



Making Stories Work for Prevention

A Research Brief of

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by

Cordelia Anderson, MA

Solutions Storytelling: Messaging to Mobilize Support for Children's Issues, Message Development Research Report, May, 2010, by Topos Partnership for Douglas Gould & Co. and Child Advocacy 360 Foundation, www.childadvocacy360.com , www.topospartnership.com

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Making Stories Work for Prevention: A Research Brief

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Key Findings and Importance of the Study

Noted author, Dr. David Walsh, often says, "Whoever tells the story defines the culture." Stories are powerful ways to bring attention to issues. The stories can also be hijacked and sensationalized to the point that the individual story is far from representative, and the dominant media messages no longer reflect reality or at least the norms needed for a healthy environment that provides the best opportunity for all children's positive development. Individual stories of trauma and tragedy have often been used to bring attention to an issue, but have not been successfully used to mobilize action for prevention. The research summarized provides insights into how to use stories for solutions rather than simply admiring the problem.

What makes most stories ineffective is that they focus on the problem rather than mustering positive action. Such stories increase cynicism, make tough problems seem intractable and do not encourage citizens to act. The findings lead the authors to what they call "Solution Story" alternatives that:

- Lift the public desire for collective action
- Increase support for a range of children's policies and government action that help all children
- Lead to support for higher taxes for quality services, even by the groups most sensitive to tax increases
- Increase support for policies focused on disadvantaged children who are most in need and help to close the gap

- Offer interesting, unique and motivating stories focused on solutions with messages on the values of common good, community, the effectiveness of collective action, and, lastly, shows what is already working or what can work

The authors point to “traps to avoid” including:

- Stories or messaging that focus on bad parents
- Stories that focus on intractable problems that people do not know what to do about or are not engaged with
- Stories that focus on politics that people do not want to be involved in or feel able to change

They also found that asserting a need or describing a problem is not enough, nor is sympathy for children. Rather, what is needed, according to this research, is to emphasize the causes and to describe the inadequate services for children that therefore require a public response. Messaging needs to help listeners see how the whole community can benefit and can have beneficial influence on children and families. This research shows the need to emphasize that action is not just a nice idea, but necessary. The authors further explain that it is important to use solutions as well as the proof of their effectiveness, to inspire action and to point out that people working together can indeed make a change.

Methodology

Original research for the report included six focus groups, a national online survey of 2,006 American voters to measure the impact of messages, and the researchers’ own “TalkBack” testing of 240 people that helps determine if people will remember a message, talk about it and hear its relevance to themselves rather than only thinking about what ‘the parents’ need to do.

Importance of other Findings

The research was generated from the belief that stories are overlooked in the tools needed to mobilize community support for prevention and, when they are told as “solution stories,” they can be a powerful way for programs to make a difference. Too often when stories are used, they are

done so in ways that can actually get in the way of the desired outcomes. This research provides practical ways that advocates can make changes for more effective outcomes.

Implications

Much of what the authors' research shows are messages to avoid (we have a problem, one case study, emotional appeal) are the very messages that many prevention efforts have used and continue to use instead of what this research shows is effective (we have a solution, we all benefit by getting children off to the right start, the community has a role, there are lots of effective solutions). To be effective, prevention advocates and programs need to build on these strategies to take back the story and be part of an effective movement to help turn things around for all children.