

Strategic Communications for Unaccompanied Children: Principles and Strategies

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The past five years have seen numerous communications challenges for unaccompanied children's providers and advocates, along with substantial threats to the well-being of unaccompanied children (UC) themselves. In 2018, under the Trump Administration, shelters were targeted as sites of protest during the height of the Family Separation policy. More recently, 2021 and into 2022 have seen attacks on UC care providers from state governors who want to end the care of unaccompanied children in their states.

This brief provides two key principles for strategic communications around the UC system, and five communications strategies for putting those principles into practice. Advocates and shelter care providers know the importance of providing care for unaccompanied children. To continue to provide that care, the program needs support from Congress, the Administration, members of the public, and state government officials. It is in the children's best interest to be able to effectively communicate and advocate on their behalf.

Most commonly, providers and advocates respond to claims that others are making. Those claims will either be used to marshal support and future actions on behalf of the content of those claims – as with [protests](#) at Heartland facilities during the Trump Administration – or to justify an action that the claimant has taken – as with Gov. Greg Abbott's [messaging](#) around his Executive Order to delicense UC care facilities in May 2021. The temptation can be to respond to or refute the content of those claims. A better model is to displace those claims, in other words, a better model is to tell a better story.

When you tell a competing story, you control the characters, you control the central conflict, you control the timeline, you control the salient facts, and you can tailor that story to an audience or audiences. Rather than addressing an audience already selected by the claimant, you can reach out for the audience that you want to hear your story. Moreover, story-based communications are successful to the extent they displace other stories. In this way we can get feedback and iterate on versions of our story within any contentious situation.

Principle #1: Tell a Story that Displaces Competing Stories

People understand the world through stories. [Stories help individuals to simulate and understand social experiences](#), which is especially useful in small settings – such as meetings with policy staffers or journalists – to elicit sympathy and to help individuals understand the impact of changes. For larger audiences, stories help to keep focus on the stakes of a conflict that might be lost when abstract discussions predominate. For

example, if we talk about potential changes to what kinds of incidents are mandated for reporting, as a technical issue, the conflict appears as what should be on a form or removed from a form. With context and with a story, the stakes are revealed: children's care, placements in long term foster care, and potential interactions between immigrant youth and law enforcement.

More than this, because UC conflicts involve a lot of technical conflicts, the conflicts tend to involve a lot of new information for whomever the audience is. Stories then have a second purpose, to help audiences organize that new information. Without going too deeply into neuroscience, brains store information in a relational structure. Any discrete idea (for example, the idea of a penguin) associates to some number of other ideas (e.g., "animal," "black and white," "Antarctica," "snow," and so forth). [This relational structure is how brains recall old information, but also how brains process and store new information](#) – via associations with things that are already known. By offering a story, you offer a way for people to make associations between ideas that help them understand the complexity, the scope, and the seriousness of the situation. A story-based model helps communicators ensure that they provide specifics of UC care alongside and integrated with a framework for understanding those details. Most importantly, the mental model of a story emphasizes to communicators the freedom available to do advocacy work – your story can be, potentially, anything you want it to be.

Principle #2: Conflict Expansion and Contraction

Only rarely are public issues on unaccompanied children's care organized and promoted by advocates and care providers. More commonly, we usually have to do our strategic communication in a contentious environment that we did not choose. Most people in this line of work immediately know *why* the content of a conflict matters – what it is that we're fighting about and *why* that matters to individuals, groups of people and to organizations. But any contentious situation can expand or contract in two additional ways: audience and timeline. Managing all three – the issue, the audience, and the "clock" – is critical for effective strategic communications.

A. Manage the Issue

The discussion of storytelling highlights that the issues of a conflict are elastic. In this way, our communications environment differs from something like a debate club, because we have not agreed on what we are disagreeing about. As communicators, we have more freedom in our individual messaging and collective messaging to align a question from a reporter or a policy staffer to the story we want to tell. Providers may choose to align with the initial claims when the issues are serious or may pivot. The important thing to remember is that the conflict is not pre-given, and to expand or contract the scope of the conflict – we can expand and contract the things that are in contention, and the things that are not at issue.

