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OTHER SECTORS  
*in*  
EFFORTS TO IMPROVE  
PUBLIC POLICY  
*in*  
EARLY CHILDHOOD  
DEVELOPMENT



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# ENGAGING OTHER SECTORS *in* EFFORTS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC POLICY *in* EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction** .....3
- How Do These Groups Perceive Issues Related to Children?** .....5
- Will Early Childhood Development Be a Priority Issue for These Sectors?** .....9
- Invite Them to the Table Before You’ve Developed Your Final Strategy/Campaign** ...11
- Be Patient and Recognize That These Groups Have Their Own Internal Processes** ...12
- Timing** .....13
- Cultivate Champions** .....14
- Don’t Overestimate Your Own Importance** .....17
- Framing Is Key** .....18
- Share Information, Rebut Critics, & Have a Consistent Message** .....20
- Finding Common Ground** .....22
- Working With the Media** .....25
- Conclusion** .....31



# Introduction



As advocates for early childhood development build support for public policies around children and families they need to create strong coalitions of diverse groups. In an effort to understand how different sectors of society perceive issues related to children and families and how organizations within those sectors make decisions about policy priorities, the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania conducted a series of meetings and interviews with leaders of national organizations working on behalf of the aging community, the religious community, the justice community (attorneys, prosecutors, and judges), and the business community. Representatives from The David and Lucile Packard Foundation helped determine the sectors to be included in the analysis.

Representatives of aging, justice, and religious organizations that engaged in national advocacy on public policy issues in their sector were met with to discuss how their sector could work with the children and youth community. The participating business sector organizations were national trade associations representing business interests and businesses with a strong record on children and family issues.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center convened three separate two-hour meetings in its Washington D.C. offices, one with representatives from the religious sector, one with representatives from the aging sector, and a third with representatives from the justice sector. Separate one-on-one phone interviews were conducted with organizational representatives who could not attend the meetings. Representatives from the business sector and the media were interviewed by phone. The phone interviews averaged approximately 30 minutes.

Directors of organizations and individuals in charge of policy for organizations or communications directors were among those interviewed. Journalists who covered children's issues were also interviewed to get a sense of the ways reporters see issues related to children and families. Either through meetings or one-on-one phone interviews, 27 professionals were interviewed.

This report identifies lessons involving message, outreach, and policy to help advocates working in the early childhood field understand how to effectively draw various groups and their constituencies into efforts supporting public policies around children and families.

*Engaging Other Sectors in Efforts to Improve Public Policy in Early Childhood Development* outlines these lessons. It also offers specific suggestions for increasing awareness about early childhood issues among these groups and suggests strategies for educating and involving them. Although most of the organizations included in the analysis represent national groups, the lessons learned are applicable to state and community groups as well.





# How Do These Groups Perceive Issues Related to Children?

One of the representatives from the business sector eloquently described the problem with getting others to work on children's issues, particularly those involving early childhood: "If I called a meeting of 12 business leaders who said they were interested in children or children's issues and I got them in a room, they'd each define the age range they were interested in differently; they'd define the issues differently."

In an effort to get a sense of how these groups viewed issues related to children, we asked them what they thought the term "children's issues" meant.

On some occasions, but not frequently, the issue of early childhood development came up as a top-of-mind children's issue. Often when it did, it was associated with a priority issue for their constituency:

- *"I did add, with education, I said formal and informal . . . And also opportunities to connect in communities. And then care, the whole child care . . . — then we get into elder care. But I do think that there are so many of the issues that really aren't necessarily just children's — they're cross-generational issues"* (Aging Sector Representative).
- *"I think about how children tend to be undervalued. We place very little resources in terms of educating and training the people who are holding their lives in their hands, whether as educators and particularly as child-protection workers, who haven't got a clue, for the most part, about the children that they're working with, and yet they're making life and death decisions every day"* (Justice Sector Representative).
- *"Immediately, when you say 'children's issues,' right now I think child care, just simply because that's the nature of my work in terms of children right now; I would say specifically child care developmental block grant [CCDBG<sup>1</sup>] and the work that the faith groups and faith communities are doing together in terms of trying to increase child care funds for those CCDBG through TANF<sup>2</sup> reauthorization"* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *"I think of — well, I guess the first thing that comes to mind is that every child deserves a fair shot. I mean, if we can get all children off to a good start then they have a world of opportunity in front of them and a chance to reach their full potential, but a lot of kids don't get a chance at a fair start. So a fair start, you know, for all children is what I think of when you talk children's issues"* (Business Sector Representative).

<sup>1</sup> The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) helps low-income families, families receiving public assistance and those families transitioning from public assistance in obtaining child care

<sup>2</sup> The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program was created by the Welfare Reform Law of 1996. TANF became effective July 1, 1997, and replaced what was then commonly known as welfare.

Not surprisingly, many of the sector representatives talked about children's issues within the context of their particular areas of work. Those in the justice sector discussed children in the courts system:

- *“What comes to mind to me when I think of children’s issues are, you know, kids in adult prison . . . the criminalization of childhood, secure custody for kids who don’t need — who pose no harm; multi-agency dysfunction; the reality that many of the helping professionals, both public and private, have done far more harm than good in many instances. The death penalty, something else that we’re seeing as a real concern. And basically, with regard to sort of special ed, the practice of pushing and pushing more kids out of public systems, whether it be education, mental health, child welfare.”*
- *“Well, I think of children’s issues as covering everything, and I would imagine if you had given us 10 minutes, 15 minutes, I could have — all of us could have filled up a couple of pages on what those issues are. Certainly, for the work that we do, the common denominator is the children are somehow involved in the courts.”*
- *“The thing that I think of is the importance of developmentally appropriate public policy programs, funding streams, and governance so that one should be matching policies to where kids and actually their families are as kids grow up. . . . It will also, perhaps, lead us to help roll back what I’ve heard called as the criminalization of childhood, which is thinking of kids as . . . adults at younger and younger ages, so that we start expelling six-year-olds from school for behavior because we think policies of deterrence work, or have them arrested under another agency.”*
- *“And what I came to see over the course of my professional career in these different silos that we’ve created is that really same kid, same problem, same neighborhood, same communities, and same largely dysfunctional bureaucracies that have been created to address them. You know, I think that the child welfare system and the special-ed system, somebody could sneak in one night, change the names on the doors and you would never know, nor would the people who work there.”*

