

## Reframing the Issue: A New Child Maltreatment Prevention Message

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Working with the media to mobilize the public in efforts to prevent child maltreatment has long been regarded as a vital component of a comprehensive child maltreatment prevention system.<sup>1</sup> Public awareness activities play an important role in that they have the potential to reach diverse audiences—parents, professionals, community members—who are critical in protecting children and supporting families.

Since the 1970s, child maltreatment prevention professionals have been implementing prevention campaigns across the country. Overall, they have been tremendously successful at making an issue out of child maltreatment and bringing it to the forefront of the public's concerns. However, child maltreatment prevention public awareness efforts have become frayed and repetitive. Campaigns swing wildly from showing or implying graphic maltreatment to heartfelt messages trying to increase the "value" of children in parents' eyes.

### History of Child Maltreatment Public Awareness

There is little research or collected history of child maltreatment prevention public awareness campaigns. However, we know that as early as the 1870s, child maltreatment showed signs of growing in the public's consciousness. The "rediscovery" of child maltreatment occurred in the 1950s-1970s, an era when equity and social responsibility dominated public discourse.<sup>2</sup> Until this time, and still existing across many areas of our culture today, children were inherently viewed as property of the family. The 1962 article, "The Battered-Child Syndrome," by C. Henry Kempe served as a springboard for child maltreatment to reassert itself as a powerful social issue.<sup>3</sup>

Between 1963 and 1967, every state passed some form of child maltreatment reporting laws. However, little was done to educate the public about these laws. Public awareness campaigns about child maltreatment began being launched to improve professional and public awareness of child maltreatment and the reporting laws. At the same time, technology in the form of Wide Area Telephone Service (WATS) lines and toll-free numbers

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allowed professionals and concerned citizens to make long-distance calls to file reports of suspected abuse.<sup>4</sup>

The first public awareness campaigns consisted of messages informing the public that child maltreatment was bad, it needed to be reported, and happened all the time. Child maltreatment became a problem "sufficiently disturbing" enough to warrant public intervention. As campaigns evolved, the messages changed slightly. These messages included reporting suspected maltreatment; encouraging children to self-report; focusing on statistics about maltreatment, and featuring shocking stories/images of severely maltreated children. Fueled by public awareness campaigns and popular media attention to the issue, public outcries resulted in an expanded service system for victims and their families.

Since the 1970s, public service campaigns have effectively raised awareness of the existence of the problem, from less than 10% to greater than 90%. Nevertheless, they have been unable to convince the public that prevention is possible or to motivate positive behavior change, either individual or societal, in support of prevention.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, public awareness campaigns have grown more sophisticated and strategic. However, the vast majority of

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public awareness campaigns are still designed around the notion that if you give people enough information about a topic, they will voluntarily change their behavior. Behavioral research has shown us the flaw of this thought pattern. While a certain amount of “public horror” relative to child maltreatment was necessary in the early years to create public awareness, the resulting model adopted by the public has become one of the largest barriers to advancing the issue further in terms of individual behavior change, societal solutions, and policy priorities.<sup>6</sup>

Following decades of public awareness campaigns about child maltreatment and neglect, the public is largely aware of the reality of child maltreatment and has an idea, sometimes exaggerated, of the pervasiveness of varying types of maltreatment. Garnering new headway and public attention for prevention will take more than relying on the traditional strategies and messages of the past.

## Reframing the Issue

In early 2003, Prevent Child Abuse (PCA) America undertook a unique project to examine public opinion, communications research, and media coverage to strategically reframe the issue of child maltreatment. The goal was to identify effective communication strategies to use when talking about child maltreatment. Many social issues, such as teen smoking, breastfeeding, and drunk driving, have used strategic reframing and social marketing with great degrees of success.

Collaborating with the FrameWorks Institute, PCA America performed a strategic frame analysis. The components of the research conducted by FrameWorks Institute and its partners at Public Knowledge and Cultural Logic consisted of a meta-analysis of existing public awareness, in depth interviews, focus groups, news analysis, and talk-back testing.<sup>6</sup>

Six focus groups and multiple interviews were conducted to help determine the public’s frame of reference on child maltreatment and neglect. These groups consisted of a diverse group of community members, including a variety of ethnicities, ages, socioeconomic statuses, education levels, and experiences with parenting. The findings from the focus groups and interviews include:

- Americans picture the worse case scenario when asked to describe child maltreatment. They believe child maltreatment is intentional, extreme, perpetual, and most often done by a parent dealing with issues such as substance abuse.
- Most Americans perceive children and teens as rude, wild, and without a strong sense of right and wrong. They believe being a parent today is much harder than in years past; however, most also believe that parents are doing a poor job at raising their children.
- A significant proportion of the public is misinformed about child development, and many adults define appropriate parental behaviors (e.g., picking up a three-month-old every time they cry) as “spoiling.”
- Americans believe that parenting is an extremely important responsibility. However, the public believes few parents are prepared for the responsibilities of raising children.
- The public understands and believes that there are severe

consequences of child maltreatment and believes that children who experience maltreatment will grow up to become abusive parents themselves.<sup>7</sup>

- Americans see child maltreatment as a very serious problem, and they believe implementing prevention activities is extremely important. However, they cannot clearly define prevention, nor do they believe they can do anything to truly affect child maltreatment.