B. Manage the Audience

The initial claim about a conflict will dovetail with an audience, usually a desired audience for the message. A key part of strategic communications is about expanding or contracting the audience—making more people

interested in what is happening or activating the right stakeholders. To counter a partisanship-focused narrative, the goal is to expand the audience using a content frame that activates other audiences or displaces the partisanship frame. Conflict expansion and contraction is about who cares about the message.

C. Manage the Clock

Managing how long a conflict goes on is often as important as managing the substance of the conflict. In situations where the advocates' and providers' story of advocates has displaced the initial claim, the temptation can be to ease off. But bad policies have a habit of popping up in new locations, and the wiser move is usually to capitalize on the current attention by creating as much documentation and the widest coalition of groups opposed to a bad policy as possible. At some point the attention will dry up, so the goal when ahead is to maximize. Conversely, "managing the clock" means that sometimes the best move as an advocate is to be a wet blanket, cut losses, and bow out. Minimizing the damage from losing situations – in events that hurt the system of care for unaccompanied children – is important in the same way as maximizing the extent of wins.

Five Strategies for Effective Communications on Unaccompanied Children

Strategy #1: Focus on Children and Families

Unaccompanied children's care is particularly salient to large audiences—people care about children and families. Children are immediately sympathetic characters in any story about threats to unaccompanied children. This contrasts with other immigration issues, since immigrants can be characterized as outsiders and therefore scary. In most conflicts our stories will be about children—children who are fleeing from danger, children who are just searching for families, parents searching for their children, and people who are trying to do harm to children.

Strategy #2: Include an Action

Actions and agents make strong messages. When doing outward-facing communications, clearly express what you want and who should do it. The likelihood of this action matters much less, and an unlikely ask does not connote a weak message. For example, in the response to Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' Executive Order 21-223, advocates consistently made an ask that [the Governor withdraw the Executive Order](#). This is a good message. By contrast, potential messages of "we want the Governor to reconsider his actions" or "we want a fair process for reviewing UC care in Florida" are weak messages. The key takeaway is that messaging is strongest when it includes what you want done and who you want to do it.

Strategy #3: Use Grammatically Positive Sentences

A grammatically negative statement is one that contains a negation (“I am not hungry”) and a grammatically positive statement is one without a negation (“I am full”). Note that both examples are morally positive or neutral, because grammatical valence differs from good and bad states. For example, “I am not upset” is morally positive and grammatically negative. Grammatically positive statements ease the load on our audiences, no matter who they are.

No matter the targeted audience, most people will engage with messaging while distracted. Communications based in grammatically positive statements will lead to more accurate reception and better retention of our key messages. Only sparingly use the words “not” and “no,” if at all. Even messaging in which we want an action or behavior to end can be stated in grammatically positive ways, such as “Stop Doing X” or “End X” (rather than “Don’t Do X”). We want our audience to receive our messages clearly and with a minimum of error, and we want to ensure people know our messages tangibly enough to repeat them to friends and neighbors.

Strategy #4: Use Values-focused Messaging

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Strategy #5: Connect with Local Values

General messaging will focus on children and families. Another important strategy is to appeal to a local value. States like Texas and California have strong identities and one can appeal to

Grammar and Cognitive Load

Most adults can easily parse negative sentences and have no problem doing so in day-to-day conversation. However, processing a grammatically negative messages is more cognitively intensive for listeners and leads to many more errors than a grammatically positive message. A very quick and illustrative experiment. Read the following question:

True or False?: Paris is located in France.

Easy, right? If you can answer the open-ended version of this question (“Paris is located in what country?”), your brain can process an answer very quickly and very accurately (“True”). Now try this sentence:

True or False?: Rome is not located in Italy.

If you are like most people, it will take you longer to come up with the correct response (“False”) because your brain must process the double negative. Some readers may have mixed up their answer even though they know the answer to the open-ended version of the same question (“Rome is located in what country?”). This illustrates this increased processing needed to parse grammatically negative sentences by audiences.

“Texas values” or “values shared by Californians” because of that sense of identity. A state like Wisconsin might want to appeal to “Midwest values” – a region instead of a state – or to a mythic and nebulous regional identity via “heartland values.” In Florida, the appeal has been to Florida’s history of welcome via [Operation Pedro Pan](#), and refugee resettlement is likewise often framed through a shared national history of welcome. Localizing the message helps an audience to associate the issue of unaccompanied children with their community, a place an individual is likely to care about and in which she is invested in a collective well-being.