Those in the aging sector talked about the need for health care:

- *“Since my background is in health care, I think about health insurance issues and access to health care. I also think about education issues since they are very prominent.”*
- *“Lack of health insurance for children is, I think, a very serious issue for children and their families. I know the S-CHIP program took quite some time to get implemented, and a lot of bumps along the road. It continues to be a very high profile and important public policy issue. Education, obviously both at the federal and state level — chock full of public policy questions in terms of vouchers and funding and state versus federal flexibility, so they are very much front and center in terms of the public policy arena.”*

- *“Instead of income I just used poverty . . . instead of crime I thought a broader context of safety. Education, health care. But I broke down health care in terms of access, affordability, and gaps in coverage. And then the whole issue around special-needs children and the impact that that has on parents as well. The impact of nontraditional families that are divorced, gay and lesbian parents, grandparents who are parenting — any kind of single parents — the kind of breakdown of different groups that reflect a difference from what we’ve labeled as king of a traditional family.”*

Consistently, and across sectors, the issues of health care, hunger, and education were raised:

- *“I guess I’ve got about six issues here — education, health care, nutrition issues, housing-related issues, crime and, well, I put income, but sort of the broader income-security issues”* (Aging Sector Representative).
- *“I think health care, education, I think housing, I think about the way children are not a high priority in American society. I don’t think really good things, largely because I don’t think that we do well by children as a nation”* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *“The needs of children. Oh, safe neighborhoods. Children’s needs are quality education, a diversion from media”* (Justice Sector Representative).
- *“Mostly I think education and childhood poverty”* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *“I think of education and health issues, predominantly. To some degree, I think of abuse issues . . . “* (Business Sector Representative).
- *“We think of hunger and homelessness as children’s issues, although I think many people tend to think of hungry and homeless people as single adults with mental health or substance abuse problems, but what we see are families with children. And those two things are overwhelming everything else”* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *“I was looking at generally the issues that support and foster the positive development in children within this society . . . education, health care, housing — I mean everything that fosters positive development really of any ages, which is kind of my second point is that I think I look at children’s issues as a subset of family issues, rather than something that’s completely separate”* (Aging Sector Representative).
- *“Education, child care, hunger, the way our culture socializes children and healthy families”* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *“So, from our vantage point as an organization, it’s — couple it with our overall view, and that is that we should be closing divides, especially in our community, as it relates to issues like housing, economic or financial divides, health and justice and safety”* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *“I think about children’s health, social services, education, well-being — children’s well-being, basically”* (Business Sector Representative).



- *“And then we think of a couple of issues where we’ve made a lot of progress in the last 10 years in expanding access to both child health services and to child care: Medicaid expansions in the state health insurance program, and then the big increases in child care funding in the Clinton administration, even though all of our friends at CDF and the Child Welfare League and everywhere else will tell you that only maybe 25% of families who need it are getting child care. We’ve made a lot more progress on that in the last 10 years than we have on housing, and than education and income security issues as well. And finally, it’s a small subset of children, but it’s a huge problem for the children affected, and that’s abuse, neglect, foster care, adoption, juvenile justice. That’s sort of the whole range of safety issues for children”* (Religious Sector Representative).

Those groups who have a social justice background — such as the aging, religious, and justice communities — often see the disadvantaged and those in poverty as their number one priority. Be it health care, housing, hunger, or education — they linked the causes of problems in those areas to poverty:

- *“You know there’s so much that’s connected to the poverty issue in terms of access to food, to housing, to the benefits that a family needs to be able to spend time together and raise a child to healthy adulthood”* (Aging Sector Representative).
- *“[I] would say that poverty is the root cause of all of these problems, and that unless we’re focusing at that level . . . you know, this year we’re going to be about TANF. If you want to know where the hours in my office are going and where people’s time is going, it’s going to TANF right now. But if you’re asking me, what’s the issue, TANF isn’t the issue, poverty is the issue”* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *“The first is poverty-related. I mean, the families who the system sees, for both the child welfare and delinquency cases, have tremendous problems with survival, economic survival. And we don’t do enough to provide them the financial supports that would raise — and the job training and all that to raise these families out of that”* (Justice Sector Representative).

This focus on poverty may present a problem for the early childhood advocate who seeks to frame early childhood as an education and not an income issue. Positioning early childhood around education — and away from income supports and the needs of working parents—may make it more difficult to get non-traditional groups involved. But as these quotes demonstrate, these sector representatives also understand the vital role of education in young children’s lives. However, these groups seem to be more motivated to act on issues related to poverty.

# Will Early Childhood Development Be a Priority Issue for These Sectors?



**G**roups working on behalf of other sectors have specific priorities on which they must focus their resources. Representatives of the business sector may have time constraints, whereas other sectors often face resource constraints. Such constraints may limit the participation of these sectors and may at best produce nominal support.

- *“Because we’re a little organization, and we have to stay focused. And so, you know, there are a number of issues that our members are working on, and so what we do is we’ll sign on to letters, or we’ll show our support at briefings. We’ll do things like that, but as far as our energy, you know, we stay very focused . . . ”* (Aging Sector Representative).
- *“What we like to do is focus in on three or four areas that we can win on — do you understand what I’m saying — that we can truly affect public policy on rather than take a large portfolio and do maintenance on all of them”* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *“I mean, merely getting my membership to embrace the other issues as being — it’s never going to be of equal dominance within the agenda, but it certainly will be things that we will work on in coalition, that we will support”* (Aging Sector Representative).
- *“I think, though, that what one has to understand is that we’re all busy and everybody has competing, you know, interests for their time. And so what the child advocacy community, or whatever advocacy community it is, what they must do, I think, is be able to get their issue, whatever that issue is, on the radar screen and to raise it to the top”* (Justice Sector Representative).
- *“Everybody is spread pretty thin, you know, typically talking about non-profit organizations that have quite a number of issues on their agenda”* (Aging Sector Representative).
- *“Our staff has been limited, severely limited in the past few years, so we just don’t have enough person power to cover all of the issues that — you know, at the same — with the same intensity. But those are some of the very core issues, and recognizing that if children don’t eat well, they don’t get adequate education, they don’t have adequate housing they can’t be expected to achieve”* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *“Because we, as generalists with a very broad agenda, tend to get involved in things later, for better or for worse. It’s just kind of reality of life that, you know, when the committee vote is coming up next week, that’s sometimes the first we’re paying serious attention to it; not that I’m particularly proud of it, it’s just kind of how life is for us sometimes other than a handful of issues that we have particular deep expertise on”* (Religious Sector Representative).

