### Uplifting Lived Experience Voices Through Op-eds, Blogs & Medium

Drafted and placed **op-eds & blogs** on behalf of **child welfare leaders and experts** from across the country.

Crafted **20+** Medium pieces to **showcase the experience of youth and families** who have been impacted by the child welfare system.



### Reporter Education Through Briefings

Facilitated media briefings to **share learnings and combat harmful narratives**.

The most recent featured **Commissioner Rebecca Jones Gaston** from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, alongside **Clare Anderson** from Chapin Hall, **Andrew Russo** from the National Family Support Network, and **Jaia Lent** from Generations United.



### Message Development

Crafted updated versions of **messaging and talking points** to **equip partners to talk about the urgent need** to support children and families in the context of current events.

Partners have been able to take this messaging and use it in many contexts, such as **Katie Albright's live interview** with ABC News in 2022.

casey family programs | casey.org

**WINS**

A selection of what the Narrative Change Workgroup has accomplished together



**Information Sharing Through National Partner Coordination**

Convened child welfare experts and communicators from across the country, **collaborating around the latest and greatest data, research and messaging** to meet the moment.



**Narrative Shifts**

Connected with countless reporters to **educate them on the realities of child welfare** and **shape the narrative** in jurisdictions across the country.

These narrative shifts appear in the coverage we read, and in how elected officials talk about how we can do more to support families.



**Coverage of Prevention is Increasing**

Coverage mentioning prevention and preventative resources has risen significantly, representing a larger part of the media landscape

2021

**Narrative Shifts**

2023

**Fragmented narrative** about the need to strengthen and support families



Clear narrative about the **need to strengthen and support families** is beginning to sprout

**Coverage is child-centered**, instead of family-centered



**Coverage is child-centered**, but highlights lived experiences

**Conversations dominated by politicians** — a clear need to uplift family voices



Conversations now **steered by child welfare policy and lived experience experts**

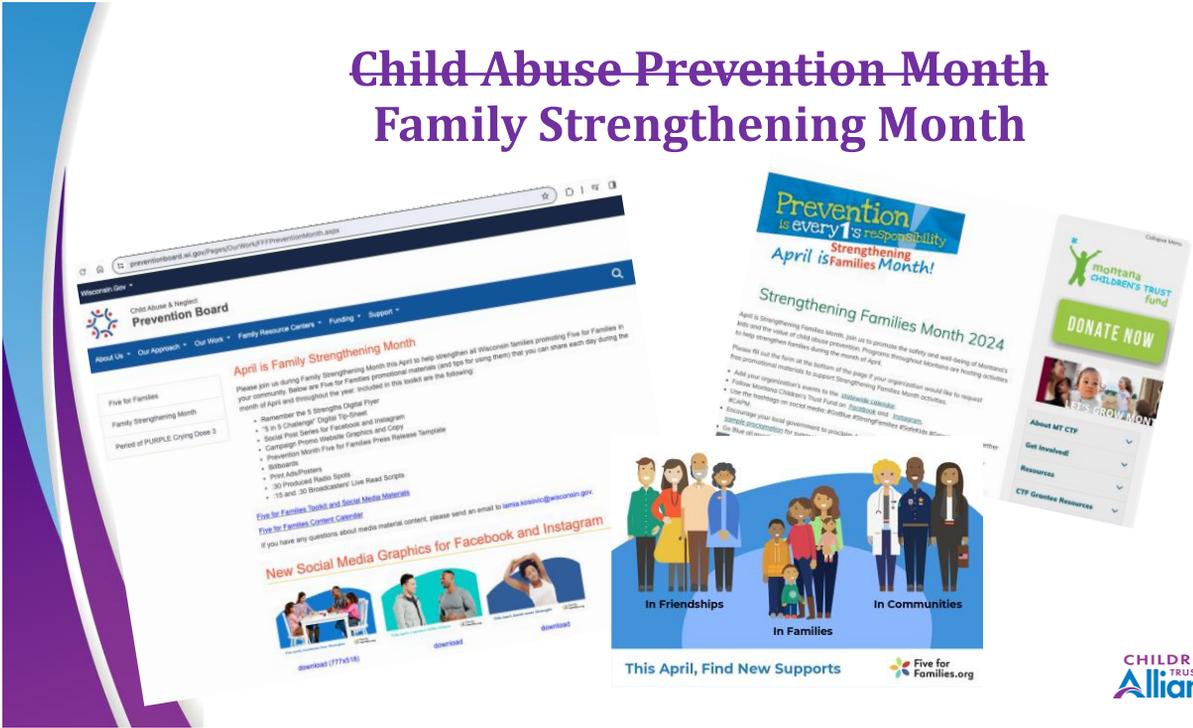
**No strong national narrative** around child welfare — narratives are regional



A national narrative on **child wellbeing & the need for systemic change** is emerging

**AUTHENTIC, PERSONAL STORIES ARE POWERFUL AND RESONATE ACROSS AUDIENCES**

# Child Abuse Prevention Month Family Strengthening Month



What are some of your favorite messaging or narrative shift examples that you have seen?

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



## Reframing Childhood Adversity: Promoting Upstream Approaches

February 2021

Julie Sweetland, PhD, Senior Advisor

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Supported by Prevent Child Abuse America and the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities



## COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE

### Using the Overloaded Metaphor to Talk About Preventing Family Stress that Leads to Childhood Adversity

#### OVERVIEW AND GOALS

Frame prevention as a public health issue: Childhood adversity and involvement with the child welfare system are preventable problems and solvable problems.

