Amplifying Our Voices

A Language Guide for Advocates, Care Providers, Policymakers and Families
A California that works for all kids

All Together Now is a statewide campaign lifting up the need to prioritize young children in policy and budget decisions. Recognizing the power in the language we use, we created this guide to help us all be even more effective in unifying and amplifying our voices to insist on a California that works for all kids.

This guide highlights core concepts to strengthen communications, contextualizes them with early childhood examples and provides additional resources to learn more from key experts. It lifts up principles like leading with shared values, naming the systems causing the problem, using asset-based language, talking about identities in a respectful way, and avoiding hedging language. It also provides guidance on how to approach terms specific to the early childhood field.

We’re eager to spark dialogue so that advocates, care providers, policymakers and families alike can reflect together on our communications and craft even more clear, effective and thoughtful messaging. Have something you want us to add to the next edition? Email info@alltogethernow.org. Together, we’ll show how putting kids first is critical to every Californian’s future.
Lead with shared values

To make a strong point, it’s common to start off by drawing attention to the issues or harms caused by a policy or event. However, we recommend naming a shared value that your audience will agree with. This helps activate emotions and opens up your audience to what we will say next. By not leading with problems as the hook to activate your audience, we also lay groundwork for the problem to feel solvable.
Instead of leading with a problem...

In practice, too many Californians aren’t able to take leave to care for their loved ones.

This program needs more funding to meet the overwhelming demand for resources for our children.

California lacks the resources to meet our children’s and families’ needs, so we must come together and demand better for our future.

Lead with shared values.

Everyone wants to care for their loved ones, and paid family leave helps everyone do that.

We all want our children to have happy, healthy lives, and more support for this program helps make that happen.

When we come together to support kids now, we’re supporting a more prosperous future for California. (All Together Now)

Frameworks Institute, Order Matters
Opportunity Agenda, Why Values-Based Messaging?
Opportunity Agenda, Public Opinion About Paid Family and Medical Leave
Opportunity Agenda, Talking About Poverty & Economic Opportunity Today: Three Core Pillars
Opportunity Agenda, Talking About COVID-19: Value, Problem, Solution, Action
Too often, we fall into a common pitfall when describing disparities that affect children: not naming what, specifically, has caused those disparities. When left unsaid, people fill in the blanks with their own explanations, which are often related to personal effort or individual choice.

Perhaps worse, only sharing disparity data can reinforce beliefs that something inherent to the group is the cause of the disparity – instead of past and present systems causing the harm.
Instead of focusing on disparity data...

““African-American, Native American and Alaska Native women are about three times more likely to die from causes related to pregnancy, compared to white women in the United States.” (The New York Times)

“By the time they enter kindergarten, Black children are on average nearly nine months behind in math and almost seven months behind in reading compared to their White non-Hispanic peers.” (National Institute for Early Education Research)

Name the systems causing the problem.

“Disparities in maternal and infant mortality are rooted in racism. Structural racism in health care and social service delivery means that African American women often receive poorer quality care than white women.” (Center for American Progress)

“Child care and early education policies are shaped by a history of systemic and structural racism. This has created major racial disparities in children’s access to quality child care that meets their cultural and linguistic needs and enables their parents to work.” (The Center for Law and Social Policy)

According to the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, when talking about race, it is important to think and speak transformatively – addressing race explicitly instead of using colorblind language, and bringing systemic racism to the forefront – to overcome deeply ingrained narratives and achieve progress.
Instead of using colorblind language...

“Most of us work hard for our families.”

“Join together with others in your community.”
(Demos’ Race-Class Narrative project)

Discuss race overtly.

“No matter where we come from or what our color, most of us work hard for our families.”
(Demos’ Race-Class Narrative project)

“Join together across racial differences.”
(Demos’ Race-Class Narrative project)

Additionally, Demos’ Race-Class Narrative project highlights that making race explicit increases enthusiasm and support for solutions with persuadable audiences.

To learn more, read:

Berkeley Media Studies Group, [Communicating for change: Shaping public debate with framing and messages](#)

Berkeley Media Studies Group, [Framing 101](#)

Demos, [Race-Class: Our Progressive Narrative](#)

The Frameworks Institute, [Unleashing the Power of How: An Explanation Declaration](#)
For too long, we have emphasized deficits and challenges as a way to spur action, and in doing so we have inadvertently stigmatized the very communities we seek to support. Embracing an asset-based approach defines people by their aspirations and contributions before noting the challenges they face.

Taking an asset-based approach does not preclude you from being specific about which communities face greater obstacles. Again, it is all about sequencing. First, start with aspirations and contributions (tomorrow’s problem solvers) and then name the systems and structures that harm this community (systemic racism and years of underfunding).
Instead of emphasizing deficits and challenges...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highlight opportunities, aspirations &amp; contributions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our work increases opportunities for at-risk youth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable populations, like families without health insurance, cannot receive the care they need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth in our communities aspire to achieve their dreams, and they need adequate support to thrive - no matter the obstacles they face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result of our initiative, families without health insurance can receive the care they need and live their lives to the fullest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To learn more, read:

- Trabian Shorters, “You Can’t Lift People Up by Putting Them Down”: How to Talk About Tough Issues of Race, Poverty, and More
- Shelterforce, The Opposite of Deficit-Based Language Isn’t Asset-Based Language. It’s Truth-Telling
- Step Up, Words Matter: Amplifying the Message Through an Asset-Based Approach
Avoid triggering language

Some attempts to apply asset-based principles miss the mark. Terms like “high-promise children” are both awkward and so vague that they could imply anyone. They can also be offensive. (Who are you implying is low-promise?)