- *“And typically, you know, our organizations will have, you know, four or five priorities that are our top-tier that we will really play a leadership role and the other issues we have to rely upon coalitions, and we’ll sign on or we might go on a group visit — include it in our newsletter or put it on the website, but it’s not something that the staff is going to dedicate a heck a lot of time to”* (Aging Sector Representative).

Though generally not lacking financial resources, the business community is often strapped for the amount of time its leaders can commit to public policy issues:

- *“The CEOs from big corporations, especially multinational corporations, you know the Fortune 1-200, are — they’ve got their plates full. They don’t have a lot of time for public policy. They, you know, just have a lot to focus on to run their own companies. And I know we’re trying to be more and more discerning about what we are asking of them.”*
- *“Everybody with a good cause isn’t going to be able to get the attention.”*
- *“They only take positions on issues where they think they can make a difference. And there are so many policy issues that they’re quite selective in those where they feel they can make a difference.”*

Early childhood advocates need to think about the kinds of involvement they want from these other sectors. Do they simply want them to sign-on to a letter? Lend their name to an initiative? Provide a newsletter mention? Formal buy-in? Active involvement? While getting a group to sign on to a letter may not be difficult, we wanted to see what it takes to get these other sectors to increase their buy-in and get actively involved in an effort. We asked our interviewees specifically what it takes to help raise the priority level of an issue within their organization.



# Invite Them to the Table Before You've Developed Your Final Strategy/Campaign

**T**hese advocates say that active involvement is minimized when they feel they're brought in on efforts as an afterthought or secondary element rather than as an integral piece of a campaign. Their involvement is lessened because it becomes much more difficult for them to make your issues a priority and to get internal buy-in for your agenda. While the groups we talked with didn't agree on how early they should be brought into strategy discussions, they did agree that other groups need to be involved before all the plans are finalized.

Calling on different groups earlier helps them take ownership of the issue and makes it easier to ask them for specific assistance later. As one justice sector representative put it, "[I]f it's structured in a way so that folks have a voice and the conversation is moving forward and people feel as though they're contributing to constructing the story, the message, the agenda, I have found that people across the board, all of the constituencies we just talked about, are more than willing to participate for a while."

Advocates from other sectors have extensive experience with coalitions, networks, public education campaigns, public policy, and media advocacy around their priority issues. They can offer that experience to help in the work the children's advocates are doing: "And I'm saying . . . the important part is at the beginning, when what you have is the sense that there's a big problem out there and you need to have better analysis and have people work together on what the prescription is . . . with the organizations like ours that represent direct services providers who have a lot of practical experience of putting that together for us, who put together the agenda" (Religious Sector Representative).

Although it can be argued that having too many people at the table too early may not allow for consensus and a strong campaign plan, it is important to recognize the contributions these groups can make rather than thinking of them as an afterthought. It isn't enough to list seniors in a campaign plan and then develop a plan without their representatives and expect them to support your effort at the end. Preliminary meetings should take place with groups you are interested in bringing on board. "I would argue you need to have the other groups be part of that process and get buy-in and have them provide input in terms of how to pull all this together" (Aging Sector Representative).

For some, it wasn't even necessary to be a direct part of the planning; they felt being brought in early gave them an opportunity to accomplish what they needed internally in order to educate themselves about the issue and bring their colleagues on board: "If you invite us in at the beginning, even if we're sitting kind of quietly, it gives us a signal that this would be a good time to make some calls, to check with our own networks, to provide — bring something to the table" (Religious Sector Representative).

Interviewees indicated that consulting them in the early stages suggests that you understand they have a contribution to make beyond being another name on a sign-on letter — unless, of course, all you want from them is a name on a sign-on letter.



## Be Patient and Recognize That These Groups Have Their Own Internal Processes

**T**hough children’s advocates might desire quick action or quick response from other groups, many groups just don’t work that way — particularly with an issue that might not readily be perceived by their board, members, or constituencies as an area on which they would normally be focusing.

Most of the groups we talked with had specific steps they needed to take before their organization would make an issue or program a priority. For some it was what was percolating from the grass roots. For others, there was an annual process in which committees would meet and determine organizational priorities. Still others relied on their board to determine organizational priorities. Even if children’s advocates are not asking a group to make a particular public policy initiative an organizational priority, there is still often a process whereby the group must get approval before acting, signing on, or getting involved in an issue. The process also takes time.

- *“So sometimes they become frustrated with us because we do have a process that we have to go through, and then especially if we don’t already have written policy. We have a general assembly then that has to pass a resolution or whatever, and then it’s my job to make sure that the proper resolutions and policies statements are put before our official body, which only meets once a year but the executive board, which is, you know, able to act in the absence of the general assembly, meets quarterly”* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *“I think one of the frustrations that secular NGOs have with the faith groups is that things take such a slow — that are so slow to happen, in terms of public policy issues”* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *“We have an absolutely wonderful board of directors and a very active public policy committee that has about 20 or more of our organizations on it, so the public policy committee does a process, makes recommendations to the board, who then discuss it, make a final decision, and then that’s basically what we focus on”* (Aging Sector Representative).
- *“We have a whole process of meetings”* (Business Sector Representative).
- *“Well, for all business groups, and for sure for us, we have a structure in place where committees have to make decisions about priorities, and ultimately our board of directors has to make decisions about priorities. And so there would have to be an understanding at a very — that there would have to be sort of a groundswell I think for people to understand that this was needed for it to be important enough to be a real priority issue”* (Business Sector Representative).

Our interviewees report that it is key for children’s advocates to understand issues of structure and time surrounding the organizations they are approaching. If not, they run the danger of alienating the groups before they’ve had the chance to get them involved: “The wrong way to do it is to not understand organizational life and organizational culture, and to give me a big bill and tell me that, you know, we need your support yesterday or tomorrow, and to not understand that, you know, you want big organizations to participate, big organizations typically have a big process, and it takes us some time to get through,” said one representative of the religious sector.

The interviewees also indicated that these groups often can’t move quickly on new issues. As one religious representative said, “people will contact us literally days before they want something moved and expect us to go through a very quick express process.” Another religious representative summed it up this way: “I sometimes get the feeling that the people who contact me want me to hit a button and reach 50 million people.”