#### WHAT THE METAPHOR CONVEYS

- Advance the idea that social conditions and contexts shape family life and children's experiences
- Emphasize the external pressures on families, rather than family or personal dysfunction
- Offer common sense evidence that suggests that many contextual factors contribute to neglect or involvement with child welfare:
  - economic insecurity—including housing insecurity, precarious employment, unemployment, and low incomes
  - lack of access to childcare
  - inability to receive medical care for a family member
  - unmet behavioral health needs

#### HOW THE METAPHOR WORKS

The metaphor of an overloaded vehicle helps people understand how external and multiple pressures on families contribute to neglect: These pressures, or layers of stress, can keep parents from functioning as they would like to in caring for their children.

#### KEEP IN MIND

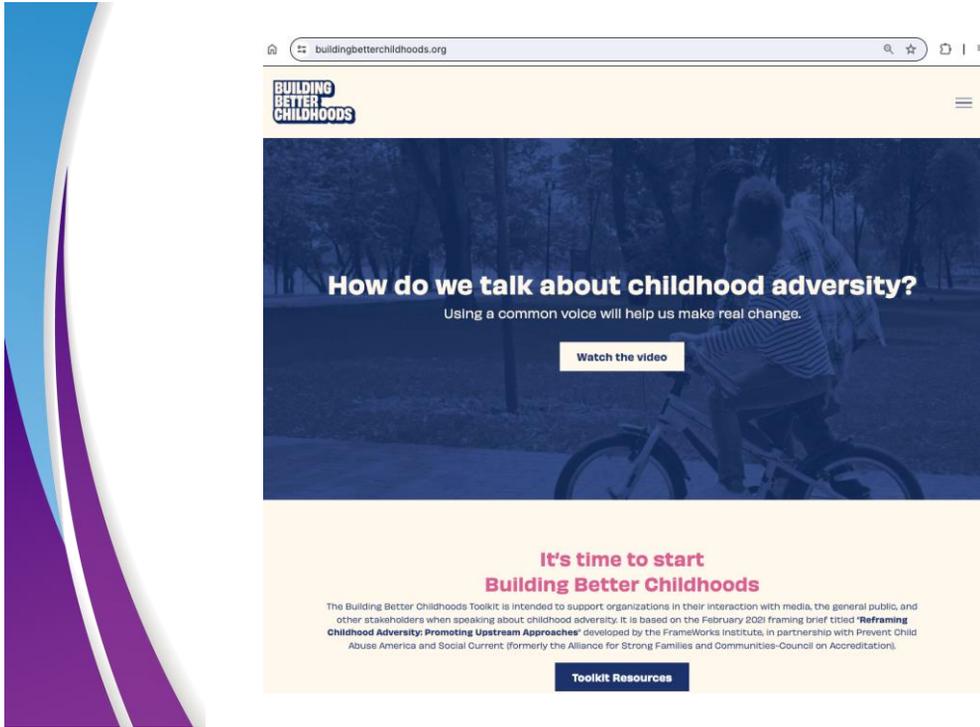
- Be creative and express this idea multiple ways (e.g., juggling).
- Connect this metaphor to the collective experience of the pandemic where we have all experienced being overloaded or not having access to resources/supports.
- Don't use this metaphor to suggest that people are helpless victims of circumstance.
- Don't use this metaphor to paint a stark, sensationalized portrait of families or communities facing disadvantage.
- When tested, this metaphor was particularly effective with Parents who had experienced childhood adversity themselves because it gave them a way to think about the causes of their parenting styles without shame, guilt, or stigma.



*"Just as a vehicle can bear only so much weight before it stops moving forward, challenging life circumstances can overload or overwhelm parents, making it hard for them to provide the best kinds of care and support. To prevent a breakdown in care, we can focus on services and resources that can help lighten the load on families."*

Sweetland, J. "Reframing Childhood Adversity—Promoting Upstream Approaches." Frameworks Institute, commissioned by the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities Council on Accreditation and Prevent Child Abuse America. Learn more at [alliance2.org/within-our-reach-office](https://alliance2.org/within-our-reach-office).





## Messaging Resources:

- [BuildingBetterChildhoods.org](https://BuildingBetterChildhoods.org)
- Frameworks Institute - [frameworksinstitute.org](https://frameworksinstitute.org)
- Colorado Early Childhood Partnership Shared Messaging Bank - [cosharedmessagebank.org](https://cosharedmessagebank.org)
- Berkeley Media Studies Group, [bmsg.org](https://bmsg.org)
- The Topos Partnership, [topospartnership.com/](https://topospartnership.com/)
- Sightline Institute, [sightline.org/](https://sightline.org/)
- Prevent Child Abuse America, [preventchildabuse.org](https://preventchildabuse.org)
- [CTF Alliance Messaging Memo](https://ctfalliance.org), [ctfalliance.org](https://ctfalliance.org)

# Book Club Messaging

“I WAS HAPPIER. I WAS MORE PATIENT AND KIND TO MY CHILDREN AND HUSBAND. I FELT MORE MOTIVATED.”

“Finding comfort in knowing that I am not alone has helped me to view others with more compassion and grace.”

**"Journey to Resilience: From Trauma to Healing"**



A discussion guide for parents to use with a book club or on their own when reading *What Happened to You?* by Bruce Perry and Oprah Winfrey.

Download the guide at... [ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/book-club](https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/book-club)

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CHILDREN'S TRUST FUND Alliance



<https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/book-club/>



# What Parents Say Issue Briefs

What Parents Say About...



The Children’s Trust Fund Alliance joined with a group of parents from the BPNN to produce these publications. They include the perspectives of parents with life experiences in using services to strengthen their families and focus on timely and important topics.

<https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/>



# ANPPC's Parent-to-Parent Infographics



<https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/anppc/>



# Birth and Foster Parent Partnership Tools



<https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bfpp/>





<https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/national-parent-leadership-month-2024/>



## Join us on Mentimeter





*For More Information*

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