## Media Analysis

In public opinion polls conducted for *Child Trends*, approximately 3,000 Americans were interviewed about their beliefs on children and parenting. More than 60% of respondents reported that their views on children and teens were shaped by what they learned from the government, advocacy organizations, universities, and research organizations. At the same time, 68% reported that religious and community leaders influenced their views to some degree.<sup>8</sup>

FrameWorks Institute completed a literature review of child maltreatment and neglect in the news media. The news analysis was based on news articles and television news stories provided by Prevent Child Abuse America and supplemented by a search conducted by the Center for Communications and Community at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).<sup>9</sup>

There are several patterns in news coverage of child maltreatment and neglect. The media analysis showed that child maltreatment is often covered as a criminal atrocity, a conflict between discipline and maltreatment, a failure of child protective services, and having a focus on child sexual maltreatment.

More often than not, the media covers child maltreatment when a horrific case has been brought to the public’s attention. Findings in the public opinion polls conducted for *Child Trends* show that three-quarters of respondents reported that their perceptions were shaped by the news media.<sup>7</sup> Considering the current media coverage pattern, prevention advocates have a considerable challenge ahead in reshaping the media’s child maltreatment agenda.

## Public Awareness Campaigns

There are two types of public awareness campaigns—campaigns that work to create public will about an issue and campaigns that work to change an individual’s behaviors. Public will campaigns seek to motivate the general public and public officials to take action about an issue. Behavioral change campaigns seek to change individual behavior in order to improve individual and societal well-being. Child maltreatment campaigns have taken both tactics with varying degrees of success.

Traditionally, professionals have created messages about child maltreatment prevention from an “expert” standpoint. We have been operating under the flawed pattern of thought that if we raise enough awareness about child maltreatment, people will automatically support the issue and change their behaviors, even though we are not telling them specifically what or how to change.

Strategic framing and social marketing are two strategies, which have been implemented with regard to a wide cross-section of social issues with great degrees of success.

Strategic framing is an approach to communications that uses the public's deeply imbedded beliefs/views and research on the way people think to create messages. The way the story is told, including the choice of narrator and the way the message is framed, determines whether we view the story as a personal or community problem. When framing messages, one must carefully consider the audience, the narrator, any visuals in the message, and how the message is marketed.

Social marketing is the use of commercial marketing techniques and strategies to promote the adoption of a behavior or value that will improve the health or well-being of the target audience or society as a whole.<sup>10</sup> There are three strategies used in social marketing to motivate behavior change by convincing (education), by enticing (marketing), and/or by coercion (law).

## Public Awareness Recommendations

After reviewing all of the research on public opinion, media representation, and campaign evaluations, there are a number of recommendations that can be discerned for future public awareness efforts. As we work to revise our communications strategies, some of these recommendations will be easier to adopt than others.

Future campaigns need to focus on educating the public about child development, and they need to utilize messages that focus on increasing parental support in local communities. Parent information campaigns need to be targeted to all types of parents, not just abusive parents.<sup>11</sup> These campaigns need to start promoting short-term instead of long-term benefits—focusing on such short-term benefits, such as less family stress and better-behaved children. Messages need to connect families to communities in positive ways to build community responsibility for kids. These messages should also help the community remember the ways in which they interact with families and the importance of families in raising children.

Campaigns need to help the public admit that parenting is a tough job—one that does not come naturally.<sup>12</sup> Messages

need to use strength-based language and focus on the positive factors of family life. When communicating directly about child maltreatment, campaigns should focus on situations in which many parents find themselves (e.g., divorces, unemployed, stressed, etc.) and connect parent education and family support to these situations.<sup>12</sup>

The media need to be carefully and strategically educated on child maltreatment prevention and new messages about positive parenting, child protection, and family support should be blended into existing media outreach efforts patterns.

A full list of recommendations for communications planning and message development can be found in the Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina publication "Reframing the Issue: Advice to Professionals on Child Abuse Public Awareness Campaigns" available at: [www.preventchildabusenc.org](http://www.preventchildabusenc.org).

## Conclusion

FrameWorks Institute summed up our public awareness challenge quite succinctly, "Stop fighting the fight we've already won."<sup>12</sup> For more than 30 years, we have been working to raise the public's awareness of child maltreatment and neglect, and we have done just that. Reporting rates continue to climb each year, and the public demonstrates a 90% awareness rate of child maltreatment and neglect. However, continuing to promote the same messages risks alienating segments of the public.

In the next 10 years, the field of child maltreatment prevention will change radically. Already we see copious amounts of research on programs that truly make a difference, and communities across the country are reevaluating their child maltreatment prevention efforts. Public awareness must change along with programming. We must develop new child maltreatment prevention messages—messages that empower people to make changes in their own behavior and support changes in the community; messages that encourage supporting parents, protecting children, and building communities. It is time for our messages to make the transition from raising awareness to stimulating behavioral and normative change. **NCMedJ**

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