## Timing

**H**ow they set their priorities for the coming year, their level of interest on various issues, the amount of effort they would be willing to put forth on a particular campaign, and the kinds of work other sectors may want to do is often based on the public policy calendar. As one advocate from the religious community said, “part of it just has to do with what’s in play at any given moment.”

“The slate is set at the beginning of each Congress,” according to a representative of the religious sector. What are the major bills that are being debated? What is going to be up for reauthorization? What programs are in danger of being cut? “Some of the issues that might have been really, really important in the past, we didn’t see any legislative action coming in the near future. And so it could take a lower priority for the moment just because of the realities,” said one religious advocate.

The changing calendar also causes groups to adjust priorities:

- *“So, first of all we’d have to figure out what’s on the table, and then it would get added into the mix of issues that we here would need to be figuring out to have them prioritized for the upcoming session if we’re talking about federal legislation”* (Business Sector Representative).
- *“Next year we see something coming up on the agenda that wasn’t high this year, then you know these things just kind of evolve”* (Religious Sector Representative).



- *“I guess, you know, for the national policy level it would need to be just a meeting of the minds to determine where there might be cross-interest in terms of what our legislative priorities might be, for example for the upcoming 108th Congress. We are in the midst now of determining what those priority issues might be for that particular Congress, and I would say from the national perspective, organizations — children’s organizations at the national level may need to plan a meeting with an organization such as ours to discuss what issues there might be and how collaboration might take place”* (Aging Sector Representative).
- *“If we’d had this discussion a year ago I would have talked a lot about ESEA<sup>3</sup> reauthorization, which was a major priority for us. Now we’re going to talk a lot about the child care reauthorization”* (Religious Sector Representative).

At the national level in 2002, TANF reauthorization might have been an opportunity for children’s advocates to link with other groups:

- *“But it strikes me that there’s — the TANF decisions that happen at this reauthorization going on now at the federal level, there’s work to be done at the state level, and then there’s local use of TANF dollars”* (Justice Sector Representative).
- *“So, this year, because the TANF program and the Child Care and Development Block Grant are up for reauthorization, this is the year to make the big push. It’s always a big issue for us, but this is the year we’re all putting in more time on it”* (Religious Sector Representative).

In 2003, the reauthorization of Head Start may be one area different sectors are already thinking about and around which they are planning public policy efforts. Early childhood advocates may want to identify common ground in the issues surrounding Head Start.



## Cultivate Champions

One common theme from our conversations across the sectors was that often one ally in an organization can have a great deal of pull in helping the organization set priorities.

Within organizations, board leaders, notable members, and task force chairs often carry a great deal of weight in determining organizational priorities and can force staff to raise the profile of an issue:

- *“Our board of directors ultimately decides what, you know, sort of makes it into our public policy agenda”* (Aging Sector Representative).

<sup>3</sup> Elementary and Secondary Education Act

- *“We could also get pressure internally. You know, this is the real world: there are three board members that care a lot about this issue and are upset that we haven’t taken it seriously, and that would be enough to force it onto our agenda. It wouldn’t determine our policy but that would trigger the discussion . . . if I heard from important people within the organization that they thought we were being — that we weren’t paying enough attention to this issue. Like I said, that doesn’t dictate policy for us, but that’s probably enough to have a meeting about it and to kind of get that process moving”* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *“But it’s like anything else in terms of national priorities. You have to fight for them and you have to find people who would be persistent, outspoken leaders”* (Business Sector Representative).
- *“But, you know, with a, ‘Look, this isn’t just something that educators believe in, but we’ve got so and so and so and so who’s a big champion.’ And I think that helps to open the door to collaborating with, you know, other kinds of organizations”* (Business Sector Representative).
- *“And I would say that one of the best things that advocacy groups could do in terms of helping churches be better organized is sort of develop one sort of point-of-entry into each denomination where you have a faithful sense that the contact can make things happen and make that process of trying to get approval for letters or engagement or calls or whatever, you know, streamlined”* (Religious Sector Representative).
- *“We’re a small organization so a lot of what we do is very focused and we have had legislative priorities that are determined by our board and public policy committee”* (Aging Sector Representative).
- *“And we also hear kind of from our people, either from our board members, from our congregation and service providers in our own community, who aren’t shy about calling us and saying, you guys are the advocates, where are you on this, we need your voice on this”* (Religious Sector Representative).

Interviewees in the business organizations pointed out that one key constituent who has enough clout can appear to represent a larger constituency. Some recommended rather than trying to get the entire business community getting just one business leader who has a strong reputation in your community:

- *“The people, the businesspeople, and I guess I could say the same about any other background, but the businesspeople that I know who are doing a reasonable job of being helpful in this area all come to it from some personal motivation . . . But without that personal motivation above and beyond whatever the company’s interests are, I just don’t know many businessmen who are either knowledgeable or involved or certainly effective.”*
- *“I’d look at the board of directors right now of social service agencies or any early childhood agencies . . . that have businesspeople involved with them and see who those businesspeople are.”*



- *“And I don’t know very many people nationally, and I think I know most of the business-people nationally who are reasonably involved in these things, and I don’t know of one of them who’s doing it because their company told them too. Certainly the effective ones aren’t doing anything because their company told them to.”*

Still another way these groups highlighted to raise the profile of issues among different sectors was to work from the grass roots up. Many of these groups listen to their local members or constituents when determining priority issues. As one representative of the religious sector said, “We are not so much influenced in our children’s agenda from, like, the children’s community. We may overlap, we may decide to work together, and we do often, but it comes out of what our local people tell us are the needs.”

Interviewees also noted that in addition to finding an individual champion one might locate an organizational champion. For example, in our conversations with representatives of the aging community, many deferred to an organization known as Generations United for its positions on issues related to children and families. According to its website, Generations United is “the only national organization advocating for the mutual well-being of children, youth, and older adults.” The other aging organizations we spoke with looked to this organization for their signals on children’s issues:

- *“The people sitting around this table and a number of other people look and set their intergenerational agenda through Generations United.”*
- *“Well, I think one of the reasons Generations United was started — I mean, Generations United, in essence, is a coalition of organizations who care about generational issues, both kids and seniors and everything in between. So, we do work through Generations United for that reason.”*
- *“What we can do is lend support and make linkages to the people who are doing that, in particular Generations United.”*
- *“Well, you know, I would encourage them to work through Generations United because a lot of the relationships have already been developed there, and if they can get it onto the Generations United agenda, I think that would facilitate things.”*

Generations United serves as an umbrella organization that focuses on issues related to seniors and families. It is a respected organization that has connections with the other senior groups. Aging sector representatives appreciated Generations United’s contribution because it cut down on the amount of work they needed to do to learn about an issue and allowed them to focus on the initiatives they see as priority: “I don’t know that it’s valuable to have all of us become generalists. I mean, I don’t know that it’s of value for us to really move into children’s issues. It’s a really high-energy, high-focused way because that’s not who we are.”