Another example of a term generating lots of discussion is “high-quality child care.” Increasingly, advocates and providers are raising concerns that the term can ignore the cultural competencies and value of care providers who have not been deemed “high-quality” in the past, namely non-licensed care providers. This impacts care provided by home-based family child care providers (who are more likely to be people of color, be linguistically diverse and have lower incomes) for children and families. As we increase our awareness of the child care system’s racist roots, we must expand the conversation around what quality means to families.

Some advocates are embracing the term “high-impact” as an alternative to “high-quality” to focus on the outcome of the child care setting, rather than a specific set of quality standards. Others are embracing “whole-child care” to describe care that holistically supports children’s health, safety, social-emotional needs and early academic skills.

Additionally, while “home visiting programs” is considered an official term, for someone without context, the term by itself can carry negative associations with Child Protective Services or other mandated interventions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when people are not visiting each other’s homes, it also paints a picture that may not be possible. To add more nuance, first introduce the term as a support for families, and then paint a picture of how it is done. This is one way to phrase it: “Programs that support families, such as home visiting through calls or video chat”.

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Avoid triggering language
Respectfully talk about identities and use people-centered language

Use language that most accurately and respectfully talks about peoples’ identities. One way to do this is to pay attention to how groups usually self-identify. Another way is to use adjectives instead of nouns and to emphasize the person instead of defining them by an illness or other categorization. For example, describing someone as a “person struggling to make ends meet” puts their humanity first instead of essentializing one aspect of who they are when you describe them as a “poor person.”
Instead of focusing on one aspect of someone’s identity...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Child care subsidies for low-income and at-risk children will not be cut under the 2020-21 California budget agreement reached by the Legislature and Gov. Gavin Newsom this week.” (EdSource)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homeless children and families need affordable, stable housing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable or at-risk children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Emphasize the person.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Families with low incomes; children and families experiencing challenging times/facing difficult experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children and families experiencing homelessness need affordable, stable housing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children who have experienced trauma and/or social, legal, economic, racial, or health challenges [or insert other specific experience]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To learn more, read: Advancement Project, [The Social Justice Phrase Guide](#)
When referring to specific racial or ethnic identities, **consider who your audience is and how they would describe themselves.** It’s best to be as specific as possible when referring to communities of color, especially when addressing issues that directly or disproportionately impact them.

It’s recommended to capitalize Black, but there are emerging conversations on how to approach additional terms like white, brown and BIPOC.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of...</th>
<th>Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blacks, whites, minorities</td>
<td>Black people, white people, people of color, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Referring to groups of people solely by the color of their skin can be dehumanizing; use language to reinforce that all people are people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic (when referring to people who have origins in Latin American countries); Latino/a</td>
<td>Black (capitalized)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not all Black people in America have roots in Africa, and among those who do, many do not identify with the term African American. Black is the preferred term in most cases. Note that AP Style now recommends capitalizing “Black” when referring to people in a racial, ethnic or cultural context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latinx (gender neutral alternative) when referring to people who have origins in Latin American countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Hispanic” is a narrower term that only refers to persons of Spanish-speaking origin or ancestry (including people from Spain), while “Latinx” is used to refer generally to anyone of Latin American origin or ancestry, including Brazilians, Haitians and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latinx is the gender-neutral version of “Latino/a,” and there are emerging conversations about how to approach this term and how people self-identify.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To learn more, read:

The Atlantic, [The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black](#)

CNN, [“Latinx” : Why people are split on using the term](#)

Paola Ramos, [Finding Latinx](#)

Pew Research, [Latinx Used by Just 3% of U.S. Hispanics. About One-in-Four Have Heard of It.](#)

The New York Times, [Why We’re Capitalizing Black](#)

The New York Times, [BIPOC: What Does It Mean?](#)
Avoid hedging

When referring to sensitive topics, we sometimes add words or phrases that are unnecessary. As we learn to use language that thoughtfully reflects people’s experiences sensitively, we should still be as direct as possible in our writing. “Hedging” or “cautious language” weakens writing by adding unnecessary padding to the points you make. Be as direct as possible with what you want to achieve, and avoid focusing on the potential your organization has to achieve it.

Access and opportunity are often seen as the first step to achieving a goal. After all, how could a goal be achieved if the opportunity or process for its achievement doesn’t exist?

But, when crafting a high-impact message, you can imply that building capacity, developing incremental progress and creating opportunity will be involved in reaching your goal, without having to name these steps explicitly.
Instead of adding unnecessary padding...

We increase access to high-impact early learning for every child.

Our campaign works to ensure students have access to after-school tutoring.

Seeks to, Strives to, Works to, With the goal to, Dedicated to, Try to, Ability to, Capacity to

Be more direct.

We achieve high-impact early learning for every child.

Our campaign champions increased after-school tutoring.

Does, Gets, Obtains, Wins, Achieves, Creates, Builds

Sources:
- Minding Our Words: Making Our Best Case for Kids in California

To learn more, read:

Anat Shenker-Osorio, Bay Area Childhood Funders,
Minding Our Words: Making Our Best Case for Kids in California

Anat Shenker-Osorio, The Center for Community Change,
Messaging for this Moment: A Handbook for Progressive Communicators (Principle: Get Less Modest)
Want to stay in the loop on the latest research, resources and news on early childhood in California?

Check out our website, sign up for our newsletter and follow us on social media!

AllTogetherNowCA.org

@LittleCAKids (Twitter, IG, FB)