

Evidence-based message strategies to increase public support for state investment in early childhood education: Results from a longitudinal panel experiment ^[1]

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Excerpted from Abstract

Policy Points:

- Investments in early childhood education can have long-lasting influence on health and well-being at later stages of the life course.
- Widespread public support and strategies to counter opposition will be critical to the future political feasibility of enhancing early childhood policies and programs.
- Simple advocacy messages emphasizing the need for affordable, accessible, high-quality childcare for all can increase public support for state investments in these policies.
- Policy narratives (short stories with a setting, characters, and a plot that unfolds over time and offers a policy solution to a social problem) that describe structural barriers to childcare and policy solutions to address these barriers may be particularly effective to persuade individuals inclined to oppose such policies to become supportive.
- Inoculation messages (messages designed to prepare audiences for encountering and building resistance to opposing messages) may protect favorable childcare policy attitudes in the face of oppositional messaging.

Context: Early childhood education (ECE) programs enhance the health and social well-being of children and families. This preregistered, randomized, controlled study tested the effectiveness of communication strategies to increase public support for state investments in affordable, accessible, and high-quality childcare for all.

Methods: At time 1 (August-September 2019), we randomly assigned members of an online research panel ($n = 4,363$) to read one of four messages promoting state investment in childcare policies and programs, or to a no-exposure control group. Messages included an argument-based message ("simple pro-policy"), a message preparing audiences for encountering and building resistance to opposing messages ("inoculation"), a story illustrating the structural nature of the problem and solution ("narrative"), and both inoculation and narrative messages ("combined"). At time 2 (two weeks later) a subset of respondents ($n = 1,436$) read an oppositional anti-policy message and, in two conditions, another narrative or inoculation message. Ordinary least squares regression compared groups' levels of support for state investment in childcare policies and programs.

Findings: As hypothesized, respondents who read the narrative message had higher support for state investment in childcare policies than those who read the inoculation message or those in the no-exposure control group at time 1. Among respondents who were initially opposed to such investments, those who read the narrative had greater support than respondents who read the simple pro-policy message. Those who received the inoculation message at time 2 were more resistant to the anti-policy message than respondents who did not receive such a message, but effects from exposures to strategic messages at time 1 did not persist at follow-up.

Conclusions: Results offer guidance for policy advocates seeking to increase public support for early childhood policies and programs and could inform broader efforts to promote high-value policies with potential to improve population health.

Related link: Narrative approach can change minds on child care spending ^[4]

Region: United States ^[5]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/21/08/evidence-based-message-strategies-increase-public-support> [2] <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1468-0009.12534> [3] <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1468-0009.12534> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/21/08/narrative-approach-can-change-minds-child-care-spending> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/advocacy> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8959> [8] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/public-opinion>