Representatives from the aging sector often turned to Generations United when asked about children’s issues from the senior perspective. Their model might be replicated at the local level.

# Don't Overestimate Your Own Importance



A key issue that emerged from our conversations was the perception that children's advocates tend to assume that those they approach will agree with their position or assign it as high a priority as they do. While children's advocates are strongly committed to the things they are fighting for, it is essential to first build common ground (rather than assuming it already exists) when trying to engage others who may be less involved in issues related to children and families.

As one business sector representative said: "Don't ever assume that the thing that is uppermost as a priority for you matters in the least to the other people . . . So they have to be prepared for that and also not sort of turn off people with excessive or overly zealous advocacy. You're trying to win someone over and not bowl them over." The language that you use to talk with those already in your corner needs to be adjusted for those you are trying to convince — "If you present us with the fait accompli, it's that much more off-putting," said one religious sector representative. Tone is equally important — one aging sector representative explained: "I think my experience has been that you've got some pretty arrogant, independent child care advocates."

"The question always seems to be, from the kid's group, is how can we get the seniors to do this for us and that's really not what it's about" said one aging sector representative.

Even the way children's advocates get funded for their work can pose problems for the other organizations. As one representative of the religious sector said, "I think foundations sometimes think, and advocacy organizations say in their proposals — I happen to know from personal experience — that by their doing research and doing a report and then educating organizations with the report that they can shape or help shape the agendas of other organizations. I think they overestimate how much they shape the agenda." Regardless of whether it is valid, there is a definite sense that the children's advocacy community has an inflated feeling of its importance.



## Framing Is Key

**N**o matter what stage of communication you're in with these groups, our interviewees suggested that how you frame your questions and go about asking them is just as important as what it is you are asking.

When approaching other sectors to get involved in public policy efforts around early childhood, think about the kinds of language and lines of argument that these groups use with their own constituencies. For example, the business community wants to hear about the importance of the issue; it wants you to get to the point so it can quickly understand the bottom line:

- *“I think they need to be fairly cut and dry about what you want them to do. They’re practical people . . . we need your help for the following reasons — not just because we think it’s an issue but did you realize that, you know, in this community or among your employees’ — give them a reason to sort of internalize your zeal.”*
- *“If you’ve got a problem with a production line or production process you don’t fix it at the end or in the middle; you go right back to the beginning. Business people understand that and I think they can help political leaders and others who will set the priorities understand that you’re just simply spending a lot of money to fix something that in many instances, not all, but many instances should be addressed earlier.”*

The connection between business and early childhood education is clear to many business groups: “We had always had a long-standing interest in education issues, in part because what we hear from employers is that they, even when times are a little bit tougher, they have a hard time finding enough skilled workers, and spend millions of dollars every year on skills training — on everything from basic skills training to more sophisticated training.”

The representatives from the business sector used language the sector identifies with, such as investing in the future when they spoke about children’s issues. As one business sector representative put it, “This is an investment issue in the country’s future and business people, if they understand anything, can understand the consequences of investing or not investing in a critical area. It’s also the right thing to do for their employees. And so we come at these issues, if you’ve read the reports, from the perspective of what the country needs to be in a certain position by a certain period of time.”

From a business standpoint there are valid reasons to be involved in early childhood issues. The children of today are their workforce of tomorrow. One business sector representative believed the connection hasn’t been made as clearly as it could be: “It would be important for business to get involved in the early childhood debate, to have more information and to have the data about the importance of early childhood education and what that means for school readiness and what it means in terms of getting — making sure that kids are on the right track when they start school and are succeeding to the best of their abilities. I would think that data would be a really powerful motivator. And I’m not sure that people have made the connection that if kids start behind, they never catch up, for example.”

The religious community has its own issues regarding how it is approached and what it is asked. One of the religious sector representatives put it this way: “A justice framework requires us to give priority to providing voice for those who, if I can use the metaphor, are voiceless; who are not able to adequately represent themselves. And children are right in the center of that. They’re not able to vote, they don’t necessarily recognize what public policy is, they don’t have — nobody really pays attention to the concerns that impact children unless there are caring adults out there lifting it up.” The religious community uses a reconciliation frame and is uncomfortable with the rhetoric of attack, blame, and shame.

- *“I think sometimes it’s important to remember as you’re working with them, church groups, if it’s language your grandmother wouldn’t approve of, we probably wouldn’t either.”*
- *“The biggest problem that I deal with is language. It’s really difficult — I mean, churches are about reconciliation. You know, churches are about bringing people who have different opinions and are at war with one another together in peace. And whether that is literally war or it’s differing positions on child care — you know, we can’t sign on to letters that speak — they’re negative. We’re not going to do it. We’re not going to bash people, we’re not going to spank the administration or senator or a committee or something for doing the wrong thing. You know, that’s not what’s going to happen, and you’re going to lose the faith community when you pursue those routes. Now, what we can do — I mean, I would say do a good cop-bad cop kind of thing. Let churches be the mediator sometimes.”*

Some of the representatives from the justice community expressed discomfort with the language of advocacy. For example, judges and prosecutors are either elected or appointed. While they may be convinced that issues related to early childhood improve children’s lives and reduce the need for entry in the juvenile justice system, what advocates ask of them can often set off alarms:

- *“Consider that the word ‘advocate,’ child advocate, is going to set off warning bells into the judge’s mind, because judges can’t be advocates and they can’t take the side of an advocate . . . And along those lines then, or as just the flip side of that is that judges are very concerned with dispensing justice and doing good things and improving the world around them. And if you present it as, here’s how we can improve the justice system, not here’s how we can be an advocate for a child, you’ll get a lot further.”*

Because judges are precluded from “lobbying,” to get them involved you need to be creative in what you ask of them and the contribution they can make to your efforts.



