

Chapter 2

Advocating for Children, Youth, and Families in the Policymaking Process

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Policymaking happens in a context that is dynamic and complex, but not unknowable. Policymakers are influenced by many factors. These include budget, constituents, science, experts, anecdotes, recent news, and the campaign/election cycle, among others. The weight of each of these factors will vary depending on the issue and on how much the various factors are in alignment or conflict. Advocating on behalf of children and youth can be particularly challenging because most people feel they already know a lot about children. Furthermore, children and youth, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, typically do not have a voice of their own in policy decisions that affect them. Thus, it is incumbent upon those who have knowledge about and care for children to advocate on their behalf.

Effective advocacy must take into consideration the factors that influence policy. Critical steps to creating a strong voice for children include: defining the problem; reviewing research relevant to solving the problem; setting a specific advocacy goal(s); and bringing research to bear on the policymaking process, to reach the advocacy goal(s). This chapter will address each of these steps, providing guidance and resources to prepare advocates to engage in the policymaking process.

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Defining the Problem

Given the competing sources of information described above, effective advocates must frame the problem for their audience, using as many of these sources as possible. To address a problem, policymakers need facts, including data on incidence and prevalence of the problem, gathered from reliable sources. While national data can be of interest, policymakers are particularly interested in data that are specific to their constituencies: what are the facts related to the problem in their state, district, or local area? Advocates can access many sources of data, including federal, state, or local government web sites (e.g., <http://www.childstats.gov/>) and publications and reports from various advocacy organizations (e.g., <http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/KIDSCOUNT.aspx>). In addition to statistics, policymakers appreciate anecdotes that provide real life examples of the problem, as experienced by their constituents. Advocates, through their work and connections in the community, can be a rich source of stories that put a human face on social problems and pique policymakers' interest. Items from local media also help frame the issue and bolster the relevance of the issue for policymakers.

Garnering Research Relevant to Solving the Problem

For many pressing social problems, there is research relevant to how they might be ameliorated or even solved. This can include both research on the factors contributing to the problem at hand and research focusing on approaches to the problem (programs, policies) that have proven effective in other settings, including program evaluations. Policymakers deal with a vast range of issues on a daily basis, from health to transportation to business to education and beyond. They must rely on experts in each of these areas to provide the research background they need. Advocates, with their professional expertise and knowledge of specific areas of research, can play this important role in the policymaking process (Zigler & Gilliam, 2009).

Setting Advocacy Goals

Once the problem has been defined and the relevant research gathered, advocates must set specific advocacy goals. This process involves advocates going beyond their area of expertise and looking at factors in the policy arena: What issues are other advocates addressing at this time? What are the related funding opportunities currently available? What issues are politically popular or pressing now? The most important concern in this step is setting realistic goal(s), given the current circumstances. There are often windows of opportunity for particular efforts and advocates must take advantage of them (Golden, 2007). Various professional organizations

publish regular newsletters and blogs that advocates can use to keep abreast of the national (and sometimes state) policy scene (e.g., The Society for Research on Child Development's [SRCD] *Policy Watch*, http://www.srcd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=266&Itemid=652; Zero to Three's *Baby Monitor*, <http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/newsletters/>; Child Welfare League of America's Children's Monitor blog, <http://childrensmonitor.wordpress.com/>). Relationships with other advocates at the state and local level, as well as with state-level child advocacy organizations (e.g., Connecticut Voices for Children, ctvoices.org), can provide advocates with information on more local, recent policy concerns. Armed with information on current circumstances, advocates can then discern what advocacy goals seem realistic at this time. The recent school shooting tragedy in Newtown Connecticut illustrates how a major news event can create an opportunity to discuss an issue—in this case gun control—that had previously been very challenging to raise.

Bringing Research to Bear on Policymaking

Finally, to work toward their advocacy goal(s), advocates must deliver the relevant research to policymakers (Maton & Bishop-Josef, 2006). To function effectively in the policy arena, advocates must have an understanding of how the policymaking process works. This includes knowledge about how a bill becomes a law, the role of committees and legislative staff, the role of executive branch agencies and their regulatory functions, etc. Some professional organizations have published excellent, yet brief, guides to the federal policymaking process (e.g., American Psychological Association [APA], 2010). Policymaking on the state or local level is likely to vary by locale, but advocates working at these levels can partner with state or local advocacy organizations to learn more about how the process works in their particular locale (e.g., Connecticut Voices for Children; <http://www.ctvoices.org/advocacy/advocacy-toolkit>). Some professional societies also focus on the state level (e.g., Zero to Three, <http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/action-center/state-advocacy-tools.html>). Hodges and Ferreira in this volume discuss the role of communities in local policy formation.

Advocates must also understand the culture of the policy world, which can be very different from that of research and practice settings (Shonkoff, 2000). It is a very fast-paced environment and policymakers often need information extremely quickly, sometimes within a day or even less. Policymakers are not likely to be interested in nuances of the research findings, preferring instead that advocates provide them with the “bottom line.” Communication has to be very brief: research should be summarized in short (1–5 pages maximum) policy briefs. Policymakers typically focus on action; however interesting the information advocates offer might be, if the policymaker cannot do something with the information, it is not likely to be useful to him/her.

Mindful of the process and culture of policymaking, there are several ways advocates can bring research to bear on it. Again, professional societies and advocacy groups assist in these efforts, by maintaining web pages focused on advocacy (e.g., APA, <http://www.apa.org/about/gr/advocacy/network.aspx>; Zero to Three, <http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/action-center/>). Contacting professional societies or advocacy groups and contributing to their efforts can be an effective way of beginning one's own advocacy work. As described by Hodges et al. in this volume, family-run organizations can also be effective advocates and advocacy partners.