## Share Information, Rebut Critics, & Have a Consistent Message

Although these groups may not make early childhood a priority, they are clearly interested in understanding the issue. But it became clear from the interviews that the other sectors were not aware of the latest research in this area, that they were getting mixed messages from the field on related issues, and that they accepted as accurate media reports on research in the area of early education.

One representative from the religious community suggested that it is useful for them to stay informed without necessarily being called upon to act. That way when you do need to ask them to join an effort, they have an idea of what the major issues are. “Write me a memo about what’s going on so that I’m not surprised later on down the road, and then maybe at a later point my legislative director will step in or I’ll step in or my director will step in. Those are steps that can come down the road.”

As one aging sector representative put it, “I think the whole issue of sharing information and knowing what each sector is doing, so that you can have a more — a continuum of family services in a community is really critical and I think that bringing child advocates and aging advocates and just helping human services folks in general together to be able to frame that on a continuum I think is critical.”

For the business community, the latest data are critical in order to make informed decisions about getting involved in an issue: “I think in all of these areas, data’s important, an ability to the extent that the data is there to connect it up to workforce readiness. There has to be some sort of connection down the road to make it clear why employers should care; you know, why — I mean, besides for — besides the general good.”

These groups internalize media reports on child care and need other sources to rebut bad reporting and highlight the latest research. Many of those we spoke with didn’t have a clear understanding of child care issues and clearly had accepted media framing, which focuses on controversy rather than areas of consensus. A number of respondents referred to the latest research on the controversies surrounding daycare:

- *“I think infant daycare is a very controversial issue, even among my own agencies who run child care centers, even before this most recent study that shows that children whose mothers are away from them more than 30 hours a week before they’re a year old are likely to have trouble in school, you know, trouble on various indicators by the time they’re three”* (Religious Sector Representative).

- *“Well, I think data that’s useful but — you know, one of the things about that is that it all depends on how you spin it and so the same data that can be used to be harmful as well as helpful. The recent data that came out that said that — and I’m not going to quote accurately — but it was essentially damning of women who work, saying that kids who grow up in child care are damaged in some ways that wouldn’t happen if at children were at home. And then at the same time, that’s juxtaposed to a public policy in this country that we now have of making welfare mothers go to work and leaving their kids in child care”* (Aging Sector Representative).

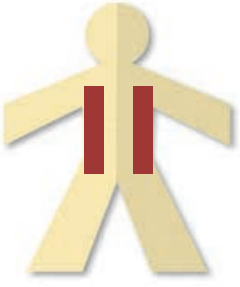
It is important for child advocates to know what the opposition is saying and how to rebut those arguments. From the religious sector: “I think what you have to be prepared to do is to be able to always argue the other side. Always make sure that the information that you have paints both sides of the picture.” Advocates are sometimes perceived as individuals who use evidence selectively. Present all sides and then make your case.

In addition, many respondents perceived that the early childhood community does not seem to have a consistent position on major issues. The front-line workers may not be on the same page as the larger advocacy community. An interviewee from the religious sector highlighted the different perspectives she got from those who work in day care centers sponsored by their organization:

“We get all the people who run daycare programs around and ask them, you know, what should we do? And some will say, well, you’ve got to do this, you’ve got to get special funding for daycare for sick children so that mothers don’t risk losing their jobs, you know, to take time home. Why should children be in daycare if they’re sick? You know, we get that, and other people say, no, no, no, we have to change the culture so employers don’t fire mothers when they stay home with kids. We should do some better policy on family leave. And some people come in and say, you know, infant daycare is so expensive, we need to set aside in the Child Care Block Grant for infant care; we’ve got to expand infant care. And then we have another set saying, no, why don’t we try to have better income support programs for mothers so that they don’t have to work full-time before their children are a year old?”

Some might say the early childhood community needs to address all these issues. Those who don’t traditionally work on children’s issues would prefer a clear and consistent approach with specific and attainable public policy goals.

Debates among the early childhood community about how to frame the issues are occurring in other sectors as well, as one representative of the religious community put it: “We have been arguing about child care, mainly at the national level, on the basis of mothers being able to go to work and the families being better off and not much attention to the quality of the care and what’s good for children. And not very many people on the Hill really look at early childhood or daycare as the first step toward kindergarten . . . I think, actually, more framing along that line, but especially for poor families.”



## Finding Common Ground

Children’s advocates need to understand how other sectors perceive the relationships among their particular issues and the issues of the early childhood community. The way other sectors frame important issues may harmonize with the early childhood community or may be incompatible.

### Elder Care

For example, representatives from the aging sector were very clear in their view that issues related to elder care and child care were similar and had similar public policy implications:

- *“One of the things — and it’s something that we face in the aging community that I think is equally important in the children’s lives and world and that is the pay, compensation, training, everything that surrounds child care as well as elder care and that that is a public policy issue that I think would make a huge difference. That we take people who are poorly trained, poorly educated, poorly compensated and we entrust them with our children for up to eight to 10 hours a day and then there’s no kind of controls.”*
- *“Being able to provide benefits to child care workers or homecare workers is an issue — it’s a huge issue. Why not deal with them together? I mean, that’s the only way we could put it on our agenda.”*

Does the early childhood community face training and compensation issues for child care that are similar to those of elder care? Is that an area for partnership?

### Child Care in Church Settings

The religious sector representatives raised the fact that many of their constituents are providing child care services. They have concerns about all the bureaucratic hoops their churches must go through to provide child care services:

- *“And we found that a lot of our churches ended up being the only conduits for child care and child care providers, so that was a no-brainer for us. The problem is that you have all these barriers and hoops that a lot of the churches and a lot of the care providers have to jump over or jump through, be it certification, licensing. Salaries is a big issue because some of the programs that are run at the church level are on a volunteer basis, and you can imagine the turnover for people involved in this type of program.”*

- *“So, I think there are — it depends on the daycare issue. If you’re talking about raising the amount of funding or putting money into improving quality, like setting aside federal money that your churches could get to do training for your staff or to raise — to actually have money to pay people, you know, whatever it is. I think those are issues that you can do with infants, but there are issues that are controversial that — and I think almost anything to do with education in the public schools is very controversial in the black community and the Catholic community and in the Jewish community. Within our communities there’s great disparity of views.”*
- *“Immediately, when you say ‘children’s issues,’ right now I think child care, just simply because that’s the nature of my work in terms of children right now. I would say specifically child care developmental block grant and the work that the faith groups and faith communities are doing together in terms of trying to increase child care funds for those CCDBG through a TANF reauthorization.”*

Does the early childhood community have a unified position on this issue? What are the public policy implications of the issues raised by this sector? These are things the early childhood community needs to think about before aggressively engaging this sector in public policy around early childhood.

## Grandparents As Caregivers

Representatives of the aging sector raised the issue of grandparents raising kids. What policy implications does this have for the early childhood community? Clearly the aging community believes public policy implications exist:

- *“Right now we have grandparents raising grandchildren as an issue in the public policy arena when the parent may be absent or may not be absent, but the whole issue of grandparent support as we go into the future with people living longer, I think it’s an issue that I’m not sure a lot of children’s foundations are really looking at to the extent that they probably should.”*
- *“Because we’re primarily an aging-based organization, most of our legislative focus is on aging-related issues. However, as far as supporting the issues related to grandparents raising grandchildren, caregivers, and other issues like that that cross over, we’re always there and signing on and being supportive, but from our three priority items we keep focused primarily on aging-specific issues.”*

Are the training and compensation issues related to caregivers of the elderly the same (or similar) to the training and compensation issues related to child care providers? Is there enough in common between the training needs of those in elder care and those in child care to link the two?





# Working With the Media



In an effort to better understand how reporters covering issues related to children and families perceive these issues, four journalists with a record of covering children's issues were interviewed. They included one television reporter, a radio reporter, and two print journalists. Our conversations yielded important insights into how reporters choose their stories, as well as some common mistakes made by advocates.

We learned from these conversations that each media outlet defined the beat differently based on who was working it, their commitment and experience, and the resources they had available to support it. As one journalist put it: "It's not a clearly defined beat and I think that's one of the things that for a reporter can make it wonderful . . . but in some ways makes it hard for it to compete for attention in the newsroom when some of the more institutionalized beats, sort of everybody knows what it is and who the cast of characters are and how we cover city government or how we cover the school system or how we cover a sports team versus this really big nebulous thing."

## Where Do the Stories Come From?

Reporters highlighted the Internet, health and education journals, and word-of-mouth information as some of their key sources for stories:

- *"Well, one of the things I really do look for are trends. I do a lot of reading in the social and medical journals."*
- *"What I tried to look for were either good trend stories . . ."*
- *"You know, I usually surf the Web a lot to find out what's going on . . ."*
- *"I also keep in mind what other people are doing. A lot of times I talk to people — you know, a lot of people. Sometimes it's the children's advocates. Sometimes it's parents themselves."*
- *"So most of my good stories I guess come from the ground. They come from, you know, ordinary parents, from, again, kids — kids are a wealth of ideas — and just sort of putting all that together in my head."*
- *"If I can show that it's either, one, a compelling story about an individual . . . or it's a story that involves lots of kids or young people around the country; if it's a trend that, again, not many people have written about or if it's something we all know intuitively but just had never put into words."*

## Avoid the “Same Old Stuff”

One reporter raised what for many child advocates is a trap they fall into when trying to generate media coverage around early childhood development: “A lot of organizations view coverage in terms of publicity. You know, how can I get publicity for this event? And, as you probably know very well, that’s not how newspapers view it and it’s sort of an automatic turnoff. When they can approach it in terms of here’s an issue and, yeah, it happens to also talk about what our agency is doing which is important.”

Annual events, annual reports, and repackaging of old data can be a turn-off for reporters:

- *“I think they need to be better at framing their ‘news’ in a way that sounds new. You know, we get a lot of the same old, same old stuff in slightly different packaging.”*
- *“Yeah, and also the other things is people call and say, well, I have this expert and it’s schizophrenia week. Well, you know, we don’t do schizophrenia week, that kind of thing. Now, if the story is that there’s a new link between schizophrenia and this, or the effects of having a schizophrenic mother or father, or schools dealing more with schizophrenic children or whatever, that’s different than it’s schizophrenia week. So, you know, often what they approach me with is just way too vague.”*
- *“Well, of course the big joke is sort of the May annual awards banquet. Everybody and their dog has a May annual event and they call to pitch us that and they’re going to recognize the volunteer and they’re going to give awards and I think that’s probably true of almost everything, of pitching the institutional hype stuff — the annual meetings for the award versus calling and saying, hey, here’s how this issue is shaping up. And here’s how it’s playing out here and you may or may not be aware of this but here’s some people you could . . . You know, maybe first put you on to some other institutional people that could confirm that this is an issue ...”*
- *“And it’s funny because we had very sophisticated thinkers here, I think. It’s not that, for the most part — there are some who really don’t understand the difference between a story and a press release on an awards banquet.”*
- *“There were always annual reports and things like that and that was sort of the closest thing to breaking news and that became sort of a challenge as to how to keep it fresh, if say the Casey Foundation puts out its sixth annual report on the state of children. What do you take from that and do you really focus on the breaking report versus do you take a nugget from that.”*

## Cultivate Relationships/Offer Exclusives

The journalists highlighted the importance of one-on-one meetings and regular updates on the latest issues. They don't want to be nagged, but encourage a phone call, email, or note with updates or a heads up on an upcoming release:

- *“Everybody’s going to know when you put it out and you’ll have the releases and everything like that, but ahead of time what I think is a good idea is to call people that you’ve worked with before that you know cover this particular issue, this beat, and give them the heads up, like, I don’t know, a month, two months before and say, we’re going to come out with this study; these are the people that we used, these are the things that we found, this is important, these is news, this is whatever because of this.”*
- *“So it does help to call and to follow up your letter with a phone call but it does not help to be a nag. So I think advocates have to very carefully — and maybe query informally other journalists and say, is this new to you; does this sound interesting, for an honest response, because if it doesn’t there’s no way you can package it to make a journalist want to pick up on it.”*
- *“I mean, the first thing I would do would be to have lunch or breakfast or a cup of coffee with every reporter in my area and I would see who, just this early, I responded to on a personal level. And then I would just kind of keep them posted. This is before you have anything you want to sell them. I would keep them posted on this event, that event, how you’re doing — not being a nag but just sort of staying in touch with them.”*
- *“Well, I have gone out, I’ve had lunch with them, I keep in contact with them on a weekly basis, they’ve given me all of their numbers, pager, cell, email, work phone, home phone. They’re very accessible and we’ve gotten to know each other more so just on the phone, but just on a couple of times I’ve had lunch with them and then they call me. And when they call me, I know who they are and then when they say that something is going on, again, they have a track record as well and so I’ll be doing stories because they’ve gone the extra mile to make sure I have the relationship with them.”*