Possible activities to bring research to bear on policy include:

Join a policy alert listserv. Several professional societies and advocacy groups have email listservs to alert their members when a policy proposal is being considered (e.g., APA's Public Policy Action Network [PPAN], <http://www.capwiz.com/apa-policy/home/>; Children's Defense Fund's Email Alerts, <http://www.childrensdefense.org/take-action/online.html>). Listserv members receive email notices and respond by calling or emailing their legislators to provide support for or voices against the given proposal.

Write an op-ed or letter to the editor for the local newspaper. The media can be a very effective tool for impacting policy, despite the fact that working with the media can be difficult (Thompson & Nelson, 2001; Zigler & Gilliam, 2009). Legislative staffers monitor local newspapers to get a sense of how their constituents think on various issues. Writing an op-ed or a letter to the editor can therefore be an effective means of gaining legislators' attention. Instructions for how to write op-eds and letters to the editor are available (e.g., <http://www.childrensdefense.org/take-action/advocacy-that-works/write-an-oped.html>). Wilcox and Deutsch in this volume provide a compelling example of successful advocacy using the media.

Write/email legislators or legislative staff. Advocates can send letters or policy briefs to legislators or their staff. The most important rule here is: *be brief and clear*. Legislators and staff have extremely busy schedules and are unlikely to read more than a page or two. Bullet points can be an effective way of communicating information concisely. Make sure the information is presented clearly, with no professional jargon. Ask a friend who knows nothing about the topic to determine if it is clear what the problem is, what the data show, and what the relevant research suggests with regard to possible solutions. Be sure to tell the legislator or staff what you want him/her to do in response to the information you are providing and how it fits with what they are already concerned about or working on. If you can, provide some local data or add an anecdote about a local example. Examples of policy briefs can be found on the Internet (e.g., Future of Children, http://futureofchildren.org/future-ofchildren/publications/docs/21_01_PolicyBrief.pdf; SRC'D's *Social Policy Reports Briefs*, http://www.srcd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=229&Itemid=524; Zero to Three, <http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/policy-toolkit/5x12-card-trifold-final-12-1-10.pdf>). Sample letters are included in APA's advocacy guide: <http://www.apa.org/about/gr/advocacy/pi-guide.pdf>

Meet with legislators or their staff. Members of Congress return to their home states/districts regularly throughout the year, so advocates can meet with them in their home state. Or advocates can request a meeting if they are visiting Washington, DC. The points for writing to legislators also apply here, particularly brevity, as you may only be granted a short meeting. Be sure to have a written document (as described in the previous section) to leave with them.

Testify before the legislature. Through repeated contact with policymakers, over time, some advocates develop strong relationships with them. Given the time pressure in the policymaking process, legislative staff often rely on advocates they already know when they need assistance. In some cases, advocates will be asked to testify before a Congressional committee or the state legislature, during a hearing. Advocates can also contact state legislators or their staff and volunteer to testify. The parameters for testimony are typically defined and narrow, with regard to both length and content. Advocates often have to submit the testimony in advance of the hearing. The chapter by Francis and Turnbull in this volume discusses testifying in more detail, using the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as an example (cf. McCartney & Phillips, 1993).

Comment on proposed regulations. On the federal level, once a bill has been passed by Congress and signed into law by the President, executive branch agencies (e.g., Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Education, etc.) develop regulations on exactly how the law will be implemented. Often, there is a call for public comment on proposed regulations published in the *Federal Register* (www.federalregister.gov). Advocacy groups and professional societies sometimes publicize these calls, as well. Advocates can easily submit comments on these proposed regulations, thereby potentially having impact on how laws in their area of concern affect children and families.

At the federal, state, and local levels, policymakers and elected officials create programs and initiate change. However, the implementation of these changes is usually left to career civil servants and political appointees. These individuals often have greater subject matter expertise and may be more receptive to the information social scientists can provide that will help them implement legislative action.

Pursue training. There are opportunities to pursue training in advocacy, both through workshops and in formal education programs. Professional societies offer workshops on advocacy (e.g., APA). For those interested in pursuing degrees in areas related to child and family policy, these are offered by several schools, including those in the University-Based Child and Family Policy Consortium (<http://www.childpolicyuniversityconsortium.com/members.html>).

Apply for a policy fellowship or internship. Several professional societies offer fellowships or internships in policy settings. Professionals or students spend a period of time (several months to a year or more) working in government settings (Congress, executive branch agency) or the society's government relations office, funded by the society. These opportunities allow for an in-depth exposure to the policy arena. APA

(<http://www.apa.org/about/gr/fellows/index.aspx>) and SRCD (<http://www.srcd.org/policy-media/policy-fellowships>) offer fellowships and internships related to child and family policy.

In many of these activities designed to bring research to bear on the policymaking process, the issue of relationships is important. Policymakers often rely on a relatively small set of advisors or other sources of information when looking for research relevant to their current policy concerns (cf. Meyer, Alteras, & Adams, 2006; Tseng, 2012).

In sum, there are many opportunities and ways for concerned advocates, armed with their professional expertise, to attempt to impact the policymaking process. While it is true that there are many voices and factors competing for the attention of policymakers and attempting to influence them, it is also true that the policymaking process can and does lead to positive changes. Becoming involved in this process requires considerable effort, including often going outside one's comfort zone; the potential benefits to children, youth and families justify these efforts.

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