They also valued exclusives:

- *“And then I would either, one, offer it to them as an exclusive, or two, offer it to them in a way — because by now you have this relationship and you think you can sell it to them. I think a lot of communication — nine out of 10 people who call me to try to sell a story to me I’ve never met in my life. I don’t know who they are, and the ones I respond to, frankly, are the ones that I have a relationship with, unless it’s a huge story that I say, oh my god, we really got to get on this. But by and large I think that a relationship in some ways is more important than the news that you’re trying to peddle in terms of being successful and getting something in the paper.”*

## A New Study on School Readiness . . .

We asked the reporters to take a moment to think how they would pitch a reporter a new study on school readiness. We asked, “Let’s say you’re a communications director for a child advocacy organization and you have a new report on kids 0 to 3 and school readiness and it’s state-specific. How would you approach a reporter to convince them to write something on the report?”

Many felt that this story has already been done, so there would need to be something very new and different about the findings to make it newsworthy:

- *“Well, I guess, unless you’re going to tell me that school readiness doesn’t help — now that’d be a news story — but the idea of preparing kids zero to three for school and that that helps them get better grades later on is not news, so you’re going to have to find, I guess, a compelling story, a compelling person who’s willing to go on the record with their child about some huge turnaround that achieved dramatic results . . . If it were, for example, the first long-term study of kids from zero to age 18, if it were the most comprehensive study ever done — I mean, on a story like that which has been told a zillion times you’re going to have to find something that makes it really stand out from all the other studies.”*
- *“Well, I assume that they have the report and/or that you’re getting them the report, but I think what would really advance it is if you could say, you know, with people that have been talking about 0 to 3 for a long time so maybe you’re getting a little bit of that ho-hum reaction, but here’s something that’s happening [locally]. Here’s a program, here’s a kind of family that’s not getting what they need to according to this report and we can help you talk to one of those families. Again, something that makes it a little more than just another report saying — we were kind of laughing about the ‘eat your vegetables’ kind of stories and reports. You know, they tell you what you knew already and, you know, we ought to all care about children or we ought to all care about safety, but to turn it into something that’s a little bit fresh is the challenge.”*

Others highlighted the need to do homework and line up people ahead of time who could talk about the issue from a variety of perspectives:

- *“Depending on what the outcome of the study was, I would do some research and find out which schools would allow a television camera in, talk about a school that’s done really well or a preschool or an organization that, you know, helps at home families with school readiness or whatever. And do that homework before you call me and say, ‘I’ve got this study out. It shows X. And not only that — not only can I provide you our director, but I can provide you a group of about 15 children who we’ve used in the study.’ Or ‘A family group that we think is doing the right thing and maybe is responsible,’ or, you know, ‘We could attribute this program to the fact that readiness is X.’”*
- *“You call me up and you sound excited and you are excited and then you fax me something and then, you know, you email me and say ‘Look at this website and call me if you want to get closer to this story. I’ve got some people that can really help tell it, real people,’ then I’m calling back.”*

## Sidebars

Stories that have implications for children and families are not necessarily covered by the “children and family” reporters. As advocates work on legislation related to early childhood, the story may fall in the bailiwick of the political, not family or education, reporter. Political reporters are often after who is on what side of the issue, not the implications for families in your communities.

To learn how to focus such a story on the effect on children and families, we asked the journalists to play the role of communications director for a child advocacy organization. Specifically we asked, “A story about new welfare rules comes out and it has implications for kids in your community. While those implications are not the center of the story, it’s important to the organization you work for. How do you get reporters to give attention to that particular aspect of the story?” Almost all of the journalists we spoke with mentioned the “sidebar” approach:

- *“Think sidebar, you know? I think that’s the best way to go about it would be to approach a reporter and say, okay, I know you guys are probably doing a lot on the new welfare rules, but did you know that one component of the welfare rule is, for example, that immigrant families would no longer be able to get food stamps, and do you realize that — arm the person with information — do you realize that 29% of families who get food stamps are immigrants — in certain states it’s 49%, you know, whatever — and what these food stamps enabled them to buy is this, this, and this and without this, this means this, you know?”*
- *“But, you know, I have a very good relationship with my political reporter and so if there’s ever an education thing that comes down, she has no qualms about giving me a quick phone call and I can help her and steer her in the right direction. And sometimes if it’s big enough, we’ll both go together with the producers and say this merits a sidebar, and so then I would do the sidebar.”*
- *“We just had a — there’s a proposal right now regarding daycare workers no longer needing high school degrees, because the daycare workers are so in demand. Now, we had our political reporter do more of the nuts and bolts about the proposal and then I went to some daycares to talk about if they thought it was a good thing or if they thought it was a bad thing.”*





Imagine if a representative from a local aging organization came to your early childhood advocacy organization asking for help on a public policy issue. What process would you go through to determine whether you want to become involved? How much energy would you want to shift to helping them? Your decision process would probably be similar to those of organizations representing other sectors. While this may seem obvious, it's clear from our conversations that representatives of other sectors feel that children's advocates have a sense of expectation that others will readily join in their efforts.

How and when you approach these groups is often as important as what you are asking them to do. They don't want to feel like an afterthought to a well thought out campaign or a line item in a foundation proposal. At the same time, they don't have a great deal of time or resources to commit to issues outside their mission.

For those wanting to engage other sectors in efforts to improve public policy around early childhood, our conversations highlighted some key lessons:

- Bringing groups in early in the process helps them take ownership of the issue and makes it easier to ask them for specific assistance later.
- Organizations have their own internal processes for making decisions about priority issues and actions they are able to take.
- Current events and the legislative calendar often play a role in determining other sectors' organizational priorities.
- Advocates should seek to align themselves with a strong ally who helps determine organizational priorities.
- How you frame the approach and ask for what you want is just as important as what it is you ask.
- Organizations welcome the opportunity to learn about issues related to early childhood and want to hear about all sides of the issue.
- There are issues where other sectors feel common ground with the early childhood community, but their framing of these issues may not be compatible with the early childhood community's.

Most of the sector representatives expressed an openness and willingness to help out. And the most important lesson was that it is always worth